Hit List

by zestycrouton

Summary

It all started as a typical day at Ordon High until a sudden school shooting turns the life of Link Hero upside down. Now, surrounded by enemies, can Link save his friends and escape the school alive?

Notes

So, some of you may recognize this story's title and summary from FF.net, where I have the original 'Hit List' posted. I'll explain more at the bottom of this chapter, but for now, please know that this is a slightly revised telling of my very first fanwork that I have cleaned up and am now posting here on Ao3 in preparation for bringing over its heavily revised and very-reworked sequel, 'From the Dust'.

Again, I'll explain more at the bottom. For newcomers, please be aware that this is a story about a school shooting. If you are sensitive towards that kind of topic, consider yourself warned.
Link Hero lay slumped on his desk, head pillowed in his arms, feet tapping gently on the grungy tiled floor to the beat of the music streaming through his carefully concealed headphones. His thoughts drifted around lazily in his head as he waited for the final bell to ring, signaling the end of the school day.

‘Goddesses, I’m starving…’ he groaned internally, absently nibbling on the cuff of his ratty green hoodie as though the cloth were edible. ‘For the love of all that’s holy, why hasn’t this class ended yet?’

Giving up on his clothing snack, Link sighed and sat up straight, stretching his back with a yawn. He spared a brief glance for the girl who was sitting on his right, her eyes fixated vacantly on the dirty desk in front of her, apparently as enraptured by the class as he was.

Her name was Midna Twili; obligatory stereotypical gothic class member and also one of Link’s best friends. Midna was your classic punk rocker/gothic chick, black nails and all. She always wore dark scuffed-up Vans and baggy, torn pants that worked in unison with her oversized sweater to give her the appearance of a homeless vagabond; a look she had strived with diligence to perfect over the years.

He shot a quick glance up at the clock on the wall behind him as he tugged the headphone out of his ear. 2:47 pm, only three minutes left until the end of class. Goddesses, this was taking forever…

He slumped back in his chair and let his eyes settle on the vacant desk just in front of him and the years of accumulated gum and graffiti plastered to the back of it.

*Moe wuz here,* eh? Congrats, dude, what an accomplishment…

This seat was typically occupied by Link’s other best friend, Sheik Shadow, but the idiot had been playing hooky for the past couple of days now.

He wasn’t overly concerned. Knowing him, he was probably passed out on his couch with an upturned bowl of Coco Puffs on his gut and a crappy blockbuster movie playing on the TV. He was going to flunk out of High School, just watch, and then Link was going to have to support him for the rest of their lives…

That actually didn’t sound that bad. He could think of worse roommates.

Frowning, he turned his attention to the class for the first time since he'd laid down about an hour ago. Professor Ezlo (as he preferred to be called for some reason), Link’s elderly English teacher, had just finished his daily sermon on whatever topic he had chosen to pontificate on for the day and was now scowling at his students in silence, a disgusted twist to his lips. His ancient eyes surveyed the classroom with cold distaste; he looked as if he had just happened upon a cluster of particularly repulsive cockroaches and was trying to decide in what manner he should bring about their demise.

Professor Ezlo's eyes suddenly zeroed in on a girl sitting near the front who was trying, and failing, to conceal her cell phone from him.
"Miss Domain," Ezlo called out in a high-pitched feeble sort of voice that made him sound suspiciously like the Keebler Elf, "Would you care to summarize for the class what you learned today?"

The girl, a cheerleader named Ruto, looked up at him blankly.

"Do what?" she asked in her annoying valley girl voice. Ezlo held out his hand with an impatient frown and she handed over her phone, sneering.

Link couldn’t restrain his snicker. Ezlo's eyes snapped towards the noise faster than a hawk who’d just spotted a one-legged field mouse.

"Mr. Hero? How about you?"

Link felt his grin grow crooked and slide off his face. He should have seen this coming.

"Um, we…well…"

"No, of course not. What was I thinking?" said Ezlo dryly. Link flushed.

"Alright then. In order to ascertain who was actually paying attention in my class, you will all be writing me a three-page essay on today's lesson, due when you walk in this classroom tomorrow afternoon."

The whole class practically exploded at the unfairness of it all.

"Maybe," Ezlo called loudly over the uproar, "if you had listened-"

He was cut off mid-sentence by the shrill sound of the bell, and before he could say another word, the angry mob of students practically stampeded out of the room.

Link stuffed his headphones savagely into his pocket and started down the hall towards the stairwell, feet slapping angrily against the filthy tiled floor as he muttered darkly about Professor Ezlo and the various impossibly convoluted torture techniques he'd enjoy performing on him.

Midna, who’d exited alongside him, matched his pace but said nothing. She stared without seeing down at the grungy floor tiles beneath them, blue because they were on the second floor, and gave only half-hearted nods in agreement whenever Link said anything particularly obscene.

He let his words die off and gave his friend a concerned look. Midna was usually the first to join in whenever Link suggested doing cruel and physically impossible things to teachers; she took it as a challenge to try and be the one to think of the most absurd ways to kill a person, and she usually did. You’d think it would be that that would make Link feel uncomfortable, but right now, it was the opposite that was the case. Generally speaking, it took a lot to make Midna lose her eccentric personality, and going by the hollow look on her face, something must have gone seriously wrong.

The question was: did he pester her about it? Women tended to be more than a little strange about this sort of thing. Or at least, that was what a lifetime with his sister and grandma had taught him.

Sometimes what they wanted was for you to show concern about their well-being, and sometimes if you even so much as hinted at their behavior being odd they’d tear your head off of your shoulders and mount it on a pike as a warning to anyone else who dared pry into their personal lives. He tended to err towards the side of caution on such matters and preferred to wait until whatever the problem was sorted itself out (which, for most women, meant waiting until it was no longer a certain time of month), and yet there was something about the dull pallor of her face, the shadow in her
usually vibrant ruby eyes that had him second-guessing his normal behavior and considering putting his life on the line just this once to make sure she was alright.

As they reached the ground floor and exited the stairwell, however, he found himself momentarily distracted as a typical high school scene evolved in front of them.

Amidst the ocean of students mingling in the halls to chat with their friends or rushing towards the busses, the car pick up lanes or parking lots, eager to be out of the school and out into the freedom that was the real world, a familiar red-haired scrawny geek was ambling down the hallway, his nose stuck in a book, not really paying attention to where he was going.

He bumped into another student on accident, and the next thing anybody knew, poor nerdy little Shad has his body slammed up against the lockers, his book knocked from his hand, his glasses askew, as Darunia Rocks held his forearm up to the kid’s throat.

“Hey!” Darunia barked, spittle flying off out of the football captain’s mouth and onto Shad’s face in gross globs of goo, “Watch where you’re going, freak! You just ran into my girlfriend! Apologize, now!”

“I-I… erk…” Shad squawked, face going red as Darunia crushed his windpipe, unable to form the words needed to say sorry.

A ring of students formed around the spectacle but none moved to intercede. This was a fairly normal showing; Darunia Rocks was arguably the most popular kid in the school, other than maybe Kafei Dotour, the mayor’s son, and he, alongside the other jocks and athletes, sort of ruled the school by merit of martial law.

That is, since they were bigger and meaner, they did what they wanted and you either dealt with it or got pummeled. Tacky? Sure, but apparently nobody but Link and his friends had ever seen the Breakfast Club, and who was he to deny Darunia his four years of glory? Everybody knew that after High School, Darunia was going to become a washed up pot-bellied car mechanic and Shad was going to win the Nobel Prize for inventing a time machine or something like that. Karma would see that Shad and Darunia got what they deserved… or at least, that’s what Link told himself whenever guilt for never trying to step in and help the poor unfortunate souls who crossed into Darunia’s warpath.

Hey, it wasn't cowardice, it was good sense! Link couldn't beat Darunia in a fistfight, let alone his entire gang. No sense in dying a martyr.

“Roonie,” Ruto crooned pathetically into her boyfriend’s ear, gently tugging on his forearm, “it’s ok, he didn’t hurt me. Let’s not waste any more time on him, we’re going to be late…”

Ruto Domain, captain of the cheerleading squad and the resident airhead who lost her phone earlier in Link’s English class, was about the only person who could get away with telling Darunia what to do. Link chose to ignore the clichéd stereotype about the football team captain dating the captain of the cheerleading team; like it or not, Ruto had a rockin’ body. She was a completely narcissistic space case with a face like a fish, but… well, credit where credit is due.

When Darunia didn’t move, Link thought that for once things were going to get serious, however, the altercation was suddenly interrupted by the arrival of a tall, long-legged, loud-mouthed girl.

“Hey Rocks,” Ashei barked gruffly, idly chewing on a piece of gum, a flat, dispassionate expression on her face, “mind moving out of the way, yeah? You’re blocking my locker.”
Darunia turned and gave the new arrival a considering look before dropping Shad to the ground and stepping back, wrapping his free arm around Ruto’s torso.

“Oh… Hey, Winters. Good game last Friday.”

“Thanks,” she replied monotonously, returning Ruto’s imperious sneer with a mock one of her own. As though to disabuse any bystanders of the notion that she’d interrupted to come to Shad’s rescue, she gave the fallen kid a quick nudge with her food and growled, “Move it, kid. I’m going to be late for practice.”

Shad scrambled to his feet, red-faced and frantic, gathering up his books and adjusting his glasses. He and Link made eye contact for a brief second before he vanished into the crowd.

“Why is everyone just standing around?” Came a gentle but authoritative voice from somewhere down the hall. Like the popping of a soap bubble, the crowd broke at once, and before he knew what was happening, Link and Midna were alone in the hallway with the man who had asked the question, Mr. Auru.

Link smiled in spite of himself. Mr. Auru was one of the history teachers at Ordon High, and easily the favorite of the student body.

He was older, in his mid-to-late forties, and his hairline was beginning to recede, but there was something about his gentle eyes and leathery face that instilled a sort of fatherly kindness in the man and you couldn’t help but like him. That, and he somehow managed to make his class interesting, something Link didn’t think was possible for history.

He covered the basic stuff; wars and leaders and enlightened thinkers and whatnot, but made sure to spruce it up with various legends and folklore about whatever place or period they happened to be discussing. Turns out that the Hylian Alliance had a veritable treasure trove of myths and legends and anyone in Mr. Auru’s class was liable to find themselves talking about flying castles or the Hero of Time more than actual history. It was safe to say that Auru’s was Link’s favorite class - so much so that he’d signed up to take a second one with him this year after enjoying his so much the year before.

Mr. Auru shot Link a quizzical look and quirked an eyebrow.

Not one to risk his life by ratting Darunia out, Link simply replied with, “Ah, you know… teenagers, hormones, someone cheated on someone… normal stuff.”

Auru nodded sagely, stroking at his graying goatee. “Ah yes, to be young and stupid again… Not for all the gold in Subrosia, eh? Have you finished your assignment on the Phantom Isles Revolution?”

Link grinned confidently. “Haven’t even started.”

“Of course not.” Auru laughed, continuing down the hall. “Well, it’s due in a week, so better hurry up!”

Link snorted. “Right, I’ll get started on it two days before it’s due, just like always. Right Mid?”

He turned to his silent companion only to see her staring blankly at the floor again. Link frowned. Alright, enough was enough; he didn’t know anybody who could zone out like that, but it wasn’t normal. She probably hadn’t even noticed the entire Darunia/Shad altercation that had just gone down. Looks like he was going to have to dive in and get his hands dirty after all.

Deciding he needed to broach the topic gently, just in case it was something serious like that she was
moving or somebody in her family had died, he opted to play it casual.

"Hey Midna, are you… feeling alright? You seem kinda out of it lately."

There you go, smooth as silk, nothing assuming about it.

She didn't reply. Her eyes still remained glued to the floor.

Well, now that was rude.

"Earth to Midna?" He snapped a few times in front of her face, and when she still didn't react he popped his finger into his mouth and crammed it into her ear. The shriek she let out was more than just a little satisfying.

"Link! Goddesses, what is wrong with you?!" She hastily began drying her ear out on her sleeve, the look on her face torn between disgust and outrage. "Oh, gross! I'm gonna have your spit in my ear canal all day! You dirty little…! Do that again, and I swear to Din, I'll knee you so hard in the groin you'll get a sex change!"

"Oh, is it that easy?" He chuckled jokingly, only laughing harder as she glowered up at him. "Now, do you mind telling me why you've been walking around like a zombie all day?"

She scowled defensively, though it looked a little silly with her head tilted sideways like that. She was still trying to clean out her ear.

"I have not."

Link quirked an eyebrow. "Really? So can you tell me what went down in the hallway just now?"

"Uh… School just got out?"

"Yeah, school just got out… And Shad nearly got murdered by Darunia. Seriously, Midna, just tell me. What's going on?"

He thought for a moment that she was just going to blow him off again, but to his surprise, she leaned against the wall beside the guidance counselor's office and let out a heavy sigh, finally removing her sleeve from her presumably dry ear canal.

"It's just…it's nothing. Look, just forget it, ok? I'm just being silly." As though to demonstrate that, she bit her lip and turned to look down the hallway like a lost little puppy.

Well, if that wasn't a blatant cry for help, Link didn't know what was.

Sensing that a potentially long talk was in the works, Link swung his backpack from off his shoulder and bent over to set it on the floor against the wall, when all of a sudden, the door to the guidance counselor's office flew open unexpectedly and collided with the side of his head.

With a painful crack, the world went black.

When he could see again, he found himself lying flat on his back on the floor with a throbbing pain in his temple.

The first thing he registered was Midna's laughter, every bit as condescending as it always was. Great; she was cured.

The second thing he noticed was the face of the most startlingly beautiful girl he'd ever seen hovering
over him. He squeezed his eyes shut and shook himself roughly to clear his head but instantly regrettet it as pain exploded throughout his skull like fireworks. When he opened his eyes again, vision swimming slightly, the girl was still there, a veritable angel, golden halo and everything.

It took him a second to realize that she was talking.

"Whazzat?" he blathered ridiculously as he pushed himself hastily to a sitting position. That was a mistake; the world span in nauseating circles and he was forced to clutch the side of his head to get it to settle down.

Midna was laughing so hard she was snorting.

"I asked you if you were ok," the stranger repeated anxiously. Her voice, he noticed, had an entrancing, melodious quality to it, which only served to make her more attractive. Either that or the blow to his head and scattered his senses. Better take another look just to be sure… No, no, she was still cute. Really cute, actually. Almost too cute, in fact.

This sort of thing only happened in dreams… Oh, Farore, don’t tell him he was hallucinating. He can’t have been hit that hard.

"I'm really, really sorry!" She continued, ignorant of the fact that his apparent inability to talk was not only because she’d just about cleaved his head in two. “I-I didn't mean to hit you, I swear, I just didn't know you were standing there, and I was sort of in a hurry and… Oh, goddesses, I'm so sorry…!"

Her voice sort of squeaked there at the end, and it was then that Link registered that not only was her concern for him the real deal, but she was getting emotional about it. Nayru, was she going to cry?!

This girl was too perfect for this world!

Quick, Link, do something to reassure her that you’re ok! But also something cool so that she’ll keep talking to you!

Plastering a dopey smile on his face that probably made him look mentally addled, Link braced himself against the wall and pulled himself gingerly to his, leaning heavily against the cold metal lockers to make sure he didn’t wobble.

Well, that wasn’t cool, but at least he was off of the ground now. That had to count for something.

Now that he was standing up straight, he could finally get a good look at her. She was an inch or so shorter than Link was, maybe around Sheik’s height, with long dirty-blonde hair that cascaded down her back like waves of honeyed gold and curled slightly at the tips. That would explain why he thought she’d had a halo earlier. Not that that meant that he found her any less angelic.

Her eyes were a deep purplish-red color, like a gemstone, indicative that there was at least a little Sheikah in her heritage, and her bottom lip was pinched between her teeth as she studied his face, looking for signs of permanent injury. Goddesses, she was attractive… and way, way out of his league.

"If you two lovebirds are done drooling over each other, I really need to get going."

Link jerked his eyes away with a jolt, his face flaming. What was wrong with him?! You can’t just ogle a girl you barely met, that’s weird! And creepy! And pathetic! And not at all something you want to do when you’re trying to make a good first-impression so she looks passed your innumerable faults and decides she wants to forego common sense and go out with you!
"Well, sorry again about the door thing," the girl mumbled awkwardly, keeping her eyes averted and staring at her shoes, "I swear it won't happen again."

Link nodded, then let out a stupid guffaw against his will and said, haltingly, "I wouldn’t really mind… I mean, no, I don’t want you to hit me again, that would suck, but I mean, like, it would be ok if we… if you… I mean, no, I just, gah! It’s ok if you… if we… I’m not mad."

He snapped his mouth closed as a wave of pure, hot mortification washed over him. What in the name of the Goddesses’ green earth had just come spewing out of his mouth?! That was so middle school! She probably thought he had mental problems or something! Why was he such a loser at talking to girls?!

The girl, who had been staring at him blankly during his entire idiotic diatribe, suddenly erupted in a fit of positively adorable giggles, making her eyes dance and sending him straight to heaven.

"Wow, I must’ve hit you harder than I thought!" She gasped through her laughter, which she tried and failed to hide behind her hand, sounding half amused, half traumatized. "I’m so sorry!"

Link couldn’t help but chuckle along with her, though thankfully his response was more controlled. "No, really, I’m fine. You just caught me by surprise is all. Don’t worry about it."

Midna began tapping her foot impatiently.

"So…I guess I’ll see you around…?" She asked quickly, taking half a step away but looking at him expectantly.

His brain clicked into gear a half-second later. "Ah, Link! Link, I'm…I'm Link," he spluttered.

The warm smile she sent him made his insides wriggle in an oddly pleasant fashion.

"I'm Zelda," she replied, extending her hand. He took it automatically and marveled at how small and warm it was. The moment lasted perhaps just a little too long, as Midna made a sound that might have been a snort of laughter that she was trying to hide behind a cough.

"Uh, bye then," he said, dropping her hand and stepping back, feeling the gradual flush rise up his face no matter how hard he tried to stop it. She smiled once more, glancing down at the floor abashedly before turning around and hurrying off towards the opposite hallway.

Link stared at her retreating figure in a sort of numb trance, the smile slowly melting off his face.

What was wrong with him? It's not like he'd never seen a pretty girl before. He was sixteen, thank-you-very-much, he knew how to comport himself in public. He wasn’t an awkward twelve-year-old going through ’changes’, he should be over this already!

But there was something about the way she’d smiled at him, the way her eyes had sparkled with worry when she'd found that she’d hurt him, the way that her hair swayed now when she walked…

Something wet and slimy was forcibly jammed into his ear and he jerked away from Midna with a hoarse yelp.

"Din-! What the heck, Midna?!" he bellowed, hastily cleaning out his ear with his sleeve while Midna cackled beside him with vindictive glee.
"Call it payback," she taunted maddeningly, “but I mean, seriously… Wow. Could you be any more of a dork?"

“Shut up,” Link grumbled, readjusting the backpack on his shoulder. Casting Zelda one last wistful look, he hurried on down the hall towards the student parking lot, Midna dancing along in his wake.

"So," she drawled as they ambled on down the hallway, the grin on her face looking decidedly catlike, "do you always drool when you meet new people?"

"Come on, I wasn't drooling," he grunted sourly, refusing to face her just in case the blush hadn’t completely vanished yet.

"Right, sure. So then explain that waterfall of saliva that was pouring from your mouth-"

"I was not drooling!" Link repeated defensively. "I just had…slight brain damage from the door hitting me so hard!"

Midna snickered. "Link, I think you need to have a brain before you can have brain damage."

Link shoved her playfully into the wall of lockers. "Oh, so funny, ha ha ha. Come on, let's get going."

Threading their way through the rapidly dwindling mass of students, Link and Midna headed down the main hallway on the first floor towards the cafeteria-slash-commons area.

Admittedly Ordon High had a rather peculiar set up; the first floor was in the shape of a giant ‘U’, with the bus drop-off on the east end and student parking on the west. The first floor held the major elective classrooms; i.e. band, chorus, P.E., art, etc, as well as the special Ed classes and the lunchroom, and a handful of staff offices, like the school resource officer and some of the councilors.

The second floor held all of the academics and was shaped like a smaller U to fit atop the first. It even had a little balcony where students used to be able to go up and eat lunch, but the door had been locked since time out of mind. Legend said that the reason it was locked was because a boy had once leaped off the balcony and killed himself… Seeing as it was just one story, Link doubted it. The real reason was probably because the faculty was too lazy to unlock it every day or to send teachers up there to monitor the students and make sure they didn’t throw things at people from the roof.

Last but not least came the third floor, and here was where the school got a little strange. There was a sort of mystery about it… not that students had never been up there; quite the contrary. They were up there all the time. No, the mystery lay in the way it had been set up.

For whatever reason, the builders decided during construction that the main office should be up on the third floor… and only the main office. No classrooms, no janitor's closet, just the office. You can imagine parents' angry mutters as they climbed the stairs when their children had been caught smoking or vandalizing property. It didn’t really make any sense that arguably the most important part of the building was so sequestered, but then again, maybe it helped the Principal feel like he actually mattered, what with him being literally placed above everyone else. Link wasn’t really certain.

There was also a little door that led out onto the roof so that the teachers could check the lightning rods and satellites, but unlike other schools, few tried to sneak out of there because of its close location to the main office.

As they passed the commons area, Link took a moment to look out across the many clusters of students engaging their various extracurricular activities and felt the familiar twist of contempt
overtake him.

Goddesses, but he hated this place...

There were the Cheerleaders, the Dance Squad, Mock Trial, and, of course, the football team. Despite it being March, the football season long over, the team still hung out with the cheerleaders after school and talked of nothing but their exploits during the last season. They were loud, crude, and overwhelmingly obnoxious, totally ignoring the Key Club who was trying valiantly to meet right beside them in spite of their raucoous laughter. The poor kids couldn't get on with their business... but then, what exactly did Key Club do, anyway?

Ordon High was very big on its cliques. It was pretty standard stuff, for the most part. For example, jocks only hung out with jocks and cheerleaders, who in turn only dated jocks. You know the drill.

There was a sort of hierarchy of popularity, and only the wealthiest and most athletically gifted could rise to the tops of these hallowed ranks. If you were a nerd, or poor, or ugly, or antisocial, or strange, then you could just forget it. The upper-echelons of student society had no pity or mercy for you.

Then there was a sort of ambiguous 'middle class'; those who were average in intelligence and physical activity, but still had friends, secretly dreaming of one day becoming popular like Ruto and Darunia. Link guessed that he fit somewhere in that category, although he tried his best to ignore the stereotyping. Sure, the star quarterback, Darunia, still liked to pretend he didn’t exist and the head cheerleader always looked down her (probably fake) nose at him, but that really didn't bother him all that much. He hated the popular kids about as much as they hated him, but he felt no jealousy towards them. All things considered, his small cluster of friends were about as diverse as you could get in such a backwater town as Ordon, and to be honest, they were all he really wanted out of High School anyway.

Heading outside, Link pulled his green hoodie around closer as a cold breeze blew over the campus. The last bitter gusts of winter were finally dissipating and signs of spring starting to crop up all around them. Some memorial garden planted by the doorway in honor of a senior class years gone was starting to show promising signs of flowers, and the sky overhead was a brilliant, bright blue, cheerful and ready for the coming spring.

Heading out into the student parking lot, Link smiled up at the sun and felt the warm rays brush his cheeks. He hated the winter. He didn't much like being indoors either, so the sun was a much welcome sight.

Link and Midna tossed their backpacks into the back of Link's beaten up old pickup truck before climbing into the front seats. The paint had peeled off ages ago, and years of exposure to the elements had caused the old metal to rust, giving the vehicle a dirty brown hue. When Link had inherited the truck from his grandfather, he had decided to christen it 'Epona', after his mother's old horse, because they were both brown and enjoyed giving Link problems.

"Where's Aryll?" Midna asked as her seatbelt clicked into place. Link slammed his door shut with undue force and turned his key in the ignition. It sputtered and refused to start.

"She's got lacrosse or something after school. My grandma will get her when she's done," Link grumbled, trying the key again. With an elderly wheeze, the truck kicked into life.

Midna nodded and turned to gaze out the window as Link fiddled for a radio station and pulled out of the parking lot. Sweet Nayru, he hated the top forties station... Aryll switched it on him every morning and it drove him nuts. Where was that classic rock at again? All he was finding were commercials...
It was a couple of minutes before he remembered what he and Midna had been talking about before he’d had his head cleaved in two by the woman of his dreams.

She’d thought something as small as head trauma was enough to change the subject… how cute.

"So," he drawled ostentatiously, leaning back in his seat as they pulled to a stop at a traffic light, "are you going to tell me why you’ve been so emo today or what?"

"I said it was nothing, remember?" Midna replied tersely, folding her arms with finality as if that was going to get him to back off. The light turned back to green quicker than he’d expected and Link put his foot to the gas pedal.

"Tell me anyway, you know how nosy I am."

He sent her a playful grin as though to demonstrate his point.

She grimaced before shoving his face away from her. “Keep your eyes on the road, you moron. You’re going to get us killed.”

“Please, we’re perfectly safe within the confines of this screaming metal death trap,” Link replied bracingly, sticking his arm out of the missing driver’s side window and slapping the side of his door. “Now stop changing the subject and tell me or else I’ll drive around in circles till we run out of gas and I make you push us home. Don’t test me - you know I’ll do it.”

She groaned. "Alright, whatever! Geez, you’re such a girl… Look, it’s just… have you seen Sheik around lately?"

Link blinked. "Sheik? No, not for a few days now… But seriously, stop changing the subject, I want to know what's up."

"I'm not changing the subject, Link, I'm really worried about him. Do you think he's hiding because of the kids at school?"

Link looked at her disbelievingly. "Because of the…? Look, I know the kids at Ordon are real jerks, especially to guys like Sheik, but come on. He's seventeen and not exactly a coward. He wouldn't run away if he had a problem and he’d have definitely told us about it. Remember the fight he had in seventh grade?"

Midna glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, then slowly said, as though she were choosing her words very carefully, "It's probably nothing, but…I saw him about a week ago hanging out with Ganondorf by the old Arby’s down on ninth. You don't think he's gotten himself into trouble, do you?"

Link forced a casual laugh, but internally, he was stunned. Ganondorf? He was back? Since when? When had he gotten out of Juvy?

He shook the thought off and said instead, "I think you’re giving him too much credit, Mid. Sheik’s too lazy to get into trouble. Actually, I'm surprised he has enough energy to get out of bed in the morning. That's probably where he is right now, the lazy little…"

Midna gave Link a reproachful look. "You know what Ganondorf's like, Link."

The fake smile fell off Link’s face and he focused on the road ahead of him, mulling over her words. Ganondorf was always the weird kid back in elementary and middle school. Not because he was
nerdy or shy, but because he was just plain mean. Ganondorf had some sort of malevolent aura that surrounded him constantly. Just being around him made you nervous, and it wasn't just him. Even the teachers could feel it. It was like, you just knew that something inside of him was off, but you couldn’t quite put your finger on what…

When he was in elementary school, Ganondorf and his friends used to pick on Link mercilessly, him and pretty much everyone else on the playground, and it had only gotten worse as the years progressed. It had started out as teasing and theft, then pushing, shoving, hitting, vandalism, trying to bury people in the sand at recess…

Childish stuff, really, but there was the look he got in his eyes when he was reprimanded, like the teacher’s scolding remarks only fed the malevolent fire that burned darkly in his heart. It sounded silly, sure, but Link was honestly terrified of that guy.

Ganondorf hadn't been much of a problem lately, however, because sometime in freshmen year he'd been sent to a juvenile correction center for severely injuring a student. Link, who had stayed behind late because he'd gotten detention for not doing his homework for the umpteenth time, had made a wrong turn and walked in just in time to see it happen, and it was basically because of Link that Ganondorf had been caught. The incident had led to a huge reveal about a history of repeated blackmail, bullying and bribes with multiple students as victims, and everything had sort of spiraled downward from there.

He hadn’t seen Ganondorf since then, but if Link was a betting man he’d say that the next time the two met things weren’t going to go so well for him.

"Link, are you listening to me?" Midna asked, snapping Link out of his dark reverie.

"Yeah," he lied quickly, shooting her a reassuring glance, not even having realized that she’d been talking the entire time. She glared skeptically then sighed and returned her gaze out the window.

Really though, Link couldn't see why she was so worried. The thought of Sheik getting all buddy-buddy with Ganondorf was completely insane. The two couldn’t have been more different; Ganondorf was the sum total of all of the evil that existed in the world (in Link’s totally unbiased personal opinion), and Sheik was a lazy, sarcastic idiot who liked to hang out at Link’s house and watch movies and tease his little sister. There was no way that Midna had seen what she’d thought she’d seen… and yet, if there existed even the slightest possibility that she was right…

The rest of the car ride passed in silence. Link wanted to say something to reassure her, yet every time he tried, the words died in his mouth.

When they pulled onto Midna’s driveway and Midna moved to get out of the car, Link reached out and stopped her.

"Listen," he said gently, "I'll call him tonight, ok?"

"Thanks, Link," she said, shooting him a warm smile before stepping out of the truck and shut the door. He watched as she slung her bag over her shoulder and headed off towards the porch.

Link took a slow, steady breath and then let it all out in a rush.

This was madness. Pure, unadulterated madness.

There was no way Sheik had gotten himself mixed up with Ganondorf’s crowd. He knew his friend, and he knew that he was probably just being his usual lazy self, holed up on his couch, watching movies and doing nothing. There was no dark, nefarious reason for his disappearance. Midna was
just being paranoid. Just watch, Link would call and everything would turn out just fine…

…Wouldn’t it?

As he put his truck back in drive and pulled away from the curb, he gave his head a rueful shake as though to shake away the pall that Midna had cast over him and found himself grimacing as the pain in his head flared up again. The pain, however, reminded him of happier things, like the mysterious new girl who had (quite literally) knocked him off of his feet, and he spent the rest of the drive home wondering who she was and mentally berating himself for possessing all of the charm and class of his 12-year-old self.

_He’d met a beautiful girl today and had acted like a total dweeb in front of her. He might as well have just shot himself in the foot. How could she ever take him seriously after today?_

_This was surely, without a doubt, the worst day of his life._

The ticking of the minute hand from the old clock in the kitchen seemed somehow loud within the confines of his otherwise silent home.

Sheik lay alone on his bed, half undressed, his eyes transfixed upon the small metal object in his hands. It felt odd and clumsy, cold and foreign, and unexpectedly heavy… but Ganondorf had assured him that he wouldn’t have to use it, that it was just for show. He had others to use those, he had said. Sheik would be needed elsewhere. It was all part of his plan…

He dropped the object on the bed beside him and ran his fingers through his long, unkempt blond hair, noting in a distant way that it had grown uncomfortably greasy in the days without a shower.

_What have I gotten myself into?_

The ticking of the clock was suddenly drowned out by the dull drone of the air conditioning unit. The change felt almost soothing after spending most of the day without saying a word. It’s not like there was anyone else there for him to talk to. There was nobody else around. His father had walked out on them back when he was a toddler, and his mother…

He crushed the rising sorrow firmly, hardly noticing the snarl on his face. None of that mattered now. Come tomorrow, everything would be different. Everything would change. It had to change. Ganondorf had promised. With the rising of the sun, he had said, the very foundations of this once noble country would be shaken forever.

It was Ganondorf’s grand plan. The snarl turned into a crooked smile against the tears that welled up in his eyes, threatening to fall. The air conditioner seemed too quiet, now. Everything different…

Suddenly, the pseudo-tranquil silence was shattered by the sound of a phone ringing.

For a moment, Sheik considered answering it. It might be one of the guys, after all. There could be a last minute change of plan… But no, they would have called his cell phone, not the landline his old-fashioned mother had used. Where was his cell phone, anyway? He didn’t know, but he didn’t feel like looking for it. Why waste his energy by moving? Besides, he didn’t really want to talk to anybody right now.

After a handful of rings, the answering machine picked up.

"Sheik? Are you there? Sheik, come on, pick up the phone."
The surprise of hearing his best friend’s voice was nearly enough to shock him out of his stupor.

Link? Why was Link calling? Had he somehow heard about...? Could he suspect that he was...?

His hand stretched out as though to pick up the phone as though he could have reached it from all the way in his bedroom, but stopped halfway.

No, Link couldn't know... How could he know? Besides, he couldn't afford friends right now. Link was lost to him.

He let his hand fall.

"Sheik? All right, fine. Um, when you get back from wherever you are, call me. Or Midna. We're starting to get worried about you. So, um...yeah. I guess... see you whenever you decide to stop being a hermit. Later, man."

The phone hung up and Sheik released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Link and Midna... Worried about him? The thought made something inside of him twinge with guilt and fear and regret, but he pushed it away.

Nobody knew of the connection between him and Ganondorf, and as long as it stayed that way, nobody he cared about had to get hurt. Ganondorf had promised. His plan was so perfect, how could it fail?

To his surprise, a laugh bubbled its way past his lips as his mother’s last bottle of wine tumbled out of his hands and thudded hollowly on the carpeted floor, staining the once clean white carpet with splotches of deep, garish red. The tears fell thick and free now, but caught in the grips of his laughter, he hardly noticed, consumed as he was by the sick joke he called life.

Link, he thought desperately, staring at the gun that lay on the tangled bedsheets beside him as tears painted tracks down his cheeks and the mattress trembled with the force of his humorless laughter. Midna. Please, whatever goddesses can hear me. If you're real, if you exist... Don't let them go to school tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

So here's what's going on.

Up till now, I have carried over basically all of my stories from FF.net to Ao3 save for two; Hit List and its sequel, From the Dust.

The reason for that is two-fold; first, they're pretty lengthy (especially FtD, which is over 500,000 words long), and second, because honestly, they were pretty messy. Like, typos galore, awkward writing, etc. (mostly in HL, but yeah. What can I say, Hit List was my first story. We all start somewhere.)

However, I was recently trying to reread FtD for the first time since I finished it a few years back and was struck with the desire to revise it. I honestly think it's a pretty good story, but it's bogged down by unnecessary length and pointless plot threads. I'm working on it now, trying to cut out at least 200,000 words without sacrificing the integrity of the story, while also cutting out some of the less-interesting or important
subplots and reworking several of the endgame plot points, so for all intents and purposes, it's going to feel like a new story - so if you've read it before and you liked it, please consider reading it again when I start posting it!

What has that got to do with HL? Well, I can't very well post the sequel to a story here on Ao3 without also bringing over the original - that wouldn't make a whole lot of sense. So I spent the last week touching up HL, fixing the typos and grammatical errors (of which there was a truly horrendous amount), rewriting some of the scenes and chapters, and generally touching it up. It's not nearly as different as FtD will be, but at least I'm no longer embarrassed by it.

I will be posting one chapter a day, hopefully every morning, from now until HL is over, after which I will begin posting FtD, also one chapter a day. Technically, HL is already completed and fully revised, but I'm not posting it all at once both because I feel like stories get overlooked when that happens, but also because I'm going to be using that time to make considerable headway into FtD's revision, which will allow me to begin posting it as soon as this story is over.

You could also go to FF.net right now and read both in their entirety, but like I said, these versions will be revised and greatly improved; the versions on FF.net are going to stay as they already are, excessive typos and all. Only Ao3 is getting the updated versions.

Finally, a note on this story's sensitive content.

School shootings are, unfortunately, very real and very disturbing events. I understand that many readers may have issues with some of the content that is going to be covered in this story. In light of that, I want to make something very clear, both to those who are sensitive to this subject matter and also to those who will be scrutinizing the narrative like a hawk because it's just what good readers do:

There are events and incidents in this story that are going to strike you as being either absurdly improbable or even outright impossible, and most of them will relate to the events that lead up to the shooting and the way that it is put together. I did this on purpose. I realize that in doing so, I may have sacrificed a bit of the integrity of my story as well as my reader's willing suspension of disbelief, but I felt that is was important for my readers to know that, though school shootings are very much real and very much awful, that the events that are listed in my story could never actually happen (at least not nearly as successfully as they are going to be portrayed), and I'm not just talking about the inevitable Triforce stuff.

This story was written initially when I was a teenager, and I was worried (justifiably so, I feel), that someone might misunderstand and think I was giving people ideas on how to pull off a school shooting, or worse, that I was planning one myself. Thus, there are some contrived things that happen in this story that make the plot possible that honestly just would not work out in reality. I hope that you can understand why I wrote things this way and that it doesn't bother you too terribly - the 'how' of the shooting isn't integral to the main focus of the plot, it's merely the catalyst for the story. The main focus lies in character drama and a traditional Zelda story told in a very un-traditional setting.

Sorry for the lengthy note, but that's all I have to say for now. Chapter 2 will be up tomorrow morning, and then it's one chapter a day till we're done, and then I'll start
posting From the Dust.

To those who have never read this before, welcome! To those who have but are interested in seeing how I've changed things, welcome back!

And to everyone, Keep it Zesty.

ZC
"Come on, Link. We're running out of time."

He drew his eyebrows down in frustration. The pressure was on now. Din, but it was unfair... How could he be expected to make such a difficult decision, with so much riding on it, in so little time? Anxiety knotted up his insides like fishing line and he ran his fingers nervously through his already messy hair.

"Um, I...uh..." Which one, which one!? So hard to choose! It was too early to make such hasty decisions...

"Will you spit it out already?!"

"Look, it's just..."

"Link, for the love of-!"

"Fine, Lucky Charms!" Link blurted out, then instantly changed his mind. "No, wait-!"

"Too late," Aryll cut in as she hopped off the kitchen counter and plucked the cereal box out of the cupboard.

Link grumbled bitterly under his breath as he stared up at the Cocoa Puffs that might have been. Rolling her eyes, Aryll smacked him playfully on the side of his head.

"Don't look so grumpy. I thought you liked Lucky Charms," she said over the tinkling of the cereal falling into two glass bowls.

"I do," Link replied as he straightened in his chair and yawned, "but I like Cocoa Puffs, too. Sometimes, it's just so hard to choose."

"Well, they do make chocolate Lucky Charms now. Why don't you just ask Granny to buy those from now on?"

Link stared at his sister as if she'd grown a second head.

"What is wrong with you? That's the most blasphemous thing I think you've ever said. Lucky Charms and Cocoa Puffs are their own unique, beautiful creations - to put them together like that, playing god with breakfast foods, is a crime against nature and an insult to who they are as individuals."

His little sister rolled her eyes and muttered something about 'boys and their cereal' under her breath.

Smiling to himself, Link's gaze drifted out the window into the blinding morning sunlight. It was early, maybe an hour before school started. Usually, Link wasn't up at such an ungodly hour (because yes, an hour before school starts is ungodly in anyone’s definition who matters), but a dream last night had woken him up and he hadn't really been able to fall back asleep.

There had been a building in his dream, large and foreboding and oddly familiar. Now that he was up and alert, he realized that it had vaguely resembled his high school, in a way. He was sure there was some sort of obvious Freudian reason for that. There had also been this terrible screaming, too...
or maybe more like wailing, as if hundreds of people were being gruesomely tortured.

The weirdest part was that rather than freaking him out, it had left him with a sense of duty, like there was something that he desperately needed to do, mingled with...anxiety? Apprehension? He wasn't sure, but it was definitely there, nibbling away at the back of his mind. Maybe he needed to stop eating so many taquitos before bed...

Regardless, he had decided to shrug the dream off. Having nightmares about Ordon High wasn’t exactly an uncommon occurrence for him, though most of them involved him hanging naked from the bleachers by his ankles as he was brutally strapped by fat old cafeteria workers during a school assembly. All in all, last night's dream seemed much less weird. And much less humiliating. And much less like he needed to go and speak to a psychiatrist.

"Hello? Ground Control to Major Tom?"

Link blinked. Aryll was waving a spoon in front of his face with a bemused expression.

"Sorry, what?" He asked as he plucked the spoon from her hand and dug into the cereal bowl he had just noticed was sitting in front of him. Aw, look, she made him breakfast... If you could call pouring someone a bowl of cereal 'making him breakfast'. It was the thought that counted.

"I was telling you that I don't need a ride to school today. Colin is picking me up in a few minutes."

"Since when can Colin drive?" Link's incredulous voice came out thick through a mouthful of miniature marshmallows.

"Since he passed his driver's test last week," She replied primly, obvious pride radiating from her voice.

Colin was Aryll's boyfriend. They had been dating for a couple months now and apparently, things were going pretty good. At first, Link hadn't been too happy to learn that his sister was dating some punk kid he didn't know all that well, but then he met Colin and his disapproval had disappeared.

Colin was one of those guys who was always nice to people. Like, always. It was like he had this mental disorder where he couldn't be mean. Which was a good thing on paper, Link supposed, but the bad part of it was that he was kind of a doormat and could never seem to stick up for himself. As a result, he was picked on a lot at school, though usually, all it took to get them to back off was reminding his persecutors that his father was Ordon’s Chief of Police.

Link knew the man from his altercation last year with Ganondorf and had since seen him a time or two when he’d go to pick up Aryll from Colin’s place or vice versa. Speaking of which, Colin had nearly wet his pants when Aryll had brought him over to her house for the first time and told him that the guy holding the baseball bat with a (somewhat staged) homicidal glint in his eye was her older brother.

"Hey," his sister asked, interrupting his thoughts for the second time, "who did you call last night?"

Link gave her a disgruntled look. "How do you know that I called somebody?"

"Um, 'cause you took the phone away from me while I was talking to Malon and said you had somebody more important to talk to?"

"Oh, right." He took another bite of his cereal.

"Well?"
“Well, I did have someone more important to talk to.”

“Shut up, I meant who did you call?”

Deciding there was no reason not to clue Aryll in and that his unease over the entire situation was completely nonsensical because Sheik was fine and nothing was wrong, Link responded, "I was trying to talk to Sheik. He's been ditching school for a while now."

"Oh yeah?" she said absently, glancing out the kitchen window.

Link snorted. "Well, thanks for your obvious show of interest."

Seriously, why ask him a question if she wasn’t even going to listen to the answer? His sister was such a spaz.

Aryll blinked and looked backward. "What?"

Apparently zoning out in the middle of a conversation was a family trait. Link shook his head ruefully and muttered, “Never mind… See if I ever tell you anything again…”

The doorbell rang and Aryll leaped out of her seat. "That's Colin! Bye, Link, see you at school! By Granny!"

Their grandmother’s voice echoed from somewhere deeper in the house. Probably from her room; she got to sleep in because she’d already served her time, or so she liked to tell him whenever he complained about her waking him up in the morning.

Link looked down at his empty cereal bowl as the door closed behind his sister. His spoon was scraping the porcelain. Man, when had he finished eating? His stomach growled again, calling out for additional sustenance, but he stood up and put his bowl in the sink. He needed to get ready for school. Take a shower, get dressed, maybe shoot for a quick power nap…

…and maybe he'd try calling Sheik again.

Midna sat petrified in her mother's silver suburban.

The light in front of her was red, but if she was being completely honest, that was only part of the reason behind why she had stopped moving. The other part had to do with the sheer terror that was threatening to consume her from the inside as she considered what she had set out to do that morning.

Really, she had no idea why she was so scared. After all, Link had said that he would call Sheik last night, and if something had been wrong he would have let her know… Even so, she knew deep down that even if Link had told her that everything was alright, she had to see him for her own eyes to be sure. Yet somehow, the idea of seeing Sheik again with the possibility that Ganondorf had influenced him in any way was terrifying.

Ganondorf didn't make friends; he made cronies.

Was Sheik his new crony?

When the light turned green, Midna forced herself to take her foot off the brake and follow the car in front of her. It was alright, she could do this. She’d been to Sheik’s house a million times before to pick him up before school. Even if his mother wasn’t exactly the nicest person around, she had no
reason to be afraid… right? Right?

As if some unknown deity had been listening in to her internal monologue and had decided to answer, she was suddenly gripped by an uncontrollable urge to get to Sheik as fast as she could. She couldn’t trust Link’s phone call to find out anything useful. Din, she couldn’t trust Link to do anything useful at all! She needed to see for herself!

What she needed was a game plan to help get into the appropriate mindset. First: check that he was ok, that Ganondorf hadn’t attacked him and left him bleeding to death in the closet. Paranoid? Sure, but this was Ganondorf they were talking about. When she thought she’d seen them both together the other day, she’d been too paralyzed with terror to do anything and before she knew it they’d slipped away. She couldn’t let that happen again.

Second: beat the living crap out of him and scream his ears off for avoiding his friends, for ditching school and making her worry. Goddesses, who did he think he was, messing with her head like that?! Seriously, if this all turned out to be some kind of joke or just idle laziness, she was going to absolutely murder him.

Finally: she would seize him by his hair and kiss him, kiss him long and hard until he realized that he had loved her all along and he fell to the floor and wept, begging for her forgiveness and vowed to dedicate the rest of his life to serving her and fulfilling her every wish and desire.

…Ok, maybe she was getting a little out of hand there, but she was honestly sick of all the circling the two of them did. Or, well, she thought it was circling. Maybe it was time that she fessed up and told him how she felt. Things couldn’t really get any worse than they already were, right?

Midna shook off the last thought bitterly before steeling herself for the task at hand. Just hurry up and get to Sheik’s mother’s apartment and get a hold of her idiot best friend, then fulfill steps one through three and maybe, if there was time, drag him to school afterward. It was a great plan… only the car in front was moving so unbelievably slow! Goddesses! Curse speed limits and all those who obey them!

Without warning, a gray blur streaked through the intersecting traffic light she was about to pass through and slammed into the car in front of her with a sickening metallic crunch, sending the car in front careening wildly off into the grassy median.

Midna’s foot slammed down on the brakes and the suburban screeched to a stunned halt.

The gray blur turned out to be a large, heavyset van, the kind that plumbing industries used, except it had no labels that she could see. A rental, maybe? The other was a much smaller vehicle with fresh blue paint, clearly purchased this year. The van, with its massive metal bumper, remained virtually undamaged… however, the little blue car’s front end was completely totaled.

Throwing her car into park and opening the door, Midna leaped out of her mother’s suburban into the middle of the intersection and ran to the aid of the little blue car’s as fast as her short little legs would carry her.

Luckily, at this time of the morning, the road was practically empty. The smashed hood sat steaming in the grass, tendrils of white mist rising up spiraling columns in the cold morning air. The front wheel on the right side was bent up off the ground and was somehow still spinning, albeit feebly. She didn’t spare a glance for the van; anything that could take that beating with barely a dent could probably protect its passengers just as well. Besides, they ran the light; it was their fault if they were hurt, they deserved it.
To her relief, the driver of the blue car had managed to extract herself from the wreckage in spite of the twisted doorframe by the time Midna had reached her, and she looked surprisingly unharmed.

"Are you ok?" Midna called out automatically. Truth be told, she was a little freaked out even though she hadn’t been involved in the accident herself but checking on the driver seemed like an appropriate first step.

The girl, clearly shaken, spun away from her ruined car, her long blonde hair whipping in the wind, and stared at Midna with wide, shaken eyes. For a second, Minda found herself wondering if the girl had even registered what she’s asked; was she in shock? Did she have head trauma? But a moment later she was swallowing thickly and giving a brief nod.

So, she was ok. Awesome.

Now what?

"Well, uh… Should we maybe call the cops, or-?"

Before she finished speaking, her words were drowned out by a resounding screech.

Whirling around in surprise, identical looks of disbelief appeared on both girls faces as the heavyset van roared into motion, black rubber tires spinning on asphalt for traction before zooming off down the road at the same speed it had been going before the crash.

"Hey!" The blonde screeched, suddenly frantic, running after the van in vain pursuit and waving her fist in the air like a bludgeon. "Hey, get back here! Who do you think is going to pay for my car, you jerk!"

The last bit was strangled with barely suppressed tears as the girl crumpled to the pavement with a frustrated scream.

Midna hurried forward and pulled the girl to her feet, and out of the way of passing cars.

"Hey, crazy! Watch where you’re running! You got a death wish?! Look, just… just calm down! We’ll get in my car and follow after them, get their license number, then call the cops. We’ll make them buy you a brand new car, alright? They can’t get away."

Tears still glistened in the girl's eyes, but she no longer looked weepy; she looked furious. Nodding hastily, she smeared the tears off of her cheeks with her wrists and stumbled to her feet, hurrying back alongside Midna to her silver suburban which was still idling in the middle of the intersection.

Climbing into the car, Midna squashed the little voice in her head that was glad for this excuse not to have to go and see Sheik and focused on the job at hand. Part of her wanted to see him so desperately it hurt, but the other side was terrified of what she would discover had become of the boy she had so unwittingly fallen for.

With a squeal that mimicked the unmarked van in intensity, Midna floored off in pursuit.

Zelda took a moment to study the strange girl currently driving the vehicle on their impromptu high-speed chase through rural Ordon. She was an odd one… odd, but still surprisingly kind if she was willing to go through all of this trouble for some girl she didn’t know. She wore mostly dark clothing; ripped jean shorts despite the cold, an oversized black hoodie and thick combat boots, but she had colored her dark hair with streaks of vibrant orange that reminded her of the sunset.
"So," Zelda began after a slight pause, "Um. Thank you for this. I’m Zelda. You never told me your name."

The girl gave a start as though she’d forgotten Zelda was there and then focused back on driving.

"Sorry, I was thinking about something. What did you say?"

"I said my name is Zelda, and… asked what your name was."

Din, this was awkward. She wasn’t sure how she was supposed to act when a stranger picked you up on the side of the road to chase wildly after the creeps whose hit-and-run had totaled the car your father had bought you for your birthday.

"Midna. Midna Twili."

Her sister’s voice echoed teasingly in her head.

_Bond. James Bond._

The thought brought a smile to her face despite her less-than-favorable circumstances.

"Well, thank you, Midna. You really didn’t have to do this."

The girl shook her head and grinned in an embarrassed sort of way.

"Please, and let that creep go? Never. It’s like we’re Charlie’s Angels right now, except we’re short one girl and I don’t have a gun. Din, I hope we get to see his face when the cops get at him."

Zelda smiled in vindictive agreement. Watch him get caught? Forget that, she wanted to punch that moron in the face! That raging imbecile totaled her car! _Her car! Crap, _she thought, suddenly stricken, _dad is going to kill me!_ 

"So do you go to Ordon too?" Zelda asked, desperate to distract herself from that particular line of thought, "What grade are you in?"

"I’m a junior too!" She replied with a smile. Well, at least she got along with one person in her grade... That makes one almost-friend made in an entire week of classes. Goddesses, she hated this place. Why did they have to move?

"Wait…” Midna said slowly, shooting Zelda a curious frown out of the corner of her eye even as she deftly weaved through the traffic, “ Haven’t I… seen you somewhere?”

Zelda frowned, opening her mouth to say no, when all of a sudden, Midna’s ruby irises went wide with surprise and delight.

“OH! I do know you! You’re that new girl, right? The one who almost murdered my friend with a door yesterday after school?"

_Horror and recognition blossomed inside of her with equal intensity."

"Oh… You’re that girl, his friend who was with him when I…”

She could feel her face turning red, though for some reason, from the look of utter glee on Midna’s face, you’d have thought the holidays had come early.
“I am so sorry…” She breathed hoarsely, rubbing her face with her hands and hoping she could rub the shame out of them. “This has been the worst first week of school in the history of mankind. First, I hit some poor guy with a door, and now this…”

Midna shrugged, a crooked grin on her face.

"Well… Link didn't seem too terribly upset."

Zelda shot her a look, then snorted and looked away.

"Was your…friend? Boyfriend? Mad when I hit him?"

The girl blinked for a moment, pulling a face that made her look like she’d just sucked on a rotten lemon before bursting out in surprisingly raucous laughter.

"Ew! Ew, gross, no! Bite your forked tongue, you she-devil! Link's just a friend. A good friend, sure, but that's all he'll ever be. Goddesses, he's like my brother!"

"So, he's not your boyfriend?"

She wasn’t sure what possessed her to say that, but she regretted it instantaneously.

Midna gave her an uncomfortably sly look.

"Oh-hoh, why do you want to know? A certain someone isn’t developing a crush on my air-headed best friend are they?"

Zelda’s face bloomed scarlet again. “No! No, I swear, nothing like that! I was just curious!"

Unfortunately, Midna was having none of it.

"Uh-huh, sure you are. I suppose you enjoyed the way he got all tongue-tied when he opened his eyes to find you leaning over him?"

Zelda hurriedly cast around for a way to change the topic. "Please, whatever. He seems like a nice guy, but… I mean, he probably already has a girlfriend."

Midna shook her head jovially. "Nope! Link's only ever dated one girl, this floozy named Ilia. But that was like, freshman year, and she moved to Termina with her father about a year ago, so… Link's all free!"

Zelda groaned internally and decided to change tactics. Really, the guy was cute, but she had only seen him once and she'd knocked him over with a door! Not exactly the greatest first impression. Besides, she was more concerned about making friends then finding a boyfriend. That would come… whenever it came.

Also, her car. Obviously.

"What about you? Do you have a guy?” she asked, deciding to turn the tables on her and see how she liked it.

Midna suddenly grew solemn.

Oh. Oh, no.

"Sorry," Zelda said hurriedly. "No, I'm sorry if that's a sensitive subject-"
To her surprise, however, Midna shook her head and said, "No, no, it's ok. I've sort of… liked… this one guy for a long time now, he's just never…"

Zelda found herself smiling conspiratorially as though the two were sharing secrets.

"Is he cute?"

Midna grinned. "Farore above, he’s gorgeous… But don’t tell him I said that, he’s arrogant enough as it is."

For the first time that week, Zelda finally felt like she’d managed to connect with someone her age. In spite of what had just gone down with her car, maybe things were finally starting to look up…

Zelda opened her mouth to respond, then froze. The car in front of them had changed lanes and there, a short ways ahead, they saw it.

The grey van.

The van that had busted her car.

A thought came to Zelda that made her shiver. What if this guy is some sort of psycho and tries to attack us?

Her stomach twisted nervously until she remembered that they didn't have to leave the car, just drive up close enough behind him to get his plate number. She was making this out to be way more dramatic than it had to be.

Almost as if her thought sparked it, the van suddenly swerved off to the right down a narrow road leading to the Faron Spring cemetery.

Zelda's blood ran cold even as Midna swerved to follow him. Everything she had ever seen in reruns of Law and Order told her that following this unmarked van into the creepy cemetery was definitely not the right move. Bad things always happened to lone girls in cemeteries. Yet even as she thought that, she remembered her car and her determination was strengthened by an uncommon surge of anger and a desire for vengeance. She wanted her payback, and no way was this idiot getting away with not paying for the damages. She didn’t want to think about what her father would say otherwise.

The chapel in front of the cemetery wasn't that far from the main road, so when they turned down the narrow street the van had already managed to obscure itself behind the building. They pulled into the parking lot carefully and waited a moment before coming to a stop near the front. If they were lucky, the guy would have already entered and they could sneak a look at the license plate without him ever being the wiser.

However, when they exited the car and peeked around the side of the building, the vehicle was nowhere to be seen. Zelda stared at the vacant parking lot in consternation. Where was the van? It had to be there somewhere! It’s not like vans just up and vanish into thin air!

Growling in her throat, Zelda opened her mouth to let out a curse when Midna suddenly reached out and touched her arm, pointing off into the cemetery. There, a couple of hundred feet away, almost obscured by the sea of like-colored headstones, lumbered the gray van.

Zelda nodded in satisfaction. This wasn’t over yet.

Exchanging brief glances, the two girls set off in pursuit on foot; the suburban would have been easy
to recognize from the crash scene, plus it stood out against the light green of the grass and the grey of
the grave markers. Darting between headstones for cover, they watched as the van rolled to a halt
before an old, run-down stone crypt. They hesitated for a moment, waiting for the driver to get out,
but after a few minutes of stillness on the part of the van’s occupants, it became obvious that they
weren’t going to move.

Hearts hammering in their throats, the girls crept closer.

This was a terrible idea. Honestly, of all the stupid stunts she’d pulled in her short sixteen years on
earth, this one easily took the cake.

Still, there was something… invigorating about it all. She hadn’t felt this alive in ages; something
about sneaking up behind a strange van in a cemetery so that you could call the cops who could
identify them and make them pay for the damages to your car so that your father wouldn't kill you,
all while you were supposed to be at school, gave her such a rush of adrenaline that she seriously
considered pulling dangerous stunts like this more often… except, maybe next time not in a
cemetery. She had never liked cemeteries. They tended to foreshadow unpleasant things.

As they managed to sneak (covertly, and with tremendous success, Zelda was sure to add) within a
few yards of the van, she noticed that despite the obvious age of the crypt most of the gravestones
around it were relatively new. The dirt still looked fresh on a couple of them. Zelda was about to dart
stealthily behind the statue of a large forest spirit when Midna reached out and snagged her arm,
pulling her down behind a plain rectangular stone.

"What are you-"

Midna slapped her hand over Zelda's mouth and gestured frenetically over her shoulder. Rising to
her knees, Zelda risked a cautious peek over the tombstone and found herself watching two new
vehicles pulling into the chapel parking lot before following the path the van had traveled into the
field of gravestones.

Zelda fell back down beside Midna and wrapped her arms around her legs, trying to tell her heart to
stop beating so fast as if she could somehow stave off the oncoming panic attack.

Oh Goddesses, what was she thinking, sneaking out here like a couple characters in a crime drama?
Mysterious vans holding secretive meetings in cemeteries? When was that ever a good thing?! Likely
this was some sort of drug exchange, or perhaps something a little more innocuous, like grave
robbing, but Zelda doubted that it could be anything normal. Something felt decidedly sinister about
the van's proceedings, and the last thing she wanted was to be discovered hiding behind a headstone,
spying on them.

The crunch of gravel announced the cars’ arrival and after a moment they heard several doors open
and close, followed by the crunch of footsteps and, eventually, voices.

Zelda found herself struggling to resist the urge to peek around the headstone. It sounded like there
were about five people behind her, all male and all teenagers.

That was odd, but then, she decided, teenagers did drugs too.

"Have we all arrived?" asked a voice somewhere to the right. It was deep and powerful, cold and
harsh like the stone behind her back, and she swallowed convulsively. For some odd reason, just
hearing the voice was enough to frighten her.

"Yeah, this is all of us. All that matter, at least." Another replied before letting out a gleeful cackle.
This voice was much higher than the first, unnaturally so, and sounded eerily similar to that of a small child.

Zelda couldn't help herself any longer. She twisted around and carefully peeked one eye around the edge of the tombstone and felt Midna do the same beside her.

All five speakers stood in a rough circle just in front of the crypt, surrounded by their three cars. One, she assumed he was the owner of the first voice, stood straight and impassive with his back to them, but by his positioning he inadvertently blocked off the view of the fifth and final guy. He was large, very large, with dark skin, deep red hair, and a bold nose; obviously Gerudo, then. His clothing looked dark and expensive and very well cared for, which stood in obvious contrast to the other five.

"Good," the Gerudo said, folding his arms and leaning back against the wall of the crypt, "let's get this meeting over with quickly so we can begin phase one.

"Sakon," he barked, and one of the boys, the one standing with his back to the girls, jumped as though startled. "Did you get everything that I told you to?"

Sakon nodded eagerly, looking disturbingly like a dog eager to please his master.

After a moment, Zelda realized that there was not one outstanding feature about the guy. His hair was dirty blond and of normal length, and his clothing was just as unremarkable as his height and eye color. He wasn’t fat or skinny, muscular or frail, tall or short, attractive or ugly. He just… was; like a generic doll that was made in a factory. It made your eyes want to slide away from him and focus on something more interesting.

"Y-yes, my lord," He stammered, making careful pains to keep from making eye contact. "I got everything you asked for. And I gave it all to Vaati, just as you instructed. You can ask him yourself."

The owner of the first voice turned to the boy standing on Sakon's left. "Well? Did he?"

"Yes, he collected it all," the boy drawled languidly. This one seemed to have an abnormal fixation with the color purple. Everything about him was purple, from his hoodie to his shoes. Even his eyes were purple, and he had died his long hair a light shade of lavender. Everything, purple… all except for his skin which was very pale, almost deathly so, as if he stayed inside most of the time, away from sunlight.

"Zant and I have put it all together for you, just as you required," Vaati continued, tone apathetic. He also had a very proper way of speaking, Zelda noticed, as if he was trying to impress you with his grammar.

"Good work, Sakon, Vaati," Ganondorf replied, inclining his head to each in turn. Vaati nodded back, but Sakon twitched.

"Zant," he continued, turning his attention to the fourth in the group, "I'll need you to oversee set up this morning. We can make the grunts do most of the work, but you'll have to make sure that there are no mistakes. We can't afford them this late in the game."

The boy with the preschooler voice offered up a lopsided grin, revealing a set of small, pointed teeth.

"But of course, Ganondorf; I live to serve you and your glorious plan," Zant grinned sardonically, performing a mock bow that almost made his head touch the floor, impressive for a guy of his height. He was unnaturally flexible.
With the exception of his voice, the fourth one really looked the part of a guy who would hold strange meetings in cemeteries. He was tall and lanky, and every inch of him was tattooed, including his shaven head, which was twice as odd for someone who was clearly around her age. His eyes, though slanted, were wide and starring; they reminded Zelda of a young child who had just caught you doing something wrong.

The large one, Ganondorf, turned finally to address the last member of the group, and Zelda got her first glimpse of him. He was of moderate height, not short but not tall either, and very lithe. His eyes, however, were a startlingly deep blood red color, a sure sign of Shadowfolk ancestry, though they seemed tired and listless. His long, shaggy blond hair hung down into his eyes and collar.

"Sheik," Ganondorf said, and Zelda felt Midna stiffen beside her and let out a small gasp. For a moment she thought Sakon's eyes darted towards them. "You've done what I asked?"

Sheik nodded wearily, and Zelda noticed that his shoulders were slumped and his face looked haggard. Clearly, Ganondorf had been working him hard.

"Good, then you can help Zant with preparations. You too, Vaati. I'll expect the first explosion exactly fifteen minutes after the second bell rings-"

Wait, explosion?

"and the rest will have to happen immediately afterward, or else some of the students might escape. Remember, after the exits are sealed, round up the students into as many classrooms as you can hold. Kill any who cause problems. Let's get going."

It was Zelda's turn to gasp as the enormity of what was just said came crashing down upon her like an avalanche. There was no mistaking Sakon's eyes this time; as he started towards them, mouth opening to say something, Zelda jerked back behind the headstone, heart hammering even more intensely than before, and silently willed herself not to burst into panicked tears.

Oh, Goddesses! She thought, panicking, her heart just about exploding from out of her chest. They're going to kill us! They're going to kill everyone! Help!

As if the answer to a prayer, Zelda heard Vaati suddenly speak up from somewhere behind them.

"Hey Zant, what did you do to your car?"

When Sakon failed to mention them, Zelda mustered up all of her courage and peeked back around the tombstone to find everyone examining the van's front bumper with obvious interest.

"Oh, right. I hit some moron this morning on the way here." He said, giggling.

Ganondorf spun towards him, yellow eyes flashing murderously in the morning sunlight. "You did what? Did they call the police?"

"Tch, as if. I got away before they even noticed me. Those little girlies were too busy crying about their car."

Ganondorf glowered until Zant broke eye contact, then spun back to his car and said, darkly, "It's time to go, we're running late enough as it is. Sakon, come with me, I need your assistance with something special. Zant, go with Sheik and round up the others. Vaati, you go on alone and meet up with Zant at the school."

After a few more gut-wrenching moments that seemed to stretch on for an eternity, Zelda heard five
doors slam and three cars drive away. Still, she waited for a few minutes before climbing fearfully to her feet and peering around the tombstone to see if the coast was clear.

It was.

"Oh, Goddesses, Midna!" she blurted out the moment she knew they were alone, wrapping her arms around her midriff in an attempt to stop herself from shaking. "Did you hear what they said?! They’re going to attack the school! Today! With bombs and guns and… and…! Light, we need to tell someone! Call the cops, or the school, or… or…"

Realizing that her companion wasn’t speaking, Zelda turned around to find Midna hunched over on the ground.

"Midna, do you have a phone?" She asked, realizing and regretting that she’d left hers inside her backpack which was still sitting on the passenger seat of her father’s car several miles away.

Midna didn’t answer.

"Midna? Midna, are you ok?"

Midna jerked as though awoken from a dream, then looked up at Zelda in confusion as if she hadn’t seen her before.

She opened and closed her mouth a few times, unable to speak, then finally managed to rasp out softly, “…Did you see him?”

"Him?" Zelda asked, confused, her mind completely occupied with the suddenly all-to-present reality of an actual school shooting, “Who him? The idiot who hit my car?"

Midna shook her head as though in a fog. "No, the blond one… The one with the red eyes."

Zelda wracked her brain for the name. "Who, the Sheik guy?"

She nodded slowly.

“What, do you… Do you know him?"

Midna didn’t answer, but the look on her face seemed to say it all.

"Oh, Midna, I… I’m sorry…” Zelda offered awkwardly, unsure how to exactly go about comforting a girl who just found out a friend literally wanted to kill her and her classmates, but once again Midna wasn’t paying attention. She was staring wide-eyed at the tombstone in front of her as if some dark secret had been scribbled across its face.

Confused, Zelda bent over to get a closer look at it.

‘Here lies Impa Shadow,’ it read in a flowing, flowery script, ‘beloved mother and friend. May she rest in peace.’

Below that were inscribed two dates, the latter of the two very recent.

Zelda didn’t get it.

“What? Midna, I don’t… Did you know this person?”

"It's Sheik's mom." Midna gasped, the tears Zelda hadn’t seen welling up in her eyes finally
overflowing and spilling down her cheeks.
Phase One

Zant sat back on his heels, inspecting the long bundle of wires that ran up the graffiti-covered stall and disappeared into the ceiling above through a loose tile, holding his breath so as not to inhale too much residual toilet stank.

Those wires, and others like it stemming from various locations throughout the school, connected to a series of homemade pipe bombs and other incendiary devices that had been strategically placed around the school’s exits on the ground and second floor. Zant glanced at his watch impatiently. There was still sixty-three minutes left until the fun started. Ganondorf had insisted that they wait for fifteen minutes after the second bell rang to be sure that as many students as possible would be in the school. It made sense, but the excitement was getting the better of him. He couldn’t stay still.

Rising to his feet on aching knees, he did his best to stretch despite the cramped space. He was alone in the grungy stall, but three other guys were in the bathroom with him to help with the preparations and to hide the evidence. On top of that, they had another guy outside for ‘security’. It seemed a bit much for Zant’s tastes, but Ganondorf had enlisted all of the help he could get for today’s big event, even people from other school districts. Turns out there were a surprising number of hate-driven, emotionally stunted or otherwise plain psychotic students in and around Hyrule.

In total, there were between thirty and forty members of the group here, including himself and Ganondorf. It was gearing up to be the largest school-based massacre in modern history. Zant couldn't wait.

Murmuring voices in the direction of the bathroom entrance drew his attention. He quickly exited the stall and placed his hand on the handle of the gun he had stuffed in the back of his pants. He didn't know who was doing the talking, but if whoever it was managed to get past the guy they had watching the door, Zant was prepared to do what was necessary to protect their cause. If worse came to worse and a bomb had to go off early, Ganondorf would just have to deal with it.

The voices eventually faded into silence and muffled footsteps announced that the stranger was leaving. Zant relaxed his grip on the handle of his weapon, but his anxiety didn’t diminish in the slightest.

"Gorman!" Zant hissed, enraged. "Gorman, get over here! Carlov, you go take over watch for a minute!"

Carlov, a husky boy from some place beyond Snow Peak, gave Zant a bitter glare and trudged over to where Gorman, a dark-haired grease ball from Termina, was now emerging from behind a wall that obscured the bathroom entrance. He smiled oily at Zant who bared his teeth in return.

"Who were you talking to?" Zant snarled, trying and failing to keep his voice low. "Don't you realize that if some whiny freshman goes off and tells a teacher that we won't let him pee, we're-"

"Relax," Gorman cut in, sounding overly calm and in control. Zant's eye twitched in irritation. What he wouldn’t give to put a bullet between this imbecile’s eyes right now... "It was the weasel. He was just reporting in."

“Well, what did he have to say?”

"He says that those kids you asked him to spy on are all here, except for the gothic girl. He's gone to
see if she's showed up yet, and then he'll make sure they're where they're s'posed to be."

"It doesn't matter that one's missing," Zant interrupted, turning away and examining his reflection in the filthy bathroom mirror. Despite Gorman's incivility, Zant’s mood had taken a sporadic turn for the better. Their plans were finally coming to fruition. "All but one is good enough. We'll get the girl some other time. You just get back to watching your door so Carlov doesn't have a conniption."

Gorman smirked as if sharing some private joke and walked back behind the wall. Carlov returned with an offended glower.

Zant let his long lanky legs carry him back into his stall so he didn’t have to stare at his moronic accomplices any longer. All but one, huh… Ganondorf would have to accept that. And if he didn’t, he would pin the blame on Gorman. He really didn't like that boy; he was too smug for his own good.

In truth, Zant had no idea why Ganondorf had wanted to make sure that certain, specific students were in attendance, but then again, he didn’t really care either. Be it personal vendetta or whatever, Ganondorf’s intentions could be his own - Zant was getting what he wanted and that was all that mattered.

His thoughts drifted to the others in the remaining bathrooms. He wondered if Vaati and Sheik had managed to set their explosives up correctly. Somehow, he doubted it. Vaati had his uses every now and then, though he lacked gumption, but Sheik was useless no matter which way you looked at him.

The walkie he’d placed on the tank of the toilet suddenly emitted a wave of static, followed by a message from their great leader. A slow smile blossomed on Zant’s face.

"Well boys," he said ominously as he reemerged from the stall. "Get your toys ready, looks like we're starting this party a little early."

"Alright class, settle down," Mr. Auru called out, leaning casually back against his desk. "This is officially your discussion time. Your test will be on Friday and I want to make sure that you're all good and ready. I want to see A’s from every one of you, so feel free to ask any questions you want, as long as they're appropriate," he sent a meaningful glance towards the few guys in the back row, "and have to do with history." He sent another meaningful glance towards Ruto, the only junior in a room full of sophomores.

Unsurprisingly, at least to Aryll, Shad's hand was the first and only in the air.

"Yes, Shad?" Auru asked.

Mr. Auru was one of Aryll's favorite teachers because he never got in your face. He was very calm and laid back, kind to a fault, and just super passionate about Hyrule's history. Though he was getting on in age, he always seemed to be able to connect to his students in such a down-to-earth way that he was easily one of the most popular teachers in the school.

"Ah, yes, I had a question pertaining to the Age of the Hero of Winds," Shad replied, pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose in a distracted manner.

Shad was a very quiet boy who shied away from most people. He was also something of a nerd, boasting an enormous brain and a mother who seemed to believe that comb-overs were somehow still in style. In spite of his social awkwardness and official status as Ordon High’s premier punching back, Shad was one of Mr. Auru's favorite students because he shared his passion for history. And
though she’d never be caught dead hanging out with him, even she could admit that he really wasn’t that bad of a guy.

"Yes?" Mr. Auru prompted gently.

"Well, you said that during this time all of Hyrule was covered in water? I don't understand how that could be."

Auru nodded curtly and said, "Well, remember that we’re dealing with a lot of legends, not all of which are completely factual, strictly speaking. Regardless, if you remember back to a few weeks ago when we were studying the Hero of Time, you'd remember that after defeating the King of Evil, the Hero left Hyrule behind."

Aryll felt herself sit up a little straighter. She was hardly the sort of person who paid rapt attention during class, particularly history class, but the Hero of Time was one of her favorite stories from when she was little. Magic and princesses and heroes with swords? It was silly, sure, but so what? Let a girl dream a little.

Shad nodded hastily, then stopped with a frown, "Er, yes, of course, but I mean to say… why did the Hero leave again? I mean, hadn’t he just saved Hyrule from a terrible fate? Certainly, he would have been honored and revered for the rest of his life, maybe even elevated to lordship or something. Instead, he leaves his country behind to be tormented by the dark one all over again? I mean, how does that makes sense? It doesn’t seem very heroic."

Aryll found herself nodding in fervent agreement with Shad. She had always wondered why the Hero had left his home and friends behind. Why rescue them if you were just going to leave them to be killed? Movies and storybooks left a lot of gaps in the popular legends of old.

Auru gave a sad sigh. "Well, try not to judge the Hero too hard here, guys. I mean, let’s look at things from his point of view. He left behind everything and everyone he knew as a child, all of his friends, in order to do what the Royal Family asked of him. Then, he ended up losing seven years of his life only to awaken to find all of Hyrule a mess, his friends had either been killed or had forgotten about him, and his only hope, the Princess, was in hiding. He then went on, braving terrible dangers and threats to rescue his friends and the Princess with absolutely no help besides an enigmatic Sheikah warrior and a sacred sword, and when he finally manages to defeat the King of Evil and imprison him in the Sacred Realm, the Princess sends him back to his childhood. Yet again, everyone forgets who he is, and he's banned from his home because he's of Hylian decent and not Kokiri - basically, most scholars have agreed that the most logical reason behind him leaving was the pain of isolation."

"So, he left because he was lonely?" Shad asked dully.

"He wasn’t alone!" cut in a tough looking tomboy to his left; Aryll thought her name was Ashei. "He still had the Princess, yeah? Why'd he leave her then?"

Auru chuckled. "Well, I imagine that the Hero wasn't too happy with the Princess at the time. She had basically rewarded his rescue of her and her kingdom by ruining his life. I guess the Hero pretty much hated her and left Hyrule in order to escape. Which leads into Shad's question about—"

"Whoa, wait, that's all wrong!"

It took Aryll a moment before she realized that the one interrupting class was her.

Auru gave her a startled look, clearly as taken aback by her outburst as she was.
"It's wrong? What's wrong?"

"Well, the Hero couldn't have hated the Princess. They were in love."

By the time she got to the end of her sentence, she had tapered off in red-faced meekness.

Auru stared at her in consternation. "In love?"

The entire class was now staring at her. Impossibly, she felt her face flush an even deeper shade of crimson.

"Well, yeah," she stammered out quickly, silently wishing she could just die on the spot, "of course, I mean, look at all the stuff he did for her. No guy would risk his life for a girl if there wasn't something going on between them."

In spite of the ludicrous turn that his class discussion had taken, Auru nodded along thoughtfully.

"So, you believe that the Hero’s actions were motivated by his deep love for the Princess."

Aryll gave a quick nod, eager to be done speaking.

"…His deep love for the Princess who ruined his life and drove him to flee the country?"

She blinked, then shook her head hurriedly and said, "No! I think that the Princess sent him back in time because she wanted to give him his life back. I think she felt awful for what she put him through and was trying to pay him back somehow."

It was Auru's turn to shake his head. "If that were true, then when the Hero came to see her before leaving, she would have convinced him to stay."

Aryll had nothing to say to that, but to her surprise, Shad did. "Excuse me, Mr. Auru, but you're wrong." Auru looked at him with raised eyebrows and gestured for him to expound.

"The princess can’t have asked for him to stay if she was a child. The memories of what had happened in their ruined future would have been retained only by the Hero, the one who was sent back in time. She likely didn’t know him when he came back to visit her."

Auru blinked and Aryll turned around to give Shad a confused look.

"It’s the only logical explanation," he continued, suddenly sounding like he was the teacher. “Even if she didn’t have feelings for him, she would have still asked him to stay if only to keep her safe. I think that Aryll is right, that they were in love," he glanced at Aryll, "and that the Princess was sacrificing her feelings and the feelings of her Hero for the good of the country."

Auru leaned back against the desk with a thoughtful look. "Well, in that case," he said, "Why didn't the hero choose to stay for himself when he came to see her?"

"I don't think that the Hero knew why she had reversed time," Shad said. "I think that he was mad at her like you said. Or maybe he had another reason for leaving. Though there's little to support it, I've read that children of the Kokiri, where the Hero grew up, had fairy friends. Maybe when he was banned from the forests, the fairy left him, and he went to find it."

"He left behind the love of his life to chase a fairy?" Ashei cut in incredulously.

Shad gave her a longsuffering look. "He left his love to find his friend."
"And then what? Why didn't he ever come back?" Aryll turned her head and was surprised to see that the voice belonged to her best friend, Malon.

"I don't...know..." Shad turned his head to address Malon and his voice faded away. He was apparently stunned to find that he was having a conversation with three different females. His face turned as red as his hair as he sunk lower into his chair and fixed his eyes on the desktop.

"Actually," said Mr. Auru with an excited smile towards Malon; it was rare that this many students participated in classroom discussions and he was clearly eager to take advantage of it, "Not many of you would know this, since you've only been taught Hyrulian history, but the hero went off to be a hero somewhere else, though not much is known about what happened."

"Hold up," cut in Ashei, "you're saying that he ditched his country, his girlfriend, and his fairy-thing, and ran away to be famous somewhere else?"

"Well, essentially, yes."

"What a douche," Ashei mouthed harshly, much to Aryll's amusement.

"Where did he go?" Malon asked, leaning forward as Ashei snorted in disgust. To Aryll's surprise, Malon actually seemed interested in the conversation. Malon was never interested in anything that wasn't boys, horses, or clothing.

Letting her gaze sweep the classroom, she discovered that a majority of the class was actually paying attention. The only exceptions were the small cluster of jocks and cheerleaders in the corner. From across the room, Aryll watched Ruto attempt to hold back laughter at something that apparently Aryll had just missed. For some reason, Shad's face was growing redder.

"Termina," replied Auru simply, and Ashei burst out laughing.

"Termina? You've got to be kidding me! Why'd he go there?"

"No one really knows," Auru said with a shrug. "Maybe he was trying to avoid the Princess. Maybe he was banished by the Goddesses. Or, maybe Termina was one of his favorite vacations spots."

Auru grinned at his own attempt at humor, but the class only let out a few half-hearted chuckles.

Rolling his eyes, Mr. Auru said, "Anyway, back to what we were talking about. Now, Shad, when the Hero was sent back in time, we need to remember what Mr. Write said in his controversial theory about split timelines-"

Mr. Auru broke off as Ruto let out an earsplitting shriek of laughter. The basketball player beside her sat up quickly, but not before Aryll saw him performing an incredibly cruel interpretation of Shad for Ruto's amusement. If Shad's face was red before, now it was scarlet.

Mr. Auru turned his head towards the little knot of popular kids, but before he could open his mouth, the bell rang.

Rising to their feet, the class hurriedly stampeded from the room amidst a cacophony of noise. Sliding in her chair beneath the desk, Aryll turned to Malon and said, teasingly, "Wow, Malon. I was surprised to see you paying attention today."

Malon punched her playfully as she swung her backpack over her shoulder. "Shut up. I'm always paying attention."
Aryll snorted.

As they turned to leave, Aryll watched Mr. Auru cross the room towards Ruto. Aryll put out her hand to stop Malon and nodded her head towards the two. Ever since grade school, Aryll and Malon had shared the sort of relationship with Ruto that only hate driven, spiteful, and vindictive young girls could. Any opportunity to see her get in trouble was a golden one in Aryll's opinion.

Over the clamor of departing students what they said was difficult to understand, but in the end, Ruto ended up giving her cell phone to Mr. Auru along with an incredibly frosty glare. As Mr. Auru slid the overly bedazzled phone into the top drawer of his desk, Ruto turned on her heel and stomped out of the room, brushing past an oblivious Shad and knocking his books from his arms in the process.

"Oh, for the love of Farore! Hurry up, you idiot!" Ashei demanded loudly as Shad scrambled around on the floor, frantically trying to gather up his things. "I need to go see Coach Naburoo and you're gonna make me late!"

Ashei was on the school volleyball team and had single-handedly won the championship for the past two years. However, because of her coarse attitude and undeniable toughness, she was mostly overlooked by the popular kids who normally would have been all over a girl with legs as nice as hers.

"I-I'm sorry! I didn't mean t-to drop my books! I'm hurrying, really!" Shad pleaded from the ground as Ashei let out a violent hiss and stomped over them, storming out the door. Aryll and Malon exchanged a brief glance before stooping down and gathering the remainder of Shad's books in their arms.

"Thank you. Really. I'm such a klutz," he said with a self-deprecating attempt at a chuckle, taking back his books with a grateful smile.

"You shouldn't let Ruto push you around like that," Aryll advised gently as they stood up.

"Really, I don't mind so much. It's not worth the trouble," he replied with a small smile. With another quick thank you, Shad vanished into the hallway.

"You know, for a know-it-all geek, he's really not a bad guy," Malon said as they headed off towards their lockers. Along the way, they squeezed passed Linebeck the janitor as he emptied a waste bin, glaring evilly at students as they attempted to lob papers and other bits of trash into the bag before he could tie it.

In trying to dodge out of his way, Aryll accidentally bumped into Ralph Ambi who was walking in the other direction. She tried to apologize, but he cut her off with an odd, "Fear not, Madame, I am unscathed," before vanishing down the hallway.

Well, that was weird… what was she talking about again? Oh, Shad…

"Yeah. He's kinda cute, too. Maybe you should go after him..." Aryll trailed off with a grin and Malon frowned.

"Ew. Definitely not my type." They arrived at their lockers and Malon quickly twirled the dial, putting in her combination before opening her locker with a click and studying her reflection in the mirror she had attached to the door.

"Who's not your type, oh fair and beauteous one?" came a voice directly behind them.

"Wouldn't you like to know, Mido?" Malon said absently as she pulled her makeup bag from her
purse and began touching up her face. Aryll, however, whirled around and grinned at the boy standing on Mido's left.

"Hey, Colin!" She said happily as her boyfriend pulled her into his arms. Mido rolled his eyes and Malon smiled. Mmm, Colin gave the best hugs… And he smelled great today, too. What was that, a vanilla latte?

"So," Mido began casually, "where's Saria? I didn't see her this morning."

"She's got some art assignment to make up or something," Malon replied as she shut her locker, apparently finished with her touch-ups. Malon was far more into makeup than Aryll was, but then again, Malon was a lot more attractive than Aryll considered herself to be. Which also didn’t make sense; if she was so much prettier, why did Malon need all that makeup? Malon always said it was more about fun than fashion, but Aryll had her doubts. It did manage to bring out the blue in her eyes, however, and her long flowing red hair could turn heads in any hallway.

Aryll's own hair was light blonde, the same shade as her brother's, and was pulled back in two pigtails. She mainly wore her hair like that because it was simple, but also because Colin had once said that he liked it that way and that was all the confirmation she’d ever needed. Colin himself had blonde hair too, but it was darker than hers, like straw, and much shorter. Where Aryll's eyes were light blue, like the sky on a sunny day, Colin's were almost gray, like the ocean early in the morning.

Mido was the oddball. His hair was a violent shade of orange that sat in messy curls on his head and contrasted heavily with his dark green eyes. Mido and Colin were the best of friends, for reasons that Aryll didn't quite understand. Colin was quiet and sincere, where Mido was loud and obnoxious. He was also something of a flirt and had been seeking Saria's attention since middle school, though wasn’t above putting the moves on Malon or any other female in the vicinity if he thought he had a chance.

Aryll finally pulled away from her boyfriend and looked up at him. "Speaking of missing people, where did you go this morning?"

"Ask Mido," he said with an uncomfortable smile. "We were headed down to see you when he suddenly had to take off for something. Where'd you go?"

Three heads turned towards Mido whose face went pale. "I, uh…had something to…take care of…" he cleared his throat roughly and said, "Never mind where I went, let's go find Saria. Besides, class starts in like, five minutes."

"Ugh, don’t remind me…I totally didn’t study for Maggie’s geometry test, I’m so gonna bomb it…"

As their little group headed down the hallway, Aryll glanced down at her phone and groaned. Colin shot her an odd look, and she beamed back up at him and explained, somewhat embarrassed, "Sorry, I just can't believe school only started like, fifty minutes ago. I swear, this day's never going to end!"

Mido snorted from up ahead of them. “Ah, it’ll be over before you know it.”
Link sat sprawled in his seat, staring at the light blue flame emitted from the Bunsen burner on the black counter in front of him, trying his best to appear as if he was dutifully paying attention to his assignment. In truth, lab experiments in Chemistry that involved fire in any way usually managed to snag Link's attention, at least until it was time to stop playing with the flame and actually get to work, but there was something about doing group work with a couple of strangers because none of your friends had shown up for class that day that made everything seem dull and boring.

The boy who sat across from him picked up a set of tongs and began adjusting the small ceramic dish they had set atop the flame. His name was Shad Sky, the incredibly smart if somewhat nerdy guy who had been assaulted after school by the lockers the day before. He'd actually volunteered to do most of the work when he and Link had been forcibly partnered together by their teacher because neither one had opted to select their own lab partners for want of friends or the desire to participate in social activities. He actually wasn't all that bad of a guy, all things considered; he just liked being by himself and had a small yet entirely rational fear of jocks.

It wasn't just the two of them, however. Sitting on Link's right was Ashei Winters, the sophomore class volleyball star who he'd also seen the day before after class inadvertently coming to Shad's rescue. She lazily flicked a rolled up piece of paper towards Link, which he failed to catch and had to bend over to pick up off the grimy tile floor. Ashei and Link had been idly playing this game since the lab had started at the beginning of class, which, he now realized as he turned towards the clock, had only been twelve minutes ago. Goddesses, but class moved slowly when Sheik and Midna weren't there to entertain him!

"We're almost done," said Shad suddenly, snagging Link's attention and making his return volley to Ashei go astray. "I just need to calculate the amount of volume lost during the second heating period and we can all go back to our seats."

"Wow," Link said, genuinely impressed. "You did that fast. It would have taken Sheik, Midna, and me at least another half an hour to get this stuff figured out."

"He does everything fast," Ashei remarked dully. "He's like the mutated offspring of a Nobel Prize winner and a supercomputer. I'm surprised he hasn't graduated from college yet."

Link chuckled in response, but Shad muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like, "My mother wouldn't let me go."

As Link turned his head to look at the clock again for lack of anything better to do, something in the hallway caught his attention. Two blurs came streaking past the doorway at a dead sprint, and it took him a moment to realize that they were students. A wry grin settled itself across his face as he pondered the duplicitous reasons behind why students went running down hallways. They were late, they had to pee, they blew up a toilet, the narks were chasing them...

9:09. Fourteen minutes since class started. Was it him, or was time actually moving slower? He was sure Shad could explain to him how Einstein's theory of relativity was the basis behind his every woe, but Link was too lazy to bother asking about it. There was no sense in blaming the poor old scientist anyway. What had he ever done that was so wrong? Have sweet hair?

"Come on class, get back to work. I know it's early, but you need to get this lab completed before
Speaking of old scientists…

Dr. Mizumi, the chemistry teacher, was probably the oldest scientist to have ever lived. The fossil of a man was arguably the creepiest teacher on campus, too, and not just because he collected tadpoles.

Approximately three-hundred years old (or at least that’s what his student’s thought), the eccentric chemistry teacher sported crazily shaped white hair that stuck out at odd places and was riddled with bald spots. He also had crooked, yellow, horsey teeth, and as though to accentuate that fact, he had the habit of standing completely hunched over, nodding his head in rhythmic, circular motions, leaving his mouth gaping wide open as he did. It was like he wasn’t even aware he was doing it. Midna swore she saw a fly zoom in there once.

As he made his rounds to the various lab stations, checking on the progress of his students, he stopped briefly at Link’s group’s table to admire Shad’s work.

"My, my. Done already, lad?" he asked, red-rimmed eyes staring vaguely in different directions.

"Yes, sir," was all Shad said, his tone as polite as humanly possible as he carefully kept his eyes averted and pretended to be busy dismantling the equipment.

"Excellent, excellent, yes, quite good…” Dr. Mizumi’s voice trailed off absently as he headed toward another table. Unable to contain herself any longer, Ashei let out a loud, graceless snorted. Link gave in not long afterward, gasping for breath amidst peals of laughter both at Shad’s uncomfortable expression and Ashei’s lack of self-restraint. Maybe working with these guys hadn’t been so bad after all…

Link and Ashei’s laughter cut off abruptly as a loud boom echoed from somewhere nearby by and the building rocked slightly.

There was a pause as the class exchanged startled glances, then Darbus, one of the members of the football team, exclaimed loudly, "What the-?"

He was cut off by another boom, this one much closer, which was coupled with a larger tremor and a few distant screams.

Dr. Mizumi rushed from the room looking worried while another boom sounded, followed quickly by another, then another…

"What's going on? Is it an earthquake?" asked a random girl from the back.


But his grin faded away as the screaming they’d heard before suddenly grew louder. Another boom rocked the building, this one close enough that Link could tell what it was without seeing the cause: it was an explosion.

An entirely new sound reached their ears over the sound of ever-nearing screams, and finally, the class began to panic in earnest.

Gunfire.

You could practically see the dread sweep across the room.
Half of the class bolted for the door while the other half dove for cover beneath the desks. Link rose from his seat but ran instead for the window, peering out from the second story through the dusty blinds, searching frantically for some sign of what was going on outside. What he saw made his stomach curdle unpleasantly.

"Guys?" he said, surprised to hear how badly his voice was shaking. He turned to find only a handful of students still remained in the room. "Uh… Someone blew up the doors."

"What?!” Ashei cried, running over to join Link at the window. It was true; the one exit that could be seen from their vantage point was nothing more than a messy pile of bricks and shrapnel that smoked lazily in the morning air. The large metal awning that had been constructed to provide shelter from the rain now lay twisted beyond recognition over the remains, sealing off the passageway.

More gunshots could be heard echoing from the school around them, drawing steadily closer.

"We need to get out of here!" wailed a girl he didn’t know from beneath her table, panic-stricken tears gushing down her cheeks.

"Alright, alright! Everyone just… just calm down!" Link stammered awkwardly, running a trembling hand through his hair as the last of the explosions finally faded away, throwing the sound of gunshots into even sharper relief. "We need to think of a plan."

"What's there to think about?" bellowed Darbus angrily in response. "We get outta here before someone shoots us!"

With Darbus acting as their leader, all but two of the remaining students rose from their hiding places and bolted for the door, disappearing into the crowded hallway. Hundreds of students were racing passed, clearly searching for some avenue of escape, only he could see from where he was standing that they were running in different directions. Could they not find an exit? What was going on?

Turning to those who stayed behind, Link was surprised to find Ashei and Shad staring at him as if awaiting instructions.

Oh Goddesses, please don’t dump this on him… Clearing his throat roughly, he gasped, "So… what should we do? We can't escape if the doors are blocked."

"We could try jumping out the window," Ashei suggested, going so far as to lift up her chair in preparation to throw it through the glass.

"No good," Shad replied with a panicked glance towards the door. The gunshots were getting closer. "The windows are barred. Perhaps we could try the air ducts?"

Link couldn't help himself; glancing up at the tiny air vent on the ceiling, he replied, "I don't think we're gonna fit through there."

Shad opened his mouth to respond, but Ashei cut him off. "Look, we haven't got time to sit here and talk about this, yeah? We gotta go! Now!"

Exchanging brief glances, Shad and Link agreed and, giving in to their panic, followed Ashei as she bolted for the door.

The hallway was a scene of mass chaos. Students ran screaming in every direction; some vying for the stairs while others searched in vain for their friends. Angling to the left, they darted for the nearest staircase which resembled mash pit for the number of students attempting to force their way through the narrow opening and escape.
Suddenly, a fresh wave of screams erupted from within the stairwell, and the students began frantically trying to claw their way back up the stairs, tripping over each other in their haste, pulling each other down, one body flipping over the banister. Link seized Shad and Ashei by their arms and dove down an adjoining hallway before the mob of students making their escape could stampede them.

They made it to the end of the hallway, looking back just in time to see someone come up the stairs with a black mask on, pointing an assault weapon up at the ceiling and firing off several rounds.

"What do we do?" hissed Ashei, close to tears, as the man with the gun shouted for the students to get inside the classrooms. Echoing gunshots from the opposite end of the hallway signaled yet another assailant had come from the other end and was doing the same.

Link tried to reply, but his throat had gone dry. Shaking his head roughly, Link attempted to quell the rising sense of panic that threatened to overwhelm his capacity for rational thought while simultaneously trying to find some way to escape. Thankfully, Shad found the answer.

Tapping Link frantically on the shoulder, he pointed behind them to a janitor's closet. Giving a grateful nod, Link grabbed Ashei by the arm and together the three darted to the closet. Finding it blessedly unlocked, they hurried inside and shut the door.

Din bless Linebeck, that hapless janitor. He'd never say another bad word about him for as long as he lived.

Flicking on the light, Link took a moment to survey his surroundings. The closet was cramped and cluttered, various mops, buckets, and bottles of cleaner lined the room on old rusty shelves. Hearing the voices of the attackers growing closer, Link quickly locked the bolt and turned to face Shad and Ashei.

"Now what?" he panted, heart thumping wildly in his chest.

"What do you mean, 'now what'?" Ashei snarled back in frustration. "Now we wait until they find us and kill us!"

"No!" Link growled in response. "I can't accept that! There has to be a way!"

Shad suddenly slapped his hands over their mouths and whispered, "Shh! Listen!"

"I think I saw some run this way!"

Link felt his heart leap into his throat and Ashei's eyes widened in terror.

"Are you sure? Where could they have gone?" replied a second voice as the sound of approaching footsteps arrived at the beginning of their hallway.

"What do we do?" Ashei asked again, her voice uncharacteristically small and frail, and Link found himself wracking his brain frantically for an answer, some means of escape. Once again, however, it was Shad who came to the rescue.

"Air ducts!" he replied.

"We've been over that already, idiot!" spat Ashei in frustration. "They're too small!"

"No, look! Just above your head!"
Link glanced up and saw a large, square grate on the ceiling just wide enough for them to fit through, attached to an aluminum air duct passage that spanned the length of the closet before presumably continuing on into the next room.

"Will it hold us?" he asked skeptically.

"Does it matter?" Shad countered, tone surprisingly bold.

Exchanging grim looks, Link and Ashei each seized one of Shad's legs and hoisted him up to the vent. In the precious seconds it took him to unlatch the grate, let it swing open, and lift his torso and legs into the vent, the voices grew nearer.

"There's nothing down here, man. Come on, before Ganon busts us for not doing our job."

"You go on then if you want to. There's a door down there, and I'm gonna go check it out."

"Suit yourself," replied the second person, and the sound of his retreating footsteps was mingled with the ones that were slowly approaching.

Seizing Ashei by the waist and displaying more strength than he knew he had, Link shoved the tall her up high enough for her to grab Shad’s awaiting hand.

"I know you're in there." The attacker called from just outside the door. "There's no use in hiding, you have nowhere to go."

With his heart pounding in his chest, Link struggled to shove Ashei's hopelessly long legs up the remainder of the way so he could begin climbing.

"Let's make a deal," the voice continued lazily, now no more than a couple yards from the door as Link began his hurried ascent up the shelves, climbing them like a ladder, struggling to be as quiet as possible. Reaching up, he seized Shad's awaiting hand and allowed himself to begin being pulled up.

"Either you come out now and let me take you to one of the classrooms with everyone else, or I fire my way through this door a couple times and drag your body out. You'll make a nice example for the others. Make your choice. You have five seconds."

Link now had his shoulders up and was frantically struggling to hoist the rest of himself in after Shad and Ashei. Shad was tugging on his sweater with all of his might, his face bright pink with the effort, Ashei’s terrified face barely visible in the gloom behind him.

"Five."

Link panted heavily, wiggling like a worm.

"Four."

He was sweating profusely, trying hard not to imagine what would happen when the shooter began firing.

"Three."

Miraculously, he managed to get his knee high enough to hoist the rest of himself into the vent.

"Two."

Scooting on the dusty metallic surface of the vent, he allowed Shad to wiggle past him and replace
Bullets began slamming into the wood of the door. Splinters and bullets ricocheted around the room, sounding like a mad xylophone player every time one pinged off of a shelf. Using the cacophony as cover, the three teens surged forward on hands and knees, crawling for their lives as fast as they could away from the janitor's closet until the noise stopped and they heard the door swing open.

The silence that followed was one of the loudest that Link had ever endured. No sound reached his ears but for the ragged breathing that echoed off of the air vent walls, just barely large enough to hold them, albeit claustrophobically, in terrifying darkness. Suddenly, horribly, as if fate had conspired against them, the vent groaned ominously under their weight.

The man fired four shots into the vent, waited a few moments, and then left the closet. The last bullet that had fired tore a hole three inches away from Link's nose, illuminating his petrified face in a small, circular shaft of light.

When the first explosion went off, Midna and Zelda were halfway down the second-floor hallway, heading towards the only stairwell that led to the third-floor principal's office. Needless to say, the ensuing panic had all but prevented them from reaching their destination before being engulfed in a tidal wave of terrorized students.

"Din! We're too late!" Spat Zelda as another explosion rocked the school. In some part of her mind, Midna couldn't help but wonder just how many could go off before the foundation became unstable and the whole building came down.

The depression that had consumed her senses since the discovery of Sheik's involvement in the plot to attack the school and the hidden death of his mother engulfed her once more. They had failed; the police hadn't believed that an armed gang of thirty or more students had rigged a school building with explosives without being caught, now countless lives would pay the price.

They’d made the phone call from a gas station because Zelda’s phone had been left behind in her father’s car, which even now was sitting in the middle of the median somewhere on the fringes of rural Ordon, and Midna’s had been taken by her parents a couple days earlier as punishment for something she may or may not remember doing.

They’d panicked then, considering calling their parents or a news crew, when Midna had suggested simply going to the school and warning the principal; was it stupid to head straight into a building you knew was about to be attacked? Absolutely. But visions of Sheik, of his face and his haunting eyes clouded her vision and obscured her reasoning. Regardless, Ganondorf had stated when the attack was going to start - they had until then to get everyone out, or at least that was what she had said to convince Zelda to go along with her. Apparently, they’d started the attack early. Goddesses above, if her new friend got killed because of Midna’s desire to confront Sheik…

Zelda snapped her out of her thoughts with an impatient shout.

"Midna! Come on, we need to get out of here!" She bellowed over the roar of the noise. Nodding numbly, they turned as one and headed back towards the nearest stairwell. Without warning, the sounds of gunshots echoing from below caused an upsurge of students attempting to turn around and climb back up the stairs.

Turning on the spot, they dashed to the opposite end of the hallway only to meet a similar sight.
Panicking, they turned back towards the first stairwell, and found themselves face to face with two figures, dressed in camouflage, toting guns that were currently pointed at them.

"Hands up, or we shoot," said one of the guys in a rather bored voice.

Eyes trained on the weapon in his hand, Midna complied and felt Zelda do the same beside her. Swallowing stiffly, she tried to work some moisture back into her mouth, to no avail.

"Alright. Now turn around like good little girls and get inside that classroom."

Breathing erratically, Midna slowly began to comply.

"Hold up," cut the second guy. He was slightly taller than the first and had an unbearable hickish accent; he must’ve been from the Faron province.

"Ain't she that girl… the gothic one we was supposed to bring up to the boss?"

Midna felt her heart leap into her throat. The boss? Ganondorf wanted her?! Why?!

A thousand different horrifying scenarios began playing in her head and she felt all hope of escape evaporate, replaced by the sickly sensation of impending doom.

The first shooter mulled it over for a second, and then conceded, "All right, fine. Blondie, you get in the classroom. Emo, come with me."

Midna mustered up her best attempt at an encouraging smile but only managed a vague sort of sickly grimace. Tears in her eyes, the redneck lead Zelda away, pushing her roughly inside a nearby classroom before following her in.

Taking a steadying breath, Midna turned and, being motioned to walk in front, lead the way across the hall in the opposite direction, past the bathrooms, and eventually into the Library.

The Library held fewer students than she had originally expected. Only about four or five teenagers sat huddled and shaking beneath a row of tables in the corner, along with the two media aids and the one gunman sent to watch them.

"Goddesses, how many are there?" whimpered a chubby freshman that was squashed between an aid and a junior honors student. The library shooter aimed the gun at his head as a threat and the girl on his left let out a reflexive scream, making the shooter laugh.

Midna walked passed them like a prisoner of war on her way to the gallows. They passed the dusty old reference section, entered the computer lab, passed the rows of blank monitors set obsequiously beneath yellowed fluorescent lights, and entered the last room set up as an office for the librarian.

Midna shut her eyes tightly in preparation for what was waiting for her inside, her breathing erratic, wondering disjointedly if she’d already seen the sunlight for the last time in her life, yet the voice she heard dismissing the shooter was not the one she expected.

Wrenching her eyes open, Midna’s tear-filled gaze landed on the young male standing before her and she gaped in disbelief.

"I-I… Sheik?!"

The overwhelming joy and relief she felt at seeing him, finally, up close for the first time in what felt like forever since she began to have suspicions about what was going on in his life, coupled with the
Sheik staggered back with a cry of pain, ragged hair falling into his eyes as he slumped against the wall, clutching his cheek. Midna wasn't done yet, however.

Throwing her whole weight into it she delivered a powerful kick straight to his groin that brought him down to his knees in agony.

"M-Midna…" he gasped in pain, eyes red-rimmed and streaming, "W-wait…"

She moved again, this time to kneel him in the face, but he was quicker. Drawing a gun she hadn't seen from the waistband of his jeans, he aimed in unsteadily at her chest.

"Stop…" he whispered hoarsely, panting heavily and clutching himself, one eye staring up at her through a gap in his bangs.

"No," she snarled back, voice shaky and strangled with emotion. "You can’t scare me. I know you, and I know you can't shoot me. Not me."

They remained still for a moment, breathing raggedly while their eyes battled each other in some convoluted parody of a staring contest until finally, Sheik gave in, dropping the gun to his side with a sigh and slumping back against the wall.

Darting forward, Midna kicked the weapon over to the side like it was a venomous snake and crouched down beside her childhood friend.

"Goddesses, you kick hard…" he mumbled bitterly, eyes squeezed shut. Midna gave him a withering look.

"Yeah, I missed you too," she replied dryly. There was a pause, and then he slowly looked up at her.

"I'd hoped you wouldn't be here today."

His eyes seemed hollow and cold.

"I tried to stop you," she admitted softly. "I was there this morning at the cemetery. I tried to call the cops, but they wouldn't believe me, so I came here to try to find you, but we were too late…"

Her voice choked off and found herself she slumping against Sheik’s shoulder, suddenly wracked with sobs.

"Why, Sheik?! Goddesses, why are you doing this?! First, you disappear and stop talking to me, then you attack the school and start hurting people - this isn't who you are!"

"What do you know of who I am?" he muttered bitterly.

Midna jerked back and glared at him. "I'm your friend, you idiot. Your best friend. Or did that change without me knowing?"

Sheik looked like he wanted to retort but couldn’t find the words. Instead, he swallowed heavily and
averted his eyes. There was silence between them for a moment, and then…

"Why didn't you tell me about your mother?" she asked quietly.

Finally, his eyes registered something: Pain. Intense, bottomless pain.

"Look, there isn't a lot of time." Sheik's voice was ragged, cutting through her even as he avoided her question. "I… I've made a deal with Ganondorf. He says that I can keep you safe so long as you stay out of the way."

His pained, blood-red eyes met her own.

"Listen to me, Mid. I'm going to lock you in here-"

Midna snarled. "Over my dead-"

"Stop!" he exploded, startling her into silence and fixing her with a look of maddening intensity. "You don't understand, do you?! There's nothing you can do to stop this, Midna, nothing! There are too many of them and only one of you; you'd never stand a chance! If you walk out of this room, all bets are off and they'll kill you. This was the only deal I was able to make, so please… Stay here. Be safe."

Pushing her away, Sheik struggled to his feet, stooping for a moment to collect his discarded weapon before striding towards the door. Powerless and terrified, Midna got to her feet as well and watched him depart, her arms clutching at her sides with all of the desperation of a drowning woman. As she watched, hurt, confused, scared and betrayed, Sheik opened the door and left the room.

Just before he locked her in, he looked into her eyes and whispered softly, "Keeping you safe is the only thing I have left to live for."

With a bang and a click, Sheik was gone, and she was alone.
Trembling, Aryll handed her phone over to their imposing assailant before twisting around and burying her face into Colin’s shoulder. She felt him slide his arm around her protectively and she did her best to find some comfort in the gesture.

She, Colin, Mido, Malon, and Saria sat huddled in a corner of their Geometry classroom, trying hard not to make eye contact with the boy holding the gun as he busied himself with collecting their cell phones. At least he had pulled the trigger yet…

Aryll didn't look up again until the sound of the door opening drew her attention.

For some inane reason, she felt hope explode inside of her as if someone had come to rescue them and deliver her from this nightmare, only to her horror another shooter came strutting in, this one leading a pretty blonde girl before him. His eyes, just like his counterpart’s, were completely dull and devoid of emotion. Aryll shuddered and hugged Colin around the middle, fighting down the fear and nausea that assaulted her in waves.

"Hey," the newcomer said, his voice surprisingly curt and dark considering how thick his Faronian accent was, “I caught this one trying to escape. Keep her in here till we get some more orders."

The first shooter gave a robotic nod in response, and the second gave his prisoner a rough shove. She stumbled forward for a few steps, then fell to her knees and slid a bit on the dirty tile floor.

The redneck left the room without further comment and the black-eyed shooter went back to wordlessly collecting cell phones.

Saria reached out slowly and seized Aryll's hand in a quivering vice grip. Swallowing shakily, Aryll took several slow breaths in an effort to slow her racing heart. It would be ok… It would be ok… She repeated the mantra again and again in her head as the panic and fear ebbed and flowed like the tide in a raging storm. It would be ok… Everything would be ok… Someone would come to save them… Someone…

Goddesses, she hoped her brother was ok.

In spite of the severity of the situation, Link couldn't help but feel frustrated and annoyed at the tedium of crawling through a cramped airshaft. Coated with layers of thick dust that clung to his clothing and choked his airway, making him cough and wheeze like an asthmatic, littered with spiders and cockroaches, some dead, some not-so-dead, and all of this coupled with their daunting need for absolute silence lest they be heard and subsequently murdered made the way ahead slow and unbearably nerve-wracking.

Due to the fact that only the main airshaft was large enough to hold them, they really could only go two directions: forward and backward. Up ahead, slowly growing nearer, they could see a small pinprick of light. With any luck, this would be the grate that led outside. In other words, freedom. That they were on the second floor was a problem he wasn’t worried about; he’d rather risk a two-story drop than a bullet to the chest. He liked his odds better that way.

Every so often, the teens came across vents similar to the one they found in the janitors closet, ones with large grates that they could fit through if they opened them, and every time they approached one
they’d struggle to crawl over them as silently as they could, peering down into the room below as they went in apprehension, trying to gauge the situation below.

From what they could see, it looked as though the students and teachers had been herded into classrooms, each with their own personal gun-toting guard. Why the attackers were holding people hostage, Link didn’t really get. Didn’t these things tend to go over quickly and violently? They usually didn’t have plans, they just went in shooting and took out as many as they could. As awful as it sounded, Link almost wished that had been the way it went down. Holding the student body at gunpoint promised something far more sinister.

A few feet ahead of Link, Ashei let out a short hiss.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Link whispered worriedly, stopping his frantic crawling short. Shad bumped into him from behind.

"Nothing," she muttered darkly, "just watch out; this vent is sharp."

Link let out a sigh that was half-relieved, half-frustrated. His nerves couldn’t handle this for much longer. Rolling his shoulders in an awkward attempt to alleviate some of the tension and the ache from the awkward way he was being forced to crawl, he waited impatiently for Ashei to clamber over the grate before continuing on himself.

The vent that Ashei had cut herself on was large, taking up most of the crawl space in the shaft. Spacing his arms farther apart, Link placed his hands on either side of the vent, carefully avoiding the sharp corners, and prepared to scoot his way across.

A noise from below caught his attention. There was a bang like a door slamming, and Link found himself peering down through the grate in surprise.

It was a classroom similar to the others they’d passed; a bunch of frightened kids in a corner, one stereotypical black-shirted gunman to watch over them, tacky posters on the wall. However, the slamming door had apparently been caused by another gunman walking in, this one bringing in yet another student.

"Hey," said the new gunman, in a ludicrously pronounced redneck accent, "I caught this one trying to escape. Keep her in here till we get some more orders."

With a brutal shove, he knocked the girl to her knees and sent her skidding across the floor, her long blonde hair rippling behind her.

Link let out a loud gasp that was thankfully obscured by the sound of the redneck leaving the class below. He knew that girl! That was Zelda, the admittedly attractive one who’d knocked him out with a door the day before! He’d forgotten all about her!

Link found himself inexplicably torn. Sure, the logical part of him was screaming for him to get out of that building as fast as was humanly possible. However, the hormonal teenage male side that had watched way too many action movies in his life and was suddenly possessive of a death wish desired to leap through that vent and rescue the ‘damsel in distress’, as corny as he knew it sounded.

Suicidal? Obviously. But he’d definitely make an impression on her…

"Link!" Shad hissed from behind him, "What is it? What's going on?"

"I…” Link began, throwing away the silly thoughts of fairytale heroism and deciding on the spot that the best way to help Zelda would be to get the police involved so that they could handle the problem
professionally, but before he could finish the sentence his eyes latched on to another blonde girl in
the room below, and his blood ran cold.

"I… I see my sister…"

"You have a sister?" came Ashei’s curious whisper from up front at the same time that Shad let out
an even, "Link, the best way to help her is to get out of here and get some help. There's nothing we
can do."

Link, however, wasn't listening. His eyes were glued to his little sister’s terrified, tear-stained face,
and he could feel a sickly hot rage seeping into his belly as he watched her cower in the corner, pale-
faceted and trembling, before the unknown shooter.

"Link," Shad started again, but Link cut him off.

"You two go on ahead."

"What?! No-!"

"Listen," he said forcefully, tearing his eyes away from Aryll to look at Ashei, who drew back
slightly at the unexpected ferocity in his eyes, "It doesn't take three people to inform the police. You
two go on ahead without me, I have to help my sister."

Ashei opened her mouth to argue but closed it again with a snap. Swallowing roughly, she let out a
mumbled growl that sounded like something about stupid males before turning around to continue
her way down the vent without further comment, leaving him behind. Well, that was one obstacle
down. Now for the next…

"Shad, climb over me," Link directed, laying himself flat on his stomach to allow Shad as much
space as possible to maneuver.

"But I-"

Link silenced him with a stern look over his shoulder.

Shad sighed before reluctantly complying. The shaft was painfully small, and Link was glad that
there was nobody else around to witness the terribly awkward scene.

Once Shad had managed to squeeze past Link and scoot over the vent, he turned back and offered
one last sentiment.

"Link…"

Link looked back up from the vent and met his gaze levelly, prepared to shoot down any more half-
hearted attempts to make him follow.

"… Good luck," He finished softly before turning and crawling away after Ashei.

Link let out a shaky breath and tried to quell the growing sense of vulnerability that rose up inside
him now that he was alone. Casting his gaze around the smallish classroom, he tried his best to think
of a way to get to Aryll without getting caught and shot on the spot.

Jumping straight through the vent was out of the question for obvious reasons; he'd be dead long
before his body hit the ground. He could always try to create some sort of distraction, but there was
no way of knowing if it would work, or even how many shooters there were in the building. A loud
noise or something would probably draw more in. Knowing his luck, he'd be caught before the diversion could happen, and that was assuming he even found a way to make one.

New movement in the room below caught his attention, and he leaned closer to the vent to get a better look.

Once again the door opened, revealing yet another shooter. Link was surprised to see that, though he was wearing black like the others, this one's shirt sported the logo for Faron High's flying squirrels; he had assumed that all of the shooters had been from Ordon. What in Nayru's name was a guy from a rival school doing here?!

The guy looked around, examining the hostages carefully before turning to the guard and saying, "This Ms. Marie's Geometry class?"

The guard nodded, clearly apathetic towards what was happening around him.

"Aight. I just got word from the superiors. I guess they lookin' for someone. Zant's been poking his head in all the classrooms, but he's getting' all frustrated, so Veran had the bright idea to put all the guys in one room, an' all the girls in another. So I'm here to get all the guys and take 'em down to the end of the hallway, an' then I'll be back with some girls, aight?"

He sure liked to hear himself talk… The guard watching the room nodded again, uncaring.

The new guy pointed his gun at the students and barked, "Ok. All you guys. Get up, follow me, and don't even think about tryin' nuthin'."

There was a sudden flurry of activity in which all of the males in the room stood, trying at once not to be the first or last to do so. Link watched Colin stand up alongside a curly headed ginger kid, his hand still firmly clasped in Aryll's until they all began to leave the room. If Aryll had looked scared before, she was terrified now. Clearly, she'd been using her boyfriend as a form of comfort and here it had just been stolen away from her. She looked like she was falling apart.

Taking a deep breath, Link heaved himself backward and began scooting back the way he'd come. He had to find a way to get into Miss Marie's geometry class, and he had to do it fast.

*Wait for me, Aryll,* he thought desperately, short of breath. *Wait for me. I'm coming.*

Midna sat alone, slumped despondently in a corner of the computer lab. Fluorescent lights buzzed garishly above her, mingling with the droning of Ordon's ancient computers, filling the air with white noise. Still, the sound wasn't quite enough to drown out her sniffles.

Midna wasn't usually a weepy sort of person; in fact, she tended to mock those who wept and liked to tell her friends that she bathed in the tears of the weak, but the hollowness of Sheik's eyes had been so stark and chilling that even now after he'd left her alone to stew in bitter might-haves and could-have-beens, she could feel them weighing down on her. Drawing her knees up to her chest, she buried her face in her arms and did her best to quell the shaking in her limbs.

Goddesses, Midna, pull yourself together… Whatever happened with Sheik was outside of your control… Regardless, there’s nothing you can do about it now, so stop crying… Din, why are you still crying?! Stop!

A sudden clatter at the door grabbed her attention, and as she scooted hurriedly across the floor to hide beneath a table, she was torn between the hope that it was Sheik coming back to explain what the in Din’s name was going on and the fear that it was Ganondorf or another of his cronies to finish
up what Sheik had refused to start.

The door finally swung open and an older man was shoved roughly to the floor with a shrill whimper.

"Just sit there and shut up. Give me a reason, and I'll kill you first."

The door closed again with a bang that reverberated around the small room, making the windows rattle. The man clambered roughly to his feet and brushed off his hopelessly messy grey jumpsuit with an indignant frown.

Slowly, Midna leaned forward and peered around the table legs at the man who now lay huddled and weeping on the floor. His graying hair, lanky and disheveled as it was, hung down below his shoulders and obscured a majority of his face, save for his nose which was a bright cherry red.

Recognition dawning on her face, she drew herself out from behind the table and cleared her throat.

"Uh… Mr. Linebeck?"

At the sound of her voice, Linebeck let out a terrified squeak, not at all unlike a hamster and flung his arms over his face protectively. After a moment’s pause, however, he shakily lowered his arms and peered in her direction.

"Din take it all!" He barked, launching himself to his feet, "What is wrong with you, girl?! Are you trying to kill me? I thought you were one of those crazy idiots with the guns!"

Midna’s jaw dropped before she could catch herself.

"Me? What's wrong with you?! One second you're curled up on the floor, cowering, sniveling like a four-year-old, and the next you're blowing up at me!"

Linebeck flushed spectacularly, but his eyes flashed as he blustered, "C-c-cowering?! I was not cowering! I was just… employing my clever skills at deception! Luring that madman with the gun into a false sense of security, giving me the upper hand when I make my move!"

Midna let out a derisive snort. "Make your move?! Give me a break! Tell me, oh high and mighty janitor, what move is that? How do you plan on getting out of this school with it swarming with gun-toting psychopaths? You can’t even clean a floor right. Look at this place, it’s filthy."

If Linebeck’s face was red before, it was purple now. His jaw was working frantically, but no sound was coming out. After a long moment, he managed to say "I… haven’t made it that far yet… But this floor is plenty clean! I’d like to see you try to keep this school nice and tidy with thousands of ratty good-for-nothing teenagers running around all the time!"

Midna rolled her eyes and turned away. It was all well and good to find an outlet for all of her pent up frustration and fear, but she needed to be directing her energy towards finding an escape route, not mocking the school janitor. It was fun, perhaps, but not exactly constructive. Maybe there was a way the two of them could work together… then again, Linebeck was useless, everybody knew that. What exactly could he do that she couldn’t?

But maybe not totally useless… Maybe he’d seen something she hadn’t. It was worth checking, at least.

Whirling around, Midna asked, "Do you have any idea how many attackers are in the school?"
Linebeck sighed glumly and slumped back against the wall, his leathery face going slack. "No, but I know there's a lot. You could hear gunshots being fired in every direction when the attack first started. Almost all of the exits are sealed off as well. I don't think there's any-"

"Whoa, hold up," Midna cut in, a sudden surge of hope blooming in her chest, "what do you mean almost every exit?"

Linebeck shuffled nervously and scratched at the stubble on his chin, "Well, when the attack started, I was atop the bleachers in the gym, doing… ah, cleaning, and… Well, I don't know if they rigged the exit in the gym and it didn't go off or if they just overlooked it, but the door is still intact. That's where I was headed before I was taken and dragged in here with you. The bleachers are closed, so I was taking the long way, down the stairs."

Midna sat on one of the tables and bit her lip thoughtfully. There was at least one viable exit that wasn't blocked. That was information she could work with. Now, if she could only find a way out of the computer lab! Din, if only Sheik hadn't locked the door… If only Sheik hadn't gone with Ganondorf's mad plot… If only Sheik would talk to her and tell her what was going on with him…

With an aggravated snarl, Midna lashed out at one of the nearby monitors. With an almighty crash, the ancient, box-like monitor toppled from the table and slammed into the grimy tiled floor, the glass shattering, shards flying in every direction.

Linebeck let out a terrified yelp, leaping back from the scattering glass with more speed than Midna would have thought possible for the portly middle-aged man; but then, she wasn't exactly focused on Linebeck at the moment. The tiny glass shards had given her an idea.

Hopping off the table, Midna began tearing cords out of the nearest monitor. "Ungrateful brat," Linebeck spat grumpily. "Do you have any idea who's going to have to clean this mess up?"

"Linebeck, shut up and help me!"

Linebeck scowled, but then finally took notice of what she was doing and stepped forward hesitantly. "Er… help you do what, exactly?"

"Look!" She panted, hefting the heavy, ancient monitor into her arms, "Glass! The windows are glass! And there's only one pane because we're inside! If we chuck the monitor at it, it should break, Right? We'll be free! But I'm not strong enough to do it myself, so get your lazy butt over here and help me!"

Linebeck sighed but took half of the monitor in his arms. "Alright, fine. But just so we're clear, I'm not cleaning this up."

Midna grinned in spite of herself. "Alright, deal. On the count of three?"

He nodded, then turned toward the window with determination. Something was tickling the back of her mind like she was forgetting something obvious and extremely important… but she pushed it aside and focused on getting to Sheik and then escaping.

"One…" she counted, her arms already getting tired. She really needed to work out more, "Two… Three!"

With twin grunts, the two sent the monitor sailing through the air with an awkward lob. For a moment she didn’t think they threw it hard enough; fortunately, the monitor hit the window and
sailed straight through the solitary pane of glass with an ear-splitting crash, shards of glass showered down like rain on the tiled floor.

Midna let out a cry of triumph and darted forward, kicking the last shards of glass out of the pane before climbing over it and into the carpeted library. A moment later, the crunch of glass behind her told her Linebeck had followed.

"Ok," she said, suddenly all business, buoyed up by her success but deciding not to let that distract her, "Let's get out of this goddess-forsaken place. You said the exit was in the gym, right?"

There was no response behind her.

"Linebeck?" Midna turned around and felt her stomach drop out.

There was still one gunman in the library. Of course… that's what she'd forgotten. She'd walked past him on the way in… How could she be so stupid?!

His gun was pointed squarely at Linebeck's chest as he slowly advanced forward. A deep, cruel laugh bubbled up from within his barrel-like chest as he watched Midna's face go pale.

"Bravo," he boomed, his voice large and loud, perfect for his hulking frame. Midna recognized him instantly; Onox, a surly, demented boy who it was rumored skinned animals alive for the fun of it when he was little. They'd had a class together in middle school.

"Bravo," he repeated, still chuckling, "What an ingenious way to escape a room. Surely, who would have ever thought of breaking a window?" All mock laughter suddenly vanished from his face as he spat contemptibly, "What? Did you think we weren't going to leave you two guarded? That we'd just leave all of these students alone to run amok? You've got to be even stupider than you look, and that's saying a lot for the janitor."

Midna's breathing had become erratic. Normally, she'd have verbally and physically assaulted anybody who called her stupid to her face, but at this moment she couldn't help but agree with him. She had been stupid to forget about the gunman. And now her stupidity was going to cost her her life… and Linebeck's as well.

"Now. Both of you, over here. If I'm going to have to kill you, I'd like to do it in full view of the others that are stuck in here with me. To… dissuade… any who may be thinking of escape." He laughed again, but this time it held no mirth.

She complied, albeit slowly. Her legs seemed to have turned to jelly. She heard rather than saw Linebeck following her, her own eyes unable to focus on anything other than Onox's gun until he had them positioned appropriately, about ten feet in front of the huddled little group she'd walked by earlier. Directly above her, a vent gently blew conditioned air over her hair, sending loose strands from her messy ponytail flying in every direction. She was shivering, though it had nothing to do with the air vent.

She should have realized this would happen. Sheik had said his protection had only extended to her so long as she remained a prisoner in the computer lab… But then, if he knew her at all he should have known she'd break out. She was doomed from the start.

"Curse the goddesses," Onox intoned theatrically, leveling the gun at her head, "they've abandoned you."

Linebeck sagged to his knees beside her, whispering a fervent prayer, but Midna paid him no mind. Closing her eyes, she tried to fix Sheik's image in her mind, choosing to let her last thoughts be of
him in spite of everything that had happened, reveling in the feel of the air conditioner gently playing against her skin…

The ceiling above her groaned ominously and Midna's eyes snapped open. Every head in the room looked up simultaneously at the ceiling. There was nothing to see at first, then without warning, a section of the ceiling collapsed, bits of ceiling tile, insulation, and what looked like a large rectangular chunk of the air vent came crashing down with a thunderous roar… directly on top of Onox.

Midna couldn't move. The scene before her was too impossible to believe. She had been about to die; surely she was now dead. There was no possible way that a chunk of the ceiling had just spontaneously decided to fall down at that exact moment to spare her.

From the gaping hole now in the ceiling, a face appeared, filthy and covered in dust.

"Ashei? Ashei?! Are you alright?!"

A groan emanated from the pile of rubble on the floor, and Midna felt panic begin to well within her once more until the source of the voice crawled out of the twisted section of the air vent. It was a girl, roughly Midna’s age with short black hair and an athletic build, and who was every bit as dust-covered as the boy in the ceiling.

She coughed roughly, stumbled to her feet like she was drunk, then slowly took in her surroundings, blinking owlishly.

"Well…” She began slowly, her tone wry, "So much for crawling our way outta here."

With a squawk, the dusty boy from the ceiling lost his balance and fell to the ground, landing with a grunt atop the pile of rubble, his glasses askew.

The reality of what had just happened hit her like an anvil. She'd nearly been killed and had been saved impossibly at the last moment. Hugging her arms to her chest, she slowly sank to her knees and tried to stem the sudden tears of relief that burst from her eyes. She didn’t know at what point she started laughing, or when the laughter had changed to sobbing, but she knew she was alive. Blessedly, impossibly alive.

Maybe the goddesses hadn’t forsaken her after all.
Ganondorf sat stoically behind the principal’s desk, fingers steepled absently before his face as he contemplated the man kneeling on the floor before him.

Their assault had begun no more than twenty minutes ago, but things were already starting to go wrong. Two of the charges, so carefully placed, had failed to go off and a large number of students had been able to escape, drastically limiting the amount of influence he held. Fewer hostages meant less national attention, and in short, less power. He would need to act carefully over the course of the afternoon if he was to accomplish his goals. What's more, he hadn't yet been able to locate Hero and he was essential to his plans.

Hero, Ganondorf mused, a smug smirk forming on his face, what a fitting name.

Ganondorf had made it a point to claim the principal's office as his own lair, not only because it was the highest point in the school, but because it held a certain air of authority and, most importantly, the windows had blinds which he closed so as to limit the possibility of getting sniped by a cocky police officer. No doubt they’d try that eventually once they’d grasped the entirety of the situation. In spite of the setbacks, he still had approximately two-hundred students trapped in various classes on the second floor. That many students ought to be enough to satisfy his needs, assuming he kept the rest of the sheep under control; now if he could only find Hero…

The sound of static crackling drew his attention back to the man on the floor.

Viscen's hand had jerked automatically towards his belt at the noise, having momentarily forgotten that his wrists were bound behind his back.

The Resource Officer had maintained a look of self-righteous dignity since the moment of his capture, much to his credit, and hadn't made a sound since Ganondorf had made an example of Principal Sahasrahla. His body had been dumped unceremoniously with the secretary and the vice principal, both of whom were still under close watch just down the hall just in case he needed any extra bargaining chips.

Nodding briefly at Vaati, Ganondorf waited till the small plastic radio was in his hand before addressing Officer Viscen.

"Well now… What have we here? Your little toy seems to be on the wrong frequency."

With a swift wrenching movement of his wrist, Ganondorf twisted the little dial clockwise until the static cleared and a voice blared out loud and clear.

"Viscen?! Viscen, come in! We need a status report, man! What the blazes is going on in there?!"

Ganondorf felt a twisted, demonic smile growing slowly on his face. Raising the walkie-talkie up to his mouth, he pressed the small black button on the side and said, calmly, "My apologies. Officer Viscen is currently… indisposed."

"What the-? Who in the name of-?"

There was a pause, in which a muffled commotion could be heard on the other line. Ganondorf's grin grew wider.
With a crackle of static, a new voice began emitting from the walkie-talkie.

"Hello there. This is Rusl Smith, the chief of police speaking. But there’s no need for formalities, you can just call me Rusl. What's your name?"

Ganondorf scoffed at the walkie-talkie. He knew what this man, Rusl, was up to. It was a grade-school tactic; first, make the assailant feel at ease. Give him your name, ask for his. Establish a routine of give-and-take. Next, he would begin making 'deals' to release hostages. His twisted smirk from earlier returned. There would be no deal making… but Rusl Smith could still be used to further his plan.

"My name? They call me Ganondorf."

"Ganondorf, eh? Have you got a last name to go along with that? It's only fair; I gave you mine, after all."

Ganondorf felt his smile turn malicious. The man's tone was careful, friendly and at ease… It was high time they changed that.

"You did. Smith, was it? Yes… I believe I just met your son, Smith."

There was a pause, in which nothing but the crackle of the static could be heard. Then…

"…You must have been mistaken."

Ganondorf laughed cruelly, making sure the button was pressed on the walkie-talkie so that Rusl heard him. "I can understand wanting to deny that he's your child. A rather cowardly runt, isn't he?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I don't have a child, Ganondorf."

Rusl's tone was still carefully light and care-free, but there was a definite shakiness to it. Good… now that he had his attention, it was time to grab the nation's as well.

"Say what you will, Smith. It's of no matter. I have another acquaintance of yours with me… Say hello, Officer Viscen."

Viscen stared back at Ganondorf defiantly, his eyes full of contempt but still without making a sound.

"Speak. Or do I need to make an example of the secretary next?" Ganondorf asked softly.

Viscen hesitated, for the first time losing his look of imperious disdain, then caved. Clearing his throat shakily he leaned forward and rasped into the Walkie-Talkie, "…This is Officer Viscen."

"Very good, Viscen. Now say goodbye."

He didn't give him time to respond. The distinct yell that emanated from the walkie-talkie was cut short by the miniature explosion that came from Ganondorf's gun. Viscen, his eyes frozen wide in shock, looked down at the red stain forming on his otherwise spotless uniform before sagging forward on the floor.

"Heed me," said Ganondorf darkly, drawing the little metal box closer to his mouth, "for too long has this country sat idle, ignorant of its once great past and the power it once possessed. For too long have we forgotten the traditions of our fathers and the ways of old. No longer will I stand by and..."
allow this degradation to continue. Like the powerful before me, I will remake this country, and restore its original grandeur. My name is Ganondorf, and very soon the world will know my name."

In one swift motion, he raised the walkie-talkie into the air and brought it down forcefully on the corner of the desk, shattering its plastic casing. He tossed the now ruined electronic across the room, sitting back into Sahasrahla’s chair as Vaati motioned some of their accomplices to remove Viscen’s body. He laid his gun back down on the desk and steepled his fingers once more.

The stage was set. All that was left now was to find his players. The boy could run, but he could not hide… He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Hero was still somewhere in the building, that he was not one of the ones who had managed to escape. Destiny would make it so, of this he was sure. Destiny always brought them together.

Panting heavily, Link willed himself to move faster as he hurriedly scooted along the cramped narrow air passage. He wasn't sure how long he had; only a few moments earlier, he'd heard a distant crash echoing from the far end of the air vent in the direction Shad and Ashei had gone. Assuming they'd made it to the end and were even now getting to the police, Link had put them from his mind with a quick prayer for their safety and was hurrying as fast as he could to find a way out. Someone must have heard the crash which meant someone was going to come investigate the vents. He was basically a sitting duck as long as he was in the ventilation system; he needed to find an empty classroom to escape in, fast, and then hurry up and get to Aryll.

At the thought of his sister, a bitter pang erupted in his chest that he beat back with vicious candor. There was no time to worry about what might have happened; he needed to focus on getting out of the vent without being caught. He could do nothing until that was done.

After a few more uncomfortable moments, he arrived at the next grate. Peering through the slits in the vent, he stifled another groan.

Full.

Again.

Goddesses, just how many of these shooters were there?! This must have been the third or fourth room he passed that was full of students. The situation was apparently worse than he had feared. Just as he was about to press on, something caught his eye in the classroom below.

Leaning in closer, Link tried his best to angle himself to get a better view of the situation through the rusted, dusty vent. There was some sort of commotion going on; a vast majority of the fifteen or so students had suddenly decided to relocate to the far side of the classroom, leaving three figures alone on the side just below Link's vent, and it looked like they were struggling over something...

He could hear frantic, terrified sobbing over the rush of the air conditioner. Leaning in further, basically plastering his face up against the grate, Link strained to hear what was going on.

"...orry! I-I'm so s-sorry! P-P-Please!"

The owner of the voice, a girl, moved behind another figure, this one broad-shouldered and imposing, as the two of them backed slowly toward the window, away from the third figure, who was unsteadily advancing on them. He was a scrawny, pathetic looking kid, not really intimidating in the slightest, but in his trembling hand, he held a sweaty silver pistol. The gun wobbling dangerously...
"Look, man," the larger male pleaded, and suddenly Link recognized him; it was Darunia, the school's quarterback. "Look, just… just calm down! Hey we've all been there, right? She's not the first girl to turn a guy down before. We all know what it's like-"

"Shut up!" the boy with the spat, desperation and grief strangling his voice. "What would you know?! When have you ever been turned down by a girl, Darunia?! You, the great football star… All of you, you all think you're so perfect! So much better than the rest of us because you're more attractive, or more athletic, or you have rich parents! You're sick!"

The girl, who Link only now realized was Ruto, the cheerleading captain, let out a frightened squeak and wrapped her arms desperately around Darunia’s midsection, hiding her face and sobbing unreservedly into her boyfriend’s back.

"Y-you're right!" Darunia stammered, throwing his arms wide as though he were stopping a charge at a football game and not a bullet. "You're right, man. I'm sorry. I'm messed up. But… Nayru, please... If you've got to shoot someone, shoot me, ok? Just let her go."

Ruto's arms clawed up Darunia’s chest spastically at his plea, holding him tightly as though determined to never let him go as she choked out "N-No! Darunia, y-you can't-!"

"Enough!" the boy roared, slashing the pistol through the air like a knife, his voice raw and practically bleeding with unchecked emotion. He stepped forward, directly beneath Link's grate, the gently blow of the air conditioner playing with his lanky blonde hair as he swayed drunkenly, staring down his gun at Darunia and Ruto, whimpering like a child lost in the cold. Tears were raining down his face, and his cheeks were blotchy and red. He hiccupped.

"All I wanted…” he choked, eyes unfocused, “All I wanted… was someone… to talk to… me… I-I thought if I tried to act like I was brave and cool like the football team, step out of my shell, I'd get noticed… But she laughed in my face and walked away. She never… she never… even looked at me…"

He shuddered like a leaf in a windstorm for a moment, and then all at once went still. A look of childlike hurt and misunderstanding bloomed suddenly across his face, and it looked as though he was really seeing Darunia and Ruto for the first time.

He cocked the pistol.

"…Do you see me now?"

Link moved without thinking. Placing his hands on either side of the vent, he hoisted his feet up beneath him and, mustering all of his strength, kicked downward with both legs.

There was a tortured screech as the metal tore free from its hinges, sending Link and the grate careening down from the ceiling. The grate struck the boy first, right as he pulled the trigger, knocking the bullet off course and sending it through the window in a cascade of glass. A split second later, Link crashed on top of the vent, their weight together knocking the assailant to the floor.

Link struck the ground on his back and was momentarily winded. Body aching, he struggled in vain for a moment to regain his orientation and clamber back to his feet, but before he could fully make it he realized that there was no need to hurry; the shooter had been knocked unconscious by the force of the blow, his gun lying several feet away on the filthy classroom floor.
Still gasping for breath, Link slumped sideways against the teacher’s desk, squeezing his eyes shut nursing his left shoulder, willing his heart to stop pounding. The only thought running through his head at that moment was 'stupid, stupid stupid!' What in the world was he doing?! He could've been killed! Din, he could have died! And if he’d snuffed it right then, who would've saved Aryll?!

Goddesses, Link, think before you do crazy things like that!

Opening his eyes, he realized that the entire class had been staring at him, speechless.

"H-Hero?!” Darunia spluttered, shock and disbelief evident on his normally smug, superior face. It was actually kind of comical.

"Aw shucks, Darunia. You don't have to go and call me that," Link quipped before he could catch himself. Din, he must be more shaken up from that fall than he thought; you don't joke around with Darunia, that's how you get yourself hazed in the lockers after gym.

The quarterback gave him a bizarre look as though not quite understanding what he'd said, before deciding to ignore it and instead ask, “Where… where did you come from?”

"Air vent," Link replied tersely, finally managing to stagger to his feet, stretching his body in an attempt to alleviate some of the tension he'd received from crawling around the cramped air shaft. Sweet Farore on high, his neck and shoulders were sore and his hip was killing him from having landed on it wrong. He needed a chiropractor or something…

There was a pause in which Darunia simply stared at Link like he was a figure from another dimension, and then suddenly all of the awkward tension in the room seemed to mysteriously vanish. The students in the corner began moving again, albeit shakily, and Ruto peeked her head around Darunia's shoulder.

"Like… Oh, my Din…" She gasped dramatically, tears still streaming down her face as she darted around the quarterback and seized Link's hands in her own, "You just, like, totally saved our lives! You really are a hero!"

Startled, Link hastily tore his hand away from Ruto’s grasp and blurted out a quick, "What? No! No, no, no!" He was trying hard not to let any disgust show on his face. It's not that he hated Ruto per se… it was just that she was the single most disgusting human being on the planet and he would rather be locked in a box with a half-dozen starving, crazed weasels than have an actual conversation with her. He wasn’t even entirely certain that she could hold an entire conversation; the space between her ears was almost guaranteed to be ninety-nine percent hair spray.

"Darunia wasn't saying I was a hero; that's just my name. Link Hero, remember? …We were in 4th grade together?" he added when her expression didn’t change. Was she not getting this? She wasn’t getting this, was she?

"She's right, Hero," Darunia said, stepping up beside him. "You just saved our lives. That makes you a hero for real. Kinda ironic, isn't it?" He chuckled good-naturedly, giving Link the first smile he'd seen from him since Junior High.

No, Link wanted to say, that doesn't make me anything. I was just doing what any normal person would have done in my situation, but before he could open his mouth, the shooter stirred with a soft groan.

It was as though someone had flipped a switch and turned the tension back on. Everyone suddenly seemed to remember where they were and what was going on just outside the classroom. Memories of Aryll trapped in Miss Marie’s geometry class brought Link back to reality with an unpleasant
bump.

Steeling himself for what he had to do, he immediately began issuing orders to the milling mass of panicked students without thinking.

"Guys! We need to tie this guy up and hide him in the closet or something. Use belts or backpack straps or whatever you've got on you, and do it quick. Also, make sure you gag him so he can't call out for help."

The class obeyed him instantly, not questioning the authority of their savior for a second, converging forward on the still unconscious assailant with surprising gusto, tying him up perhaps a bit rougher than was strictly necessary.

"Darunia," Link said, noticing the gun that had fallen forgotten to the floor and picking it up, "it's dangerous out there, take this."

Darunia eyed it apprehensively but nodded.

"I'm not sure exactly where, but there's gotta be an exit somewhere. Take the gun and get these kids out of-

"Wait, what? What about you?" Ruto cut in. Her crying had stopped, but she was still puffy-eyed and clinging to Darunia's arm for support. Her mascara had smudged spectacularly, giving her the appearance of a particularly disheveled raccoon.

Link took a deep breath, steeling himself for any more arguments. "I can't leave yet. I have to find my little sister."

Ruto shot him a look of perfectly executed incredulity, but Darunia seemed to understand without further discussion. Clapping Link on the shoulder, he said, "Alright. Good luck, Hero. But are you sure you don't want the gun?"

"No," he replied quickly, although deep down a part of him wanted to say yes... Though if he was being honest, he didn't even know how to use the thing. Also, it... kinda scared him. "You need it more than me. You've got other students to protect."

Darunia nodded grimly.

"Alright!" He suddenly barked, turning his attention to the room at large once again and switching into quarterback mode. The students leaped to attention. "You heard the man. Check that the coast is clear, then let's move out. We head straight to the nearest staircase, then let's see if we can't get out through the backdoor of the kitchen. I doubt they thought to block that."

The door swung open and, after a brief pause to check the halls, the students began hurrying out of the classroom. Darunia, Ruto, and Link were the last to leave. Ruto headed off immediately after the students, but Darunia paused momentarily and turned to Link.

"Hey, Hero!"

Link, who'd been about to turn and head in the opposite direction, paused and met Darunia's gaze head-on.

"...Don't get yourself killed, alright?" With a surprisingly encouraging smirk, Darunia turned and jogged off after his girlfriend.
Link forced a begrudging smile and headed in the opposite direction. Well, that was... out of
character. Then again, he did just save their lives, so maybe he'd start being nicer to him now.
Wouldn't that be a miracle?

His thoughts drifted back to the shooter he'd knocked out, and he frowned. The boy clearly had
some psychological issues, but... Link wondered if Darunia and Ruto realized just how much their
actions and the actions of their friends had played on today's events. Link wasn't saying it was
entirely their fault, but... At least in that one instance, a little bit of kindness on their part might have
changed that boy's life for the better. How true was that sentiment for every shooter in the building,
he wondered?

Shoving any empathy from his mind, Link forced himself onwards. He didn't have time to care
about his attackers. There would be a time for introspection and philosophy later - for now, his little
sister needed him, and he didn't care how many tragic stories he had to fight through to get to her.
He would keep her safe. He'd lost enough family members as it was already... He wasn't losing her
too.

Aryll did her best to put on a brave face. Most of the girls in the classroom had long since dissolved
into teary puddles of hopeless despondency, including Malon. She, Malon, and Saria, who was
silently hugging her knees to her chest on Malon's other side, sat in the back of the room partially
hidden behind a rather flimsy table.

Not that the protection would have mattered; the shooter, having decided that going on a homicidal
rampage was too dull to attract his interest, had long since seated himself in Ms. Marie's office chair,
propped his feet up on her desk, and had begun flipping through the few channels that the
classroom's standard issue tv could support. Many of the students had seized this opportunity and
broke out into fearful, whispered conversations.

Aryll reached over, clasping both Saria and Malon's hands.

"Hey, it's alright. We're gonna get through this. Come on..." She tried her best to make her whisper
sound encouraging. The only response she got was a feeble sniff from Malon; even Saria continued
to stare at the wall blankly and ignore her.

Sighing heavily, Aryll let her gaze wander the classroom. Since the attacker had commandeered the
tv and taken their cell phones, Aryll had no way of knowing what time it was. For all she knew,
they'd been in there for hours... though it had probably only been forty minutes or so. Din, but it felt
like hours...

She wished he'd turn the station to the news. Aryll couldn't help but wonder how much the outside
world knew about their predicament, what actions the police were taking to rescue them. Colin's
father was probably beside himself with worry.

I wonder if grandma knows...

That thought was enough to send Aryll spiraling even deeper into depression. She and Link were all
that their grandma had left in this world; Grandpa had died just before Grandma had decided to move
back to Hyrule from the Waker Islands, and they had both taken Aryll and Link in when their
parents had died. She was such a sweet, fragile old woman... with a temperament like an active
volcano, but still. If anything happened to Aryll or Link, she knew her grandma might not be able to
bear it.

Link... Aryll felt tears begin to sting her eyes, and she sniffled in spite of herself. Link, you'd better be
safe, you stupid idiot... for grandma's sake...

"Hey now, you can't start crying too."

Aryll jumped. Turning to the right, she was surprised to find that the voice belonged to a kind-looking red-headed girl who she didn't recognize, though she looked to be a senior.

She was sitting sort of cattycorner to Aryll and her friends, smiling at her sweetly in a motherly, big-sister sort of way, her hand gently grasping that of another that belonged to a purple-haired girl sitting on her left who was facing the wall, her face hidden behind her long, elegantly tangled locks.

"I... I'm sorry?" Aryll asked, trying desperately to regain control of herself. Din, she was trying to be strong for Malon and Saria! She couldn't give in to her fear now!

"You need to stay positive. It's just like you said; we're going to be alright. Here, would you like to hold my hand?"

Aryll was momentarily floored. There they were, in the middle of a life-or-death crisis, and here this girl was concerned about the well-being of a complete stranger. She didn't know people like that actually existed.

"N-No, thank you," Aryll stammered, her face turning pink. "I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

"Anju Pots," the girl said sweetly, a warm smile radiating across her face. "And you are?"

"Aryll Hero. Thank you... for caring, I mean."

Aryll flushed even harder, embarrassed, but Anju just beamed. The blue haired girl shifted uncomfortably.

"Excuse me," Anju said suddenly, leaning forward to address the girl on Aryll’s right, the one sitting directly in front of them. The girl looked up, apparently just as startled as Aryll had been that a stranger was speaking to her.

"Um... Yes?" she replied, and Aryll realized that she was the girl that had been brought in just before the gunner had taken Colin and the other boys away. When had she scooted over to join them? Had she been so wrapped up in her terror that she hadn’t noticed?

"Do you need a band-aid? You're bleeding," Anju said, motioning toward the girl's knee which sported a nasty looking cut through a hole in her jeans that she no-doubt received from being sent sliding across the floor.

The girl looked down and seemed to notice the blood for the first time. Before she could answer yes or no, Anju had already begun rooting around through her purse.

The blue haired figure chuckled unexpectedly.

"Forgive her. Anju tends to butt her way into other people’s business like a nosey mother hen, but she means well. She’s a little too sweet for her own good."

Aryll's mouth dropped open in shock as the purple-haired figure finally turned toward the little group.

It was a guy.

Aryll and the pretty blonde gaped, astonished, but Anju merely replied with a flippant, "You make it
sound like caring about others is a bad thing, Kafei."

"Never," he replied sweetly, his surprisingly suave voice muted to a whisper, "I was merely trying brag about how perfect you are."

He reached over to tuck a stray strand of hair behind Anju's ear. She slapped his hand away distractedly but flushed all the same.

“Oh, stop it, you know that doesn’t work on me.”

"W-wait! You're a guy?!” Aryll blabbed, flustered, “How did they not take you along with everyone else?!"

Kafei flashed her a charming smile, his eyes twinkling in a merry fashion as he flicked his luxurious locks behind his ear with no little exaggeration, "Sometimes, it pays to have fabulous hair."

Anju sniggered. Aryll would have laughed too if she wasn't trying to stop herself from swooning. *Stop it*, she chided herself. *You have an amazing boyfriend. And besides, he looks taken.*

...*But by Nayru, that hair is fabulous.*

"Ah ha!" Anju whispered triumphantly, drawing from the depths of her purse a colorful Power Ranger's band-aid.

"I'm sorry," Kafei said while Anju leaned over to place the band-aid on the blonde's knee, "I don't know either of your names. I'm Kafei Dotour, the Mayor's son."

Aryll smiled back at him, trying not to look too eager to answer. "I'm Aryll Hero."

"I'm- ow!" the blonde stopped as Anju leaned firmly placed the band-aid on her knee.

"Sorry!" Anju whispered meekly, leaning back.

"No, you're fine. Thanks." She smiled up at Anju reassuringly. "I'm Zelda Nohansen. I just moved here. This is actually, like, my second day."

"Oh, you poor dear!" Anju said.

Zelda offered up a sheepish smile. "Well... things couldn't have gotten much worse, I guess. First, I screw up my classes, I forget my locker combination, I knocked out this cute guy with a door yesterday and then my car gets totaled this morning by some psychopath, and now..."

A heavy sigh escapes past her lips. There was no need to continue. A weight seemed to settle on the group.

"So... A cute guy?" Anju asked, obviously trying to change the subject to something lighter, "Anyone I know? Did you get his name?"

Zelda blushed, obviously not wanting this to be the topic of their conversation but also not wanting the talking to end lest they go back to dwelling on their unfortunate circumstances.

"Ah... well, I dunno... I mean, his name's Link and he seems really nice, but I don’t actually know him. I only saw him that once-“

Aryll felt like she’d been smacked in the face with a pillow. "You think my brother's cute? Wait, you knocked him out with a door?!"
A look of utter mortification flashed across Zelda’s face.

"Y-Your brother? He's… No way, i-it has to be another Link-!

“There aren’t any other Links in the school,” Aryll supplied blandly, thoroughly enjoying the moment.

“Yeah, sorry.” Anju chimed in, a consoling smile on her face, “even I knew who you were talking about the moment you said his name.”

“If anyone’s a total freak, it’s Link, not you,” Kafei added, a conspiratorial grin on his face. So the hot upperclassman knew her older brother too? No, bad thoughts, she had a boyfriend…

At the knowledge that the boy she’d just admitted to thinking was cute was someone everyone knew, Zelda’s face grew from mortification to complete abject horror. “Oh Nayru, I'm so sorry! I really didn't mean to hit him, he just- He was just there, and I was in a hurry, and-!”

But Aryll's sudden laughter cut her off. "No really, it's fine. He probably deserved it. I just wish I'd been there to see it!"

"Keep it down, or I'll silence you permanently." The shooter's voice rang out, still holding no more emotion than it had when he had been collecting phones.

The girls and Kafei exchanged ominous looks.

“Maybe we should be quiet for a while…” Anju suggested tactfully.

The nodded along fearfully, Zelda looking a little relieved that their conversation was forcibly ended.

For Aryll’s part, however, she wished that it was still going on. Not that she cared whether this girl thought her brother was cute; honestly, Link’s love life was an enigma. It was just nice to have something stupid like teenage romance to distract her from the tidal wave of fear that was threatening to sweep her away. She wished that today was a day like every other; a day where the biggest news would have been that the pretty new girl had a crush on her hopeless brother.

Now, all she wanted was for her and her brother to not end up on the news. Please keep him safe… Nayru, Farore, Din, anybody… Don’t leave her all alone…

Rusl slid his battered old cell phone shut and rubbed his hands over his face wearily. He'd just gotten back to the high school and it seemed as though nothing had changed since he'd left. Which is what he'd just been trying to tell his wife.

Strictly speaking, he wasn't supposed to be taking personal calls right now, but, well… Uli was terrified for their son, and who could blame her? He was terrified too… but he couldn't let it show. He had a job to do. A team to lead. A school to save.

Getting out of his car, Rusl swiftly adopted his trademark no-nonsense look and briskly strode over to their makeshift command center, situated in the back of a van. Glancing up, Officer Rosso hailed him from behind an ambulance.

"Chief… how did it go?" He asked, his voice equal parts tense and reserved.

Rusl looked down despite his resolve to look calm and in control. "…as well as could be expected."

Rosso nodded morosely. He understood; one of the hardest things to do was to inform the wife of a
friend that she was now a widow.

Rusl swallowed, then said curtly, "When this is over, I may send you over there to check on her."

Rosso grunted in agreement. Clearing his throat, Rusl clapped his hands, signaling that it was time to get back to business.

"Alright, now… There's still been no word from that Ganondorf kid?"

"No sir," said Rosso as they both turned and began striding along the circumference of the caution-tape barrier that surrounded the school. "The latest count shows there are anywhere from one-hundred-and-fifty to two-hundred hostages still inside the building."

"Alright. Do we have snipers in position?"

"Yes, sir. But we have no way of knowing where Ganondorf is located, nor exactly how many shooters there are. The numbers we've been getting from the kids who made it out seem unreal."

Rusl nodded slowly, trying desperately not to think about his own son who was still trapped inside.

"Have there been any deaths reported?"

"Of students, no… though a few say that they saw some teachers get shot, though how many were fatally wounded is difficult to say."

"Alright. Has there been any luck hacking the security system so we can see what's going on in there?"

Rosso sighed wearily. "No, sir. We've been trying, but it seems that someone has blocked the access channel. The cameras are still on, but they're being controlled from within the school."

"In that case, we'll need to consider cutting the power to the building," Rusl began but stopped suddenly as a voice suddenly emitted from his walkie-talkie.

"Chief! We have movement! Back of the school, by the cafeteria! There are students escaping!"

Rusl and Rosso exchanged surprised looks before breaking into a dead run.

The back of the school was a flurry of activity when they arrived. It looked as though someone had kicked an anthill; ambulance sirens were wailing, lights flashing as the EMTs began promptly looking over the newly-escaped students who were surrounded by a mass of cops hastily interrogating them for any information they could gain.

There were maybe a dozen or so, all looking bedraggled and exhausted, a few having burst into tears of relief after having finally made it out alive.

Rusl found his eyes hungrily scanning the crowd, yearning for some glimpse of his son… His heart plummeted when he realized that he wasn't there. Sighing, he reached out and grabbed an officer at random, demanding to know how these students had escaped.

"I-I don't know, sir, I just arrived here myself. Uh, but," he added quickly as a vein began to throb in Rusl's temple, "They're all saying something about being rescued. It looks like the quarterback was the one who led them out of the building."

Rusl nodded and clapped the man lightly on the shoulder. "And where is he?"
"O-Over there, with the cheerleader," he said, gesturing to a small huddle of officers who were trying vainly to shield the students from a wave of reporters that were calling questions from the streets.

Striding forward, Rusl closed the space between them quickly and tapped the boy on the shoulder. He was a larger kid, taller than Rusl, with biceps like boulders. He needed to get this guy into the force.

The boy shot him a disgruntled look before noticing the badge and immediately becoming attentive. In a hushed voice, Rusl asked if the boy would speak with him in private; he nodded without hesitation, and, after briefly explaining to the hysterically-sobbing girl at his side, set off with Rusl behind a nearby fire truck.

Clearing his throat, Rusl opened his mouth to speak, but to his surprise, the boy cut him off.

"I think you should take this," he said, reaching his hand into his waistband and drawing out a small handgun.

Rusl stared at it in surprise. "Well. So I take it you're the young man who led these students to safety. You should be very proud of yourself; everyone's calling you a hero. How in the world did you manage to take a gun away from one of the shooters?"

The boy shrugged. "Actually, it… wasn't me. And I didn't do anything special. I didn't even have to fire it. We didn't see anybody on the way out."

Rusl studied the boy momentarily. So many questions… but which to ask first?

And were they even right to ask now? True, there were hostages, they needed as much intel as they could possibly get, but the students were all hysterical and liable to snap at a moment’s notice.

The football player in front of him was doing his best to put on a brave face, but Rusl had been in the force long enough to recognize psychological trauma when he saw it. The boy’s eyes were wide and staring, and there was a hollowness to them; the delicate bubble of his teenage life had just been popped, and like it or not, he’d just had to grow up very quickly. He’d probably never be the same after today.

He decided that questioning could wait for a moment; doubtless, whatever information they could glean from the students would be more coherent after they’d been given a few minutes to calm down. Putting his arm around the boy's shoulder, Rusl began leading him away.

"What's your name, son? We should contact your parents to let them know you're safe. I'll let you use my phone."

"Darunia," the boy replied, "Darunia Rocks."

“Well, Mr. Rocks, I want to thank you personally for what you did. Leading these students to safety was no small feat, you should take pride in that—"

“A-actually sir, that’s… That’s not actually what happened."

Rusl paused and looked back at the boy who had stopped walking. He looked like he was struggling to say something difficult.

“…What do you mean?” Rusl prodded gently.
Darunia took a deep breath, then met Rusl’s gaze head-on. “Look, I didn't disarm the shooter. I'm not the hero the students are all talking about. I… I didn’t really do anything.”

Rusl looked at the boy oddly. Modesty? From the star of the football team? Or was there something darker at play here?

"So… who did?"

"Hero. Link Hero, I mean. He’s this kid I’ve known since elementary, and I always… Well, h-he saved my life. He saved all of our lives, I mean. If it's possible, can I… I'd like to call his family, too. Y’know, to let them know what he did for me. For all of us. He was the one who gave me the gun and told me to guide the students out. He kinda did… everything."

Rusl was stunned. "He… Well, why didn't he come with you?"

Darunia sighed, scuffing his foot on the ground. "He said he needed to find his sister. I knew better than to try to talk him out of it. But… I should have… I should have gone with him… I owe him for saving Ruto…"

"His sister…"

"Aryll Hero," said a preppy voice from behind him, and Rusl turned to see the teary-eyed cheerleader from before walking forward and taking Darunia's hand, sending him a comforting smile. "That's her name. We have history class together."

Rusl felt like his heart had stopped beating.

"What's wrong?" asked Darunia, giving Rusl a queer look. "Sir- I mean, uh, Chief Smith? Are you gonna be ok?"

Rusl sighed wearily. Link Hero… He’d thought he knew that name. He’d met him a few times when he’d bring his sister by Rusl's house. His sister, the one he’d stayed in the school to rescue after saving these students, the one who was dating Rusl’s son, Colin.

“I’ll see about letting you speak to his grandmother,” Rusl said finally, ignoring the odd look he received from the teenage duo, “But first, you’re going to call your own parents, and then I need you to wait here for a while and answer some questions, ok? Any insight at all that you can give us on the inside situation may be vital towards saving the rest of your classmates. Understand?"

The teenagers nodded as one, and he motioned for them to return to the others.

Goddesses above, give him strength…
"P-please, My Lord, it's not what you think-!"

"Oh? So you're telling me that five minutes ago, a dozen or so students didn’t just escape from captivity, thereby limiting the amount of influence I have over current affairs?" Ganondorf's voice was deceptively soft, his tone almost carefree.

Sakon flinched as though struck and cowered back, turning his pasty face away from Ganondorf's ominous form. Even with his back to them, facing the window, he struck a terrifying figure.

"T-They did, My Lord… B-But I swear it wasn't-!"

"I don't care whose fault it was!" Ganondorf roared, turning finally and fixing Sakon with a thunderous look. "I've already sent Vaati and Zant to double check our perimeter and the remaining hostages, so as to ensure that this incompetence doesn't upset my plans."

At this, Sheik glanced at Sakon with barely suppressed annoyance. The kid was practically quivering… Why had Ganondorf brought him on, anyway?

Ganondorf had apparently noticed it, too. He scoffed and turned away in disgust, muttering to himself contemptuously, “Pathetic… I’ve surrounded myself with imbeciles.”

Sheik snickered in spite of himself, and at once Ganondorf’s attention was focused on him, his golden-eyed stare impaling him like daggers.

"Is there something funny about a dozen of my victims escaping?" he snarled murderously. Sheik felt as though his grin had been slapped off of his face. Bitterly, he cleared his throat and tried to affix a 'no-nonsense' look on his face.

"I didn't think so."

Turning his back to them once again, Ganondorf contemplated the narrow shafts of light that pierced through the blinds of the Main Office's third story windows, enveloping them in a surreal light. It felt like an old-school noir film.

"It's just as Aghanim said, I suppose…” Ganondorf brooded softly to himself, his eyes fixed on the pattern of light and shadow before him, “any battle strategy is only good until the first arrow flies.”

Sakon and Sheik exchanged uneasy looks. There it was again; he'd mentioned Aghanim. Sheik knew from eavesdropping on whispered conversations and general rumor-mongering that Aghanim was one of the councilors at the juvenile detention center where Ganondorf had been held after his arrest in Sheik’s freshman year.

Apparently, the man was nuttier than squirrel pooh and was obsessed with ancient Hylian lore. In a nutshell, he was an old religious coot, but his teachings seemed to have had a profound impact on Ganondorf who revered the man as both scholar and sage. Yet what was it that he could have taught Ganondorf that had influenced his decision to attack the school?

"If I am to claim Power…” Sheik thought her heard Ganondorf mutter to himself, and he found himself leaning forward almost subconsciously in an attempt to hopefully catch some snippet of his
leader’s true plan, but a moment later Ganondorf whirled about again and smiled thinly at the two boys who stood before him.

"If we are to ensure that this… oversight… does not upend us, then we must make haste. Sakon," The sweaty, trembling boy nearly jumped out of his skin and hastily stepped forward, dry washing his hands. "Go, search the students again. You remember what that boy told us; Aryll Hero is here. Bring her to me at once."

Sheik didn't even have time to ponder what boy Ganondorf was talking about; something painful had suddenly gripped his chest. Aryll? Ganondorf wanted Aryll, Link’s little sister? But… why?! For what reason?! Forgetting himself for a moment, Sheik opened his mouth in what he knew was a futile attempt to argue, to somehow try and save the little girl he knew so well, he was cut off by yet another piercing gaze from Ganondorf.

"And you, Sheik… You remember our deal. I promised you one could live, and you made your decision. Go, bring her here, and lock her up with the other surviving faculty. We'll need to tighten our security net and I don't need any more loose ends lying around. I've been busy setting up the security cameras and they're almost online. Our moment is soon, gentlemen. Let's not waste it."

Wordlessly, the two youths turned on their heels and all but fled from the room, both pale and shaky. But where Sakon's terror was from being in awe of Ganondorf, the only person to whom he'd bow and scrape and show obsequiousness, Sheik's fear was entirely different.

He suddenly felt like throwing up. But why? He’d been all for this plan yesterday… Making the country pay for its crimes of neglect… Yet seeing Midna earlier seemed to have rattled some part of him, cracked open eyes he’d thought he’d permanently shut, and the light… the light of reality, the truth of Ganondorf's plan was finally catching up to him… and he wasn’t entirely sure that he liked what they were doing.

Midna sat rigid, completely motionless aside from the occasional shiver, in one of the many stiff, uncomfortable chairs that were positioned in small clusters around the library. In a removed way, she knew that this feeling of light-headed, nauseous detachment was what they called shock; after all, it wasn’t every day a madman points a gun at your head and you see your pitiful teenage life flash before your eyes, only to rescued at the last possible moment by a pair of strangers falling impossibly through the ceiling.

She felt as though the scene before her was being witnessed by another person; Ashei and Shad were dragging the bits of ceiling plaster and twisted air vent into the computer lab where Midna and Linebeck had been imprisoned only minutes earlier. She wasn’t sure if they were trying to hide their tracks, which was impossible given the piles of dust now ground into the cheap library carpet and the massive, gaping hole in the ceiling, or if they simply had a complex to constantly tidy up after themselves.

Onox's body had also been unceremoniously dumped in the lab; the force of the blow he received from a large piece of metal weighed down by a human body seemed to have been too much for his beefy neck to take. He had been dead before his body had even hit the floor.

Dead…

Midna shuddered involuntarily, fighting down the bile that rose in her throat, and for the first time since sitting down, she felt herself blink. Letting out a shaky breath, she forced herself to move and began rubbing her arms in an attempt to fight off the sudden chill. Even though he’d been about to kill her, she couldn't bring herself to be glad or even relieved that Onox had been killed.
"Hey kid, you alright?"

Midna jerked back in surprise, suddenly realizing that Linebeck was standing right in front of her chair, leaning over and staring at her with what looked astonishingly like concern on his sallow, leathery face. His voice sounded abnormally loud in the stark silence of the library.

"I... What?" she fumbled, still feeling scrambled up inside like a box of mismatched puzzle pieces. "Y-Yeah. I'm fine. I'm..."

She let out another shaky breath, her gaze drooping listlessly to the floor, and Linebeck sighed.

"Listen, kid," he said, his voice taking on an uncharacteristically paternal tone, "I know what you're feeling. That was a really traumatizing experience back there, so it's normal to feel a little shocked... but you need to perk up!"

At this, Midna glanced back up at the graying janitor and quirked an eyebrow. In answer, he flashed her his most charming smile, which only served to make him look like a particularly disreputable car salesman.

"After all, you're with the Great Linebeck! What could possibly go wrong?"

In spite of her current psychological state, Midna felt her jaw drop.

"'The Great Linebeck?!' she all but screeched, leaping to her feet in outrage, all of her previous worry evaporating like a puddle in a forest fire. "What are you...?! In what world...?! You haven't done anything useful this entire time!"

"E-Excuse me?" Linebeck squawked indignantly, his face turning red to match his nose. "I've done lots of things!"

Midna gave an exaggerated snort. "Oh sure, who can forget how heroic you were when you were sniveling on the ground?! You're a pathetic failure and you know it, Linebeck!"

The sound that emitted from Linebeck’s mouth at that moment could only be compared to a peacock being strangled. His chest inflated like a bullfrog, and he was readying himself to fire back some sort of retort when a sudden quiet cough to their side drew both her and Linebeck's attention.

"Er... not to be rude, but could we please settle this another time? We're sort of in a time crunch."

Shad said matter-of-factly, pushing his glasses up the slope of his nose with one finger as he did so, causing them to flash briefly with reflected light like a cartoon character. Ashei, standing at his side, snorted disparagingly.

"Right... sorry..." Midna mumbled, abashed. Well, that was embarrassing... Leave it to Linebeck to leave her feeling like an idiot.

"Er... not to be rude, but could we please settle this another time? We're sort of in a time crunch." Shad said matter-of-factly, pushing his glasses up the slope of his nose with one finger as he did so, causing them to flash briefly with reflected light like a cartoon character. Ashei, standing at his side, snorted disparagingly.

"Right... sorry..." Midna mumbled, abashed. Well, that was embarrassing... Leave it to Linebeck to leave her feeling like an idiot.

Glancing over his shoulder Linebeck asked, his tone still gruff from having been verbally assaulted a moment earlier, "Hey. Where'd those kids and that smokin' media aid go?"

Midna turned toward the far end of the room and was surprised to find it empty. She, Linebeck, Shad, and Ashei were the only ones left in the library.

"Huh. I guess they must've dashed once I clobbered Onox," Ashei offered thoughtfully. Her voice suddenly grew annoyed. "They could have at least waited for us, yeah?"
"Are they really what's important right now?" Shad cut in, his usually passive voice sounding shockingly strong and confident, "We're wasting time. Every second we spend in this place is one second closer to us probably getting shot. Let's hurry up and find a way out of here."

"Brilliant plan, ginger," Ashei spat disdainfully. "Just where exactly do you plan on going? 'Cause I dunno about you, but I don't really feel like running around a school full of psychos with guns on the off-chance we find an exit."

Shad shot her an angry scowl, his freckled face turning pink, but it was Linebeck who answered. "Well, like I was just telling Sparkles here before we were so rudely interrupted, I just so happen to know of an exit that's still intact."

"You do?" Ashei and Shad spoke in unison, the doubt and incredulity every bit as apparent in their tones as it was on their faces.

"Sparkles?" Midna asked, confused.

"Yup! The explosion in the gym was a dud and the back door is wide open. Looks like someone’s not so useless after all." He shot Midna a superior look, making her scoff. "Well, what are we waiting for, kiddies? Let's get this show on the road!"

Linebeck's victorious grin seemed to be infectious, at least for some of them, and Shad and Ashei quick to join in with the smiling as the four made their way towards the exit to the hall. As their motley crew began heading towards the door, Midna found herself glancing back at the computer lab's shattered window, remembering Sheik and everything that had gone on inside, and came to a decision.

She couldn't leave yet. She had to find him, had to find out what was going on and what she could do to fix it. Impossible as it may seem, she couldn’t leave him, no matter how far he’d fallen. He was her best friend, and the goddesses take her, she loved him, no matter how corny it sounded.

As Linebeck reached out for the handle, Midna opened her mouth to announce her intentions to the group, but before she could speak, another voice echoing from the hallway cut her off.

"I don't like this one bit, V."

Midna’s blood turned to ice as she recognized the high pitched, childish tone from the graveyard that morning. Suddenly frantic, she snagged her companions’ arms and dragged them to the ground and out of view from the door's small, rectangular window.

Out in the hallway, another voice answered the first.

"Stop whining, Zant. Keep obeying orders and you'll get your chance. Oh, and don't call me V."

"What's wrong, Vaati?" Zant teased. "Don't like your little nickname? Would you rather I go back to calling you the purple midget wonder?"

Just in front of their door, Midna heard their footsteps stop and her heart leaped into her throat. Goddesses, they weren't coming into the library, were they?! Shad's face had paled drastically, and Linebeck was chewing his nails with reckless abandon. Outside, Vaati let out an annoyed sigh.

"Look, stop taking this out on me. Just because Ganondorf won't let you go on a shooting rampage just yet doesn't mean you get to vent your anger on your comrades. Besides, we have more important things to deal with right now."
"What, like finding that kid?" Zant spat, clearly irritated. "What does Ganon want him for anyway? If it’s just to kill him, why don't we just kill everyone in the school and be done with it?"

"You know what he has planned-

"Yeah yeah, I know all about his 'plan'." Zant cut in aggressively. "But come on. Do you really think it'll work? Isn't this stuff all superstition anyway?"

"Of course not," Vaati said, with the air of one speaking to another who was clearly intellectually inferior. "The legends are all true. As for whether Ganondorf's going about it the right way…"

"Well, whatever," he replied, and Midna heard their footsteps continue on down the hallway. "I'm getting sick of waiting. You can go ahead and help him if you want, but I didn’t sign up to play Ganon’s toady. I hear most of the cheerleaders are in the gym."

Miraculously, the sound of their echoing footsteps began drifting away. They were safe after all! With a cackle of spine chilling laughter, they heard Zant’s distant voice say, "I think it’s finally time for me to have a little fun…”

Then they were gone.

Midna's heart was thudding painfully in her throat. Ganondorf was searching for someone specifically? That was news, but… who? Who could Ganondorf want to hurt so badly he’d hold an entire school hostage? And Zant said he was going to…

The full meaning of Zant's final comment hit her with the force of a cement truck.

"Oh, Goddesses…” She whispered, feeling the vomit rise in her throat again. "He's going to kill everyone in the gym… We've got to stop him somehow…"

"What?!" Linebeck yelped, his face going pale. "S-stop him? And how exactly are we supposed to do that?!"

"She's right," Ashei chimed in, sounding infinitely more confident than Midna felt. "We've got to go after them. Two of us can go after Zant and stop him, but I think the other two need to stop Vaati before he finds that kid and brings him to Ganondorf because if he does, I get the feeling the rest of us won't be around for much longer."

"Ashei and I will go after Vaati," Shad said, nodding in agreement to Ashei's deduction while Linebeck looked back and forth between them in horror, his mouth gaping like a fish. "You two go after Zant."

"Why do we get the crazy one?!" Linebeck burst out indignantly.

"Because your exit is in the gym, and it's the only way we can be sure you won't run out on us." Ashei snarled.

Linebeck moaned, his head slumping forward in his arms. "That’s it. It’s official. We're all going to die…”

Midna swallowed and tried to stop herself from agreeing.

To say that Zelda was getting a little stir crazy was the understatement to end all understatements. As if being forced to sit cross-legged behind a table on the cold, hard, and filthy tile floor, squashed
between two-dozen terrified teenage girls, and held at gunpoint on her second day of school wasn't bad enough, her knee was starting to sting something awful. She knew she shouldn't have worn her jeans with the ripped knees today, out-of-fashion as they were, but they were her lucky pants… Or they used to be. Not anymore, it would seem.

Leaning back against the wobbly wooden leg of the table, Zelda let out an impatient sigh. How long was it going to take for them to be rescued? Did the police even know what was going on? Surely they must; the attackers couldn't have captured every student, and even if they had, someone outside must have noticed the explosions and heard the gunfire…

Letting her eyes sweep the classroom for the umpteenth time that morning, she found herself focusing mainly on her new gaggle of friends.

Well… friends in the loosest sense of the word. More like congenial prison acquaintances, but she liked them all the same.

Aryll, who was sitting in front of her and a little to the left, had her arm protectively around the shoulders of a pretty red-head who had been quivering nonstop since Zelda had shown up, tears pouring silently down her face. Her other hand was being squeezed to death by a short boyish girl who had drawn her legs up to her chest and had buried her face in her knees. Her short hair was a particularly vivid shade of green, an odd hair color that she didn’t see too much of up north where she was from.

Situated in front of Zelda, but more to the right and leaning back against the wall, sat Anju and Kafei, the resident upperclassmen. Anju sat silently, her head resting on Kafei's shoulder, her fingers gently intertwined with her boyfriend’s, who was still facing to the wall to avoid detection. It was sweet, really; Kafei possibly risking his life in an attempt to comfort and protect his girlfriend in this time of crisis.

All at once, Zelda felt very alone. Anju had Kafei, and Aryll had her two friends, though it looked like the other two were getting the most of the comfort. Who did she have? The only friends she had were the ones she'd made during the shooting... and wasn't there some famous saying that claimed relationships based off of traumatic events never worked out? Ok sure, that was probably directed towards romantic relationships specifically, but still…

The loneliness hit Zelda harder then than it had at any other point since moving to Ordon. She really only had two people in the world; her father, Daphnes, and her older sister Tetra, who was away at college. Her mother had passed away when Zelda was a child, and her father had moved around a lot. She'd never really had the opportunity to stay in one area long enough to make friends, until… Well until now, when her father had managed to secure a job working for Hyrule's Prime Minister, acting as a political correspondent here in Ordon.

It was supposed to be a long contract, allowing her to finish out her high school career without being uprooted again. Now, finally, Zelda was given her chance to spend the rest of High School being normal, to actually make friends… and then this happened.

Anju's foot nudged Zelda's thigh softly. Drawing herself out of her den of woe, Zelda met the kind older girl’s concerned gaze.

"You ok?" Anju whispered softly.

Deciding that she didn't want the older girl's pity and that it was high time she got over herself, Zelda gave her best attempt at a nonchalant shrug and said, casting around in her head for an excuse for her sudden depression, "Yeah… I'm just… worried about this girl I met earlier."
"Don't worry, sweetie. I'm sure your friend is fine," Anju said, beaming encouragingly.

Friend, huh?

"Yeah… me too…"

Anju gave her a scrutinizing look that clearly said that she wasn’t buying it, but rather than continue the subject, Zelda grunted, softly, "I wish they would hurry up already..."

From Aryll's side, the red-headed girl's head jerked up with a frightened squeak, shooting Zelda a look that was both scandalized and infuriated.

"No, no!" Zelda recanted frantically, "I meant the cops, not…! Not the other people!"

"It's ok, Malon," Aryll said soothingly, rubbing the girl's arm. Over her head, she shot Zelda an amused smile.

Malon, however, did not look amused at all. "Seriously, we all, like, need to get out of here right now before we get murdered!"

"And how exactly do you propose we do that?" Came Kafei's wry response from Anju's side. He turned his head from the wall to give Malon a condescending look. "Just in case you've forgotten, the dude's got a gun."

"Well, we've got to do something!" Malon hissed insistently, glaring through her tears at the purple haired young man.

"Oh sure," he replied loftily, rolling his eyes in exasperation. "How's about you three take out his legs, and while he's distracted I'll tackle him and take the gun. Then, we just tie him to a chair like Jason Bourne and waltz on out of here."

If anything, Malon's scowl only intensified, but to the surprise of everyone listening, the green-haired girl let out a snort of laughter.

"I'm sorry!" she said through her giggles as Malon glowered at her, offended. "It's just… that was funny…"

A sudden thud of shoes hitting the tile floor from the front of the class drew their attention.

"Alright, that's it. I told you to shut up, and you didn't. Now I have to be the bad guy."

Zelda felt her stomach drop out. Backing up quickly so she was directly under the table, as though that was somehow going to protect her, she drew her knees up under her chin and hugged her legs tightly, feeling terror flowing through her freely once more.

Behind her, she could hear the slow, plodding footsteps of their emotionless captor drawing steadily nearer, keeping time with the frantic beating of her heart.

Finally, after what felt like a painful eternity, he rounded the corner of the table that Zelda was hiding beneath and stared down at the tiny clump of students, his long black trench coat feeling simultaneously anachronistic with the rest of the students’ clothing and yet at the same time, strangely fitting.

The green-haired girl went rigid; her eyes wide like a deer caught in headlights as she frantically scurried back against the wall, her chest heaving. Malon dove behind Aryll for protection with a
wail and Aryll's face paled dramatically, her eyes fixated on the assailant's gun. Even Anju seemed to lose her sense of composure for a moment, her hand suddenly squeezing Kafei's in a vice grip as she shook perceptively.

As for Kafei, he had turned back to the wall and gone very still, his head once again tilted down so that his long hair curtained his face.

The boy seemed to survey them once before sighing dramatically.

"What a pain..." he muttered, and though Zelda couldn't see properly from her spot beneath the table, from his shadow she could tell he was running his free hand through his close-cropped hair. "I can’t believe you’re making me do this. Alright fine.... who do I have to kill?"

The way he tossed out the word 'kill' so absently, as though it were nothing special, made Zelda’s skin crawl. When nobody answered he stepped forward and prodded Aryll's leg with his shoe.

"What about blondie here?"

Aryll's face went from white to green and she made a strange choking sound in the back of her throat. Malon whimpered from behind her.

"Or... how about greenie?"

The smaller girl buried her face in her arms and burst into tears.

"Stop it!" Anju blurted out angrily, glaring up at their captor in outrage. "Stop toying with us! You're a sick, twisted, monster of a human being! What gives you the right to-!"

The shooter turned his gun calmly towards Anju, effectively cutting off her tirade with a strangled gulp. Her mouth worked, but no sound came out as she stared at the barrel of the gun and seemed to lose all rational thought. Kafei tensed beside her.

"Thank you for volunteering," the boy said, his ever monotonous voice still displaying no emotion.

Zelda felt something rise in her chest as the soon-to-be killer turned his back to her in order to face Anju fully. She had to do something... There had to be a way... She couldn’t just sit here like a lump and let Anju die!

The boy positioned himself directly in front of the table where Zelda was hiding, his entire upper torso completely obscured. Zelda found her eyes focusing on the back of the boy's knees, and suddenly she remembered what Kafei had said earlier.

Without pausing to think, Zelda leaned back, braced herself against the table leg, and kicked out with all her might at the back of the attacker's knees. The boy let out a grunt of surprise as his legs gave way, sending him toppling back into the table.

Kafei didn't hesitate; as though he'd coordinated this with Zelda beforehand, he leaped up from the floor onto the attacker with a furious roar. They grappled for a second, but caught both off-guard and off-balance, Kafei had the upper hand, and a moment later he had effectively pinned the shooter on the table top.

Zelda rolled out from under the table and sprang to her feet, a handful of others rising with her, shock and amazement evident on everyone’s faces.

There were a few more seconds of struggle in which the boy tried to force Kafei off of him, but
Kafei had seized him by the wrists, the fullness of his weight resting on his chest, and the boy had no room for leverage. In a moment of clarity, Aryll darted forward and pried the gun from his now immobile wrist.

Pointing it at him shakily, she managed to gasp out a semi-authoritative, "Don't move."

The remainder of the class sat stunned, watching with bated breath as the scene unfolded before them. Anju and the green-haired girl rose from the floor apprehensively, Anju's eyes filled with worry as she watched her boyfriend grapple with their captor. Malon remained on the floor, though she watched the two boys with unrestrained awe.

After a few more moments of futile struggle, the boy finally gave up. Breathing heavily, he said, showing the first true emotion that any of them had heard from him, "...you're... you're a guy?!"

Kafei flashed a roguish grin, still panting from the exertion.

"Surprise."

Anju cleared her throat to get her boyfriend’s attention and announced, her voice still a little shaky, "Now would be a good time to leave."

"What do we do with him?" Kafei asked, jerking his head down at their captor.

At this, the green-haired girl blurted out a surprisingly enthusiastic, "Tie him up like Jason Bourne!"

As Kafei and the rest of the class got to work incapacitating their old captor, Zelda gratefully took the opportunity to sit back and organize her thoughts.

Getting out of the school was obviously their number one priority, but her thoughts on friends earlier had brought back into her mind the girl from this morning. What about Midna? True, she barely even knew the girl, but it felt wrong to simply abandon her after all they'd already been through...

Not that there was much she could do for her anyway. She didn't even know where she was, let alone how to help her. The most she could do for the girl was pray that the police hurried up and rescued them. That was probably the best chance any of them had.

With her eyes squeezed shut, she didn't see Anju approaching her from the side.

"Thank you," she whispered quietly, and Zelda's eyes flew open in surprise.

"For what?" she asked, floored.

"For saving me. If you hadn't kicked out his legs, I wouldn't..." her voice died in her throat, and she had to swallow quickly before continuing. "Anyway... thank you. You saved my life."

Zelda flushed in embarrassment and looked down at her feet.

"I-I didn't really do anything. It was all Kafei, really. I just sort of helped."

But the next thing she knew, he was enveloped in a bone-crushing hug. After a moment, Zelda hugged her back, smiling stupidly.

"You two finished bonding yet?" Kafei asked, bemused, approaching them with a cocky grin.

Normally, egos were unattractive, but Din, this boy was handsome...
Glancing over his shoulder, Zelda could see that they'd bound the shooter to a chair at the front of the class using random odds and ends that they'd found around the classroom, including belts and masking tape. His trench coat and shoes lay on the teacher's desk, having been removed to make binding him easier. Strangely enough, the coat had been folded.

The now-liberated students had clustered together like cattle and were nervously surveying Kafei, dutifully awaiting more instructions.

Anju let out a tired sigh and stepped away from Zelda, surveying the group before her with a calculating frown.

"How are we going to get out of here?" Aryll asked, stepping forward and forming a mini-circle with Zelda, Anju, and Kafei.

"There has to be a way..." Anju muttered, taping her fingers against her lips as she thought, her brows furrowed intently.

"Well, first things first, where's that gun?" Kafei asked, cracking his neck as though in preparation for something particularly challenging. Aryll handed it to him tentatively, holding it as though it were a poisonous viper.

Anju eyed it with no small apprehension. "Sweetie..."

"Relax, Anj. I so have a plan." Walking calmly towards the bound would-be killer, he continued speaking aloud over his shoulder. "We can't just lead a group of students walking around the high school; we'd be caught long before we found an exit and they'd just capture us all over again. So I'm thinking if I impersonate one of the guys who's doing the shooting, maybe we can avoid suspicion and we can all get out of here in one piece."

"But how are you going to-" Zelda's voice cut off as Kafei lifted the attacker's large, baggy trench coat from the desk beside the chair they'd imprisoned him on.

"I'll wear this. If I keep my hood up, nobody will be able to tell I'm not him from a distance, and if I have a gun and act like I'm taking you somewhere, nobody will have reason suspect a thing."

Anju opened her mouth furiously to protest, but Kafei quickly strode back across the room and laid a finger over her lips. "We don't have much of a choice, love."

"He's right," Aryll said matter-of-factly. "As much as I don't like it, his plan is the best we have. At least it's better than just sitting around. Let's hurry up and get out of here."

Anju looked horrified, and while Kafei and Aryll began relaying their plan to the rest of the frightened girls, Zelda calmly took the older girl's hand in her own and gave it a comforting squeeze.

"Your boyfriend is really brave. You should be proud."

"I am." She whispered, tears of worry flooding her eyes.

Zelda sighed and put her arm around the trembling girl's shoulders in her best attempt at a comforting gesture. She didn’t think she’d ever been this touchy and open with strangers before, but there was a first time for everything, she supposed.

After a few more moments of hasty preparations, the group seemed ready to depart at last.

"Alright ladies," Kafei said, throwing them a charming smile as he opened the door, checking that
the coast was clear before holding it out for them like a gentleman. "Let's do this."
With a weary sigh, Granny Hero stepped into her quiet home and, balancing precariously on one frail leg, closed the front door with her foot. Readjusting the large brown paper grocery bags that she carried in her arms, she hurried forward past the couch, through the den, and into the kitchen.

Setting the bags down on the countertop, Granny took a moment to lean back and catch her breath. Old age had clearly done a number on her stamina; to think that carrying in a few bags of groceries could wind her! With a rueful shake of her head, she turned to head toward the den to sit down for a few minutes and get some much-needed rest when she noticed something sitting on the kitchen table.

It was a spoon. A wet spoon. A wet spoon sitting in a puddle of milk, surrounded by miniature marshmallows.

Link.

Growling in her throat, the elderly woman stomped forward, yanked a couple paper towels from off the roll on the counter as she went, and began cleaning up her grandson's mess.

Honestly, she didn't know where the boy got his manners. He was like a pig who thought the whole world was his sty. Something he picked up from his friends, no doubt, because he certainly didn't learn it from her, or her late husband Smith; the goddesses knew Link would do whatever Smith said from fear of a firm spanking when he was young. Working at a steel mill had given her late husband some fantastic muscles. And it certainly wasn't his mother, from whom she was certain Aryll had inherited her sweet personality. No… it was likely his father. Or perhaps he'd learned it from his uncle. Both of her boys had been wily troublemakers… before they had been killed in the war.

Drawing a shaky breath, Granny willed herself not to get sucked into despair again. She'd lost so many family members in so short a time… Nobody should outlive their child, especially not both of them. Link and little Aryll were all that she had left in the world… not that that excused Link for leaving messes for her to clean up. Why, when that boy got home…

Entering the den, a blinking red light in the corner of the room drew her attention. It was the phone; she had a missed call. Pausing for a moment to check the caller ID, she ignored it and decided to take a breather. It was just Rusl, Aryll's boyfriend's father. She couldn't imagine what he wanted, but she was in no mood to talk to anyone at the moment.

Easing herself down in her husband's old recliner, she reveled in the silence of her home for a moment before turning on the TV.

Cooking with Paula Dean? No. Lifetime? Not right now. The News? It was too early for political scandals. Maybe later, after-

She caught sight of what was being shown on the screen and dropped the remote with a strangled gasp.

It was the high school. Link and Aryll's high school. Surrounded by police cars and ambulances, smoke issuing out of several entrances, all framed by the news station’s white ‘Breaking News’ caption.

The camera angle was overtop the school, clearly from a helicopter. From that vantage point, she
could see the flashing strobe lights of emergency responders flashing in all directions, crowds of civilians and reporters gathering along the fringes behind yellow police tape barricades. The whole thing looked like a scene from a crime drama.

"…far, attempts to negotiate with the students who are leading the attack have been futile. The number of casualties reported is still climbing, though it appears that most of the students managed to get out before being captured. The Chief of Police has not been available for comment, but we have been promised an interview with one of the students who led a recent escape from the school within the hour."

Mrs. Hero stopped listening. Rising to her feet much faster than she would have thought possible at her age, she threw herself toward the phone. Quickly dialing Rusl's number, she prayed to the goddesses that he knew where her grandchildren were.

The gaggle of newly liberated girls moved together in a frightened pack through the halls. Originally, Kafei had divided them into two columns so as to march in a more orderly fashion, as though trying to give off an air of authority in case anyone caught them roaming about, but the columns had quickly fallen apart as the girls subconsciously moved closer together for comfort.

Zelda walked slightly ahead of the group to avoid their endless whimpering, both because it was irritating and because she didn’t want to give in to the temptation herself. Arm in arm with Anju, she couldn't help but turn her head in the direction of every distant sound or peer down every adjoining hallway, envisioning in her mind the hulking form of Ganondorf striding towards to stop their escape, a cold, malevolent smile on his face.

However, in spite of the omnipresent sense of dread and nearly paralyzing fear that seemed to constrict her chest with frigid, iron bars, straining her breathing and making her heart thud painfully against her breast, there was one person in the group who seemed totally at ease.

Kafei Dotour, the group’s official unofficial leader, was swaggering directly in front of Anju and Zelda with excessive zeal, the bottom of his stolen trench coat swaying back and forth with the exaggerated movement of his body. He held the gun they'd taken casually in his right hand, and turned occasionally to peer around the corner of the hood that obscured his vibrant hair to flash a dazzling smile and wink at his girlfriend. Every time he did this, Anju would hiss angrily and gesture for him to pay attention to what he was doing, and ever time he'd merely chuckle affectionately and return to his strutting.

After every chuckle, Zelda would give Anju's arm a reassuring squeeze, which would result in a tremulous sigh from the worried girl. This cycle repeated over and over until finally, Zelda began to question just how long this hallway really was, and if they would ever actually find their way out of this school.

Just before she was about to lose her sanity, Kafei’s quiet murmur sliced through her thoughts.

"Ok guys, what do you think? Stay on this floor or try downstairs?"

Zelda and Anju exchanged baffled looks, not knowing how to answer his question, but it was Aryll who came to the rescue.

"Downstairs," she said, stepping up beside Zelda, her pigtails bouncing distractingly.

"Why? Do you know of any exits that aren't blocked?"

"No," Aryll replied, "but I mean, there are more exits on the ground floor, which means there's a
greater chance that we'll find one there that isn't."

Kafei grinned at her winningly. "I like your thinking, blondie."

Aryll blushed scarlet and looked down at her feet.

"Alright ladies, you heard the girl. Down we go!"

The romp down the stairwell was every bit as uneventful as the trek down the hallway was, for which Zelda was eternally grateful, though it was a good deal noisier. The girls, too terrified to think straight, kept trying to rush ahead to keep close to Kafei, causing a good deal of stomping and frustrated hisses as they bumped into one another, and at one point the whole lot of them nearly toppled down the stairs.

After exiting the stairwell and finding themselves once again alone, they faced another decision.

"Ok, Anj, what do you say? Right or left?" Kafei said softly, gesturing to the two hallways that stretched out before them.

"Um…Right," she replied, biting her lip in hesitation.

"Alright, left it is!" he announced, flashing another grin at her indignant expression.

"He's just trying to lighten the mood," Anju muttered softly in response to Zelda's baffled frown.
"He's trying to stop the other girls from panicking."

Turning to glance behind her, Zelda decided that his plan was working at least somewhat. None of the girls looked relaxed, but they also didn't seem as likely to break down into hysterics as they were when they'd first set out.

Letting her eyes sweep the group, Zelda could see Saria hugging her elbows fiercely, a look of intense determination in her eyes. Aryll had her arm around Malon, guiding her swiftly behind Zelda and Anju while she rubbed her shoulders comfortingly, occasionally whispering comforting things into her ear. The other students had various expressions on their faces, ranging from terrified to tearful: one girl was tugging at her braid fitfully as if it was a pulley that could take her out of there. Another was chewing on her lip with an anxious look on her face, her doe-like brown eyes skittering from one end of the hall to the other like a rat on acid. There was a boy, his expression blank, reaching for something in his coat, and a short girl tugging on the ends of her…

Wait, boy?

A sudden feeling of dread exploding in her chest, Zelda felt her arm tighten around Anju's as she spun around, her eyes darting frantically to find in the crowd of girls what her brain was telling her couldn't be… No!

She opened her mouth to scream, but it was too late.

There was a bang, louder by far than any she'd ever heard, and the collective scream of a dozen frightened girls. Eyes wide with panic, Zelda numbly took in the face of the shooter; his plain expression, his average light brown hair, his forgettable brown eyes, and realized the one thing that set him apart from the crowd was that there was nothing that set him apart other than his gender.

She recognized him from the graveyard this morning. What was his name? San? Samok?

There was a loud thud beside her as her arm was suddenly released, followed by a heart-wrenching
cry.

"Anju!"

Whirling around, Zelda struggled momentarily to process what she was seeing.

Anju had fallen to her knees, her hands clutching fitfully at her stomach, trying to hold in the mass of red that was pouring between her fingers. Kafei had collapsed beside her, his hands shaking as they covered her own, his face pale, his mouth gaping, eyes boring desperately into hers.

"Ow…" She muttered softly, hunching over, her eyes clenched tightly shut in pain.

"Anju!" Aryll wailed a moment too late, but her cry of despair was suddenly silenced with a squeak.

Tearing her disbelieving gaze away from her wounded friend, Zelda noticed for the first time that they were completely surrounded by armed boys, one of which had seized Aryll from behind and covered her mouth. Where had they come from? Had they been lying in wait for the other boy to make his move?

"Take her," said the forgettable boy, his voice sounding very plain beside the muttering of some of the others. "Ganondorf wants her alive, mind. Make sure she isn't harmed."

"Whatever you say, Sakon," the boy holding Aryll said with the air of one who wasn't exactly happy to be taking orders from another. With a rough yank, he pulled Aryll out of the mass of students and led her off down an adjacent hallway.

"Looks like your aim was a little off, eh Sakon?" one of the others joked. "You missed the guy."

"I didn't miss," he replied calmly, his plain eyes regarding the bleeding girl and the sobbing boy evenly. "She jumped in the way."

Sakon's words seemed to spark something in Kafei. He looked up slowly towards Sakon, his face contorted with rage, his eyes wet and bloodshot, and snarled.

"You…"

Sakon didn't even flinch; raising his gun a second time, he pointed it directly at Kafei.

Kafei, however, was faster; already moving, he drew the gun Zelda had forgotten he carried from the pocket of his trench coat, quickly firing a single shot.

There was a stunned silence in which Sakon staggered backward, blood blossoming on his left arm. His hand began to spasm and, unable to control the muscles in it, the gun he held dropped uselessly to the floor.

Suddenly, there was movement everywhere. Every other armed assailant brought out their guns and trained them on the spot where Kafei was sitting, but he was no longer there. Having realized he'd missed, he'd darted forward, charging Sakon with a roar of rage. Sakon, however, turned and fled down the hall, Kafei charging after him, bullets tearing up the tile and lockers around them until they both disappeared around the corner.

Zelda, under the cover of the confusion, sank to her knees beside Anju. The puddle of blood beside where she lay was growing larger, and her pale body trembled with the pain.

"K… Kafei…" she whispered faintly, her eyes staring at the spot her boyfriend had vanished at.
"Hold on, Anju," Zelda whispered fervently, her voice choking in her throat even as the attackers turned their attention back to the girls and began trying to restore order. "Hold on. I'll get you help… I promise…"

Clutching his chest and panting with relief, Link tried his best to quiet his breathing. He was sitting beneath the grimy sinks of the boys’ restroom on the second floor, hiding from the shooters he'd heard walking his way. They'd been gone for about a minute, but he didn't want to take his chances, and besides, he needed to catch his breath.

He'd been carefully stalking his way down the hall in the opposite direction that Darunia had taken the students. True, he realized that he was now heading back towards the direction he came from, but he was hoping to be able to get back to the janitor's closet where he’d gained access to the air vent in the first place; to him, it seems like the easiest way to search the school without being caught. He still needed a way into Miss Marie's geometry class.

Unfortunately, before he could make it, he was forced to take a wide, circuitous route in order to avoid what he could only assume was one of the shooters looking for a vending machine, seeing as he was talking aloud to himself about how badly he was craving a Snickers bar.

In any event, he soon had to duck inside the bathroom to hide from a passing group of armed teens, and he was taking it as an opportunity to catch his breath.

Ok, he thought grimly, so far today I've been shot at, chased up an air vent, nearly broke my back falling from said air vent onto some dude's head, may or may not have made friends with the quarterback, and am now playing hide and go seek in a bathroom.

Clearly, I live a blessed life.

Link shook his head irritably, willing himself to focus. Finding Aryll, that was his number one goal. Nothing else mattered, not even his own safety. After all, Aryll and his grandmother were all he had left in the world, and if anything happened to her…

Link sighed, running his hand through his messy, dust-covered hair. At least Sheik and Midna weren't here; Sheik had been missing for days, so he found it safe to assume he wasn't being held captive like the rest of them, and Midna hadn't met him in the morning like she usually did. She was probably skipping, or homesick. Well if she wasn't sick before, she likely was now. Sick with worry, that is.

He found himself wondering what the news was saying about the whole ordeal, which led to thoughts about how his grandma was taking it, which lead to thoughts about Aryll…

Groaning slightly, Link climbed to his feet and met his determined reflection in the mirror. Miss Marie’s geometry class. That's where he'd last seen her. Get to the vent, then back to the classroom, and figure out something from there.

With renewed vigor, Link quickly strode from the bathroom, turned the corner with reckless speed, not pausing to check if the coast was clear, and immediately ran smack dab into someone.

"Oof!"

"Urk!"

With a painful crack, Link felt the disturbingly familiar sensation of his head colliding with the tile floor. Emitting an admittedly zombie-like moan, Link gingerly pushed himself up into a sitting
position, rubbing his head irritably and turned to scowl at the boy he'd run into…

And froze.

The boy, apparently still on his feet, was staring down at him through messy blonde bangs that covered his wide, shocked, blood-red eyes. The gun in his hand shook imperceptibly as their eyes met.

"L-Link?!"

"Sheik?!"

That was it, then. He'd finally lost his mind. That last crack on the head must have been what did it. There could be no other explanation because what he was seeing right now was impossible. Sheik couldn't be here, not after he'd been missing for so long, ignoring Link and Midna’s calls, playing hooky all day. And he certainly couldn't be holding a gun, because that would mean…

That would mean…

Midna's conversation from yesterday rang out loudly in Link’s head.

“I saw him about a week ago, hanging out with Ganondorf and his posse by the old Arby’s down on ninth. You don't think he's gotten himself into…trouble, do you?"

"Sheik…” Link started slowly, inwardly pleading with the Goddesses that what he was seeing wasn't real, "What are… Why do you have a gun?"

Sheik seemed to come back to his senses with a jolt. Glancing down at the weapon in his hand, he turned his gaze back to Link and took a slow, steady breath.

"Link. Get off the floor."

"No," Link shot back, his heart beginning to pound furiously within his chest. "Answer my question."

"Link, just get off the--"

"No!" He bellowed, and suddenly he was on his feet, his chest heaving. Anger, hurt, and betrayal were coursing through him wildly, empowering his words. "What are you doing?! Where have you been, and why do you have that… that thing?!"

"If you keep yelling, you're going to draw attention." Sheik intoned softly, his voice unreadable.

Link opened his mouth to shout some more, to rage against the boy he once called his best friend, but suddenly he felt deflated. He shook his head, leaning up against the wall for support, nausea washing through him, and turned his gaze down to his scuffed shoes.

"Sheik… please tell me you're not part of this…"

Sheik said nothing.

Link drew a haggard breath then let it out. "So what's the plan, then? You just gonna shoot me?"

Silence.

Link looked up at his once-best-friend to see his face looking gaunt.
"Well?"

"Just... just get in one of the classrooms and stay there, Link," he said quietly, his gun still pointed at his chest.

Link scoffed bitterly. "What, you too good to do the dirty work yourself?"

He wasn't sure what made him say it. Deep down, a little voice in his head was urging him not to provoke the guy with the gun. But Link didn't see an attacker when he looked at Sheik, all he could see was Sheik; the guy he'd always hung out with, the guy who slept over at his house sometimes on the weekends, who helped him pull pranks on his little sister, who once decided it was a good idea to try and keep a wild raccoon as a pet...

Sheik flinched at Link's jab and looked down. "Ganondorf doesn't want any students killed..."

The name 'Ganondorf' set off new explosions of fear and panic within Link's chest, but in a removed way, the fact that Ganondorf was somehow involved and presumably leading the shooting felt unsurprising. He chose not to focus on that for now.

"Oh, sure. Right. My bad. I forgot that Ganondorf was looking out for the good of the students-"

"Just shut up, Link! Get in the friggin' classroom! You don't understand-!"

"Well, then make me understand!" Link shouted, stepping forward threateningly.

"What, you really think I won't?" she spat back, his eyes blazing.

"What are you gonna do, shoot me?" Link hissed venomously, disdain thick in his voice. "I don't care what you say. You're still Sheik. You're still my best friend."

Sheik snorted derisively, tearing his eyes away from Link's and scowling at the floor, but didn't reply.

"Fine then," Link growled, readying himself. "I'll just have to knock some sense back into you!"

Sheik reacted too late; Link's fist was already sinking into his stomach. With a heavy 'Oof!' Sheik stumbled backward a few steps before glaring up at Link through his bangs.

"You punch like your sister," he grunted.

"You would know," Link snorted, and then before he could stop himself, added, "remember that time when you- Ack!"

Sheik had full body tackled Link to the floor, causing him to land heavily on his already injured shoulder. Grunting with effort, Sheik managed to punch Link twice in the face with his free hand before he was shoved off. Scrambling to his feet, he aimed a less-than-perfect kick which thankfully connected with Sheik's side. Still on all-fours, Sheik rolled desperately to the side to avoid Link's second kick before catching his foot and pulling him back to the ground.

They rolled apart and sprang to their feet simultaneously, red-faced and furious. Link swung wildly at Sheik but he side-stepped it easily, swinging his arm back and smacking Link soundly on the head with the butt of the handgun. Forehead bleeding into his eyes, Link stumbled blindly into a locker before being kicked in the back and sent flying back down onto the floor.

Wiping his eyes grimly, Link pushed himself to his feet and bull-rushed Sheik with a roar, slamming
him back into the lockers. He threw a punch and missed as Sheik ducked under the blow and escaped his clutches, Link’s fist slamming into the cold metal, denting it and cutting his knuckles.

Whirling around, Link swung again, and this time his fist connected with Sheik’s face and sent him stumbling backward.

They stared at each other coldly for a moment; Link wiping the blood from out of his eyes, Sheik spitting it out of his mouth, eyes glaring daggers… and then the moment was over. They moved as one; Link charging forward, his fist raised, Sheik's arm rising, the tip of his pistol aimed squarely at Link’s chest…

And he hesitated.

Link smacked the gun from his hand, sending it flying in a high arc before crashing back into the ground with a heavy clatter. The two teens stood panting, regarding each other through guarded eyes. The moment seemed to stretch on for eternity, neither moving or acknowledging what had happened.

Link spoke first.

"Why?"

"Why what?" Sheik spat, looking down as he leaned heavily against a locker, still gasping for breath from their fight.

"Why didn't you shoot me?"

Sheik opened his mouth as if to answer, then closed it again, shaking his head.

Link sighed. "Alright, then answer this. Why are you doing this? Sheik, you’re not… this isn't like you…"

There was a long pause, and just when Link was going to give up and walk away, Sheik spoke.

"Ganondorf, he… He offered to help me."

"Ganondorf, he… He offered to help me."

"Help you…? With what?"

There was a slight hesitation as Sheik lifted his head to meet Link's eyes. They seemed… hollow, almost. Like all the life and energy that had once been inside them had been scrapped out.

"My mom was… was real sick. We didn't know what was wrong with her, and we didn't have any money to pay for her treatment. You know what she was like; always drinking and shooting up. No way was any health insurance gonna accept her. She was a sour, self-centered, drug addicted waste of space… but she was still my mom. I couldn’t just let her die… Ganondorf, he… he said he could pay for her treatment if I did a few odd jobs for him."

Link was silent, watching his friend as he slowly straightened up.

"So I went along with it for a few weeks. It was just stupid stuff, like delivering packages to people in alleys and stuff. I dunno, I guess they were drug deals or whatever, but I didn't really care. Whatever it took, ya know? I was numb to it. But then… one day, about a week ago…"

Sheik sighed heavily and cleared his throat. "She… My mum, that is. She just didn't wake up."

His voice, which had been quiet and monotone, suddenly broke and vibrated with barely withheld
emotion. Link felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. Sheik's mom? Dead? Sure, Mrs. Shadow wasn't exactly the nicest woman in the world, but still…

"I didn't know what to do… I used up the last of our savings to pay for her funeral, but… I'm still 16 and I knew social services was coming for me. I didn't want them to take me away, so I was gonna make a run for it. But then Ganondorf came to me, and said he had a plan… Some way to make the system pay for not treating my mom like they should have..."

He slowly turned his gaze up and looked imploringly at Link, who was startled to see tears brimming in his usually stalwart eyes. "I-I don't know why I went along with it. I've been in this haze… ever since she died. I just had no one else to turn to, and I was so angry…"

"Sheik…" Link said, stepping forward and putting his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Come on, man. Why didn't you tell me? Or Midna? We're your best friends, of course we would've been there for you."

Sheik only shook his head, clearly trying to regain control over his emotions.

Link sighed. "I mean, not to get all 'Boy Meets World' on you, but… I care about you, man. You're like… the brother I never had."

Sheik snorted, wiping his eyes on the back on his hand and clearing his throat. "You're such a girl…"

Link laughed hoarsely. "Meh. Aryll watches too many chick flicks, I guess it kinda rubbed off on me."

Sheik smirked and opened his mouth to respond when the sound of a gunshot rang out loud and clear a short way down the hall. Link and Sheik both froze, suddenly remembering where they were and what was happening around them.

Link turned to face the direction the gunfire was coming from. "Sheik, I have to find Aryll and get her out of here. Do you know where she is?"

Sheik sighed. "No. I don't. All I know is that Ganondorf's after her."

Link spun around, eyes bulging. "He's what?!"

"I don't know, dude. He just told Sakon to bring her to him. He doesn't tell me all of his plans."

Link's heart was pounding painfully in his chest. "Well, where's Sakon? If I follow him, maybe he'll lead me to her."

"It's not like I keep track of these people," Sheik replied unhelpfully.

Link just about exploded. "Well, are you gonna help me or not?!"

Before he could answer, an explosion of gunfire sounded off down the hallway, loud and discordant, followed by a bull-like roar and the sound of running.

"Sakon!"

From off to their right, a medium-sized brown-haired blur streaked past, and the sounds of hurried footsteps suggested he was climbing the stairwell. A moment later, another blur streaked passed, this one rather purple, and it too began ascending the stairs.
"Um…" Link said blankly.

A series of feminine screams came from down the hallway, and without thinking, Link set off after them.

"Link, where are you going?" Sheik called quickly. "Sakon went that way!"

"Girls." He said quickly, still panting from their fight. "In trouble. Might be Aryll."

He made as though to run but was stopped by a hand seizing the back of his sweater. He turned back to shout at him to let him go, but Sheik cut him off.

"Wait," Sheik said, once again holding the gun he'd dropped. "Let me go first. They know me so they won't shoot."

Link gave a grateful nod, and together the two headed off down the hallway.
"No!"

Somewhere in Zelda's understandably tormented mind, even she had to admit that her shriek sounded pretty impressive. "We can't just leave her here in the hallway!"

"Listen, Blondie-"

"She's going to die!" Saria cut in angrily from Zelda's side, clutching Anju's pale hand to her breast, trembling.

The boy in front of them let out a disdainful snort. "Well, obviously. I mean, that's sorta the point."

"Please," Zelda gasped, desperation coating her anguished words. "Don't make us leave her… We can… We'll carry her to wherever you want us to go, just… please…"

Tears were falling down Zelda's face freely now, and she hated herself for it. She was supposed to be staying strong for Anju, trying to be supportive for the other girls, but with Kafei and Aryll gone and Anju dying on the cold tile floor before her, she could feel the last dregs of hope fading with her.

They weren't going to get out. They were going to die here, all of them. And there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Still, she maintained eye contact with the boy and was surprised to find hesitation in his red-rimmed eyes. The gun he held pointed at her face lowered ever-so-slightly until a short bark of laughter from one of the other attackers drew their attention.

"I'm sorry, what? We're supposed to be compassionate and feel for you now? DO you not get what's going on here?"

He trudged forward, shoving the first boy aside and stared down at Zelda, Saria, Anju. With a sudden snarl, he lashed out with his foot and kicked Zelda straight in the face.

Saria and the other girls shrieked in outrage and alarm, but Zelda hardly heard anything over the ringing in her ears. She lay back on the floor, dazed and confused as she struggled to find her bearings and push herself back into a sitting position. Her face and neck throbbed painfully and she was pretty sure he'd busted her lip. Blood trickled out of her mouth and down her chin.

A handful of the shooters sniggered cruelly, and the one who kicked her made a show of spitting on her, effectively adding insult to injury.

"I'll settle this argument right now. I'll just shoot you both and be done with it."

Still a little disoriented, Zelda’s eyes flew wide open, her heart grinding to a screeching halt, all thought of pushing herself back up to a sitting position lost. All around her she could hear the sudden intake of breath from the other frightened girls, as well as a particularly terrified squeak that she knew belonged to Malon.

Time almost seemed to slow for her as she watched the barrel of his gun rise from his side and come to a rest aiming straight at her face.
This is it, she thought. This is the end. I'm done for.

I'm coming to see you, mom.

With a choked off sob, she squeezed her eyes tight and let out a soundless howl of fear and agony in her head, waiting for the end. Her fingers found Anju’s hair and she tangled them in her russet tresses, pleading forgiveness from her new friend that she was unable to save her, unable to save them both…

"Stop!" Came a new voice from somewhere off to the side.

Zelda’s eyes struggled to open through her tears. Stop? Had someone actually said that, or was she hallucinating?

Her eyes skipped back and forth across the huddle of strange faces in front of her drunkenly, unable to process what she was seeing, desperately searching for the voice that had spared her, even if only for a moment. Her brain churned sluggishly as though caught in a vat of molasses, and it took her a moment to notice that the bubble of gun-toting sociopaths that surrounded her had parted to allow in two new boys.

She felt her fledgling hope die as she met the startlingly blood-red eyes of the boy in front. She recognized him instantly from the cemetery that morning. What was his name? Sheik? He was panting slightly and his clothing looked ruffled, as though he’d been in a fight. There was a bit of dried blood on his shirt as well and it drew her eyes for a moment, the thought of where it might have come from making her shudder.

He regarded her in silence for a moment through his lanky bangs before turning his attention to Anju. His lips tightened, and something that looked almost like hesitation flickered through his eyes. Then he stepped forward to talk to one of the shooters, and Zelda felt all the air rush out of her lungs, for there, behind Sheik, was the boy she’d struck with a door the other day.

Link… Aryll’s older brother. Oh Goddesses, what was he doing with the bad guys? Was he… Was he one of them?!

Of course, she found herself thinking despite herself, you meet a cute guy and he ends up being a homicidal maniac. Go figure.

"What's going on?" Sheik demanded, his voice hard and authoritative.

The wiry teen who’d kicked her, who she now noticed was wearing ‘Charles of Moria’ T-shirt (a complete disgrace to one of her sister’s favorite bands), shrugged nonchalantly and said, "Nothing much, just teaching them a lesson."

Link caught Zelda's eye over Sheik’s shoulder and mouthed 'you ok?'

She found it was all she could do to nod, relief pouring throughout her body like rain through a parched desert. Ok, maybe he wasn’t a killer after all… But then, what was he doing with Sheik? And why was there blood on his face?

Then again, there was blood on her face, too. Maybe she should stop leaping to conclusions.

"A lesson," Sheik replied, his tone flat. He turned and examined the huddled group of gun-toting males and hysterical girls through his pitiless red eyes before addressing the boy again.

"Tell me, Charles," he said, putting a great deal of disgust in the nickname, "do you remember what
Ganondorf said about the hostages?"

A couple of the guys who were leaning against the lockers shuffled nervously and looked away.

The boy scowled, apparently not liking that his authority was being questioned. "Yeah, so what?"

"So," Sheik replied, his voice taking on a dangerously soft quality, "how do you think Ganon's gonna feel when he hears he's got even less hostages than he had before because somebody decided to play teacher?"

To give the boy some credit, he at least attempted to return Sheik's glare, but meeting those ruby irises was like trying to stare down a gorgon. They were every bit as cold, harsh, and unyielding as stone. After a few seconds, the Charles of Moria boy let out a curse and tore his eyes away, casting around for a change of topic and finally noticed Link.

"…Who's he?"

"Ganondorf wants to see him."

"How come?"

"That's none of your concern. Now, how about you get back to your assigned posts?"

"What about the-?"

"Don't worry about them, I'll clean up your little mess. Now, go!"

With a murderous glare, Charles and the rest of the guys started shuffling back down the hallway toward the staircase, muttering under their breaths and shooting dark looks over their shoulders.

Zelda was stupefied. Had Sheik just delivered them from their captors? Was that even possible? What side was he on?!

A whimper drew Zelda out of her stunned reverie. Anju's face was paler than ever, her hands still clenched fitfully against her abdomen as her chest struggled to rise and fall. Her off-white shirt was now stained scarlet; the tiny pool of blood that had formed on the already filthy tile floor had now soaked through Zelda's jeans.

"Sheik!" Saria called out, agonized, the sheer volume of her voice after so much silence startling Zelda and making her jump, "Please, you have to help her! Anju got shot! She's not… she isn’t going make it…!"

She cut off, sounding strangled.

"Relax," Sheik replied, and all of a sudden, his voice was startlingly soothing and composed, "She's going to be fine, but we need to hurry."

"Wh… what?" Zelda breathed, staring in shock at the blond as he knelt gently in front of Anju and started examining the wound.

"I mean, I'm no doctor, but I don't think the bullet hit anything too important… Not that your intestines aren't important, but… It's too low on her stomach to have nicked her liver, and if it hit her kidney, there'd be more blood. Still, she's bleeding pretty bad and if we don't get her to the hospital soon, she's a goner."

Zelda couldn't speak. She felt like the world had turned on its head. Get her to a hospital? Was this
some sort of sick joke?! He was a bad guy! One of his partners was the one who shot Anju! Sheik was part of the reason they were in this situation in the first place!

"But Sheik, there are so many of them and all the entrances are blocked..." Malon whimpered, clinging to Saria's arm with one hand and stroking Anju's pale face with the other.

Sheik shook his head as he began ripping off the torn part of his sleeve. "Not true. I happen to know Darunia led a group of students to safety not too long ago from the kitchens. Also, the device planted above the exit in the gym didn't go off. All the exits are supposed to be guarded of course, but... well, they're not as organized as they'd like to think."

Zelda was about to bring into question how exactly he'd come across that knowledge and expose the truth about him to the group when Link spoke up.

"Wait, Darunia? He got everyone out?"

She had almost forgotten Link was even there. He looked horrible; dusty and out of breath with dried blood sprinkling his face and sweater, his hair in complete disarray. Zelda felt a small pang of compassion extend toward him upon seeing the gash on his forehead. She thought that she'd had it bad, but apparently, her day had nothing on Link's.

Before Sheik could answer, Saria's eyes suddenly grew wide and she blurted out a frantic, "Oh, Farore! Link! Link, they took Aryll!"

There was a pregnant pause in which the impact of her words seemed to reverberate back and forth across the lockers, ad infinitum. Link and Sheik merely stared at Saria, stupefied. After a moment Link managed to stammer out a weak, "W-what? Who... Where... Who took her? How long ago? Which way did they go?!"

But Saria had tears streaming down her cheeks again as she shook her head pathetically, too overcome with emotion to answer, "Link, I d-don't..."

"It was Sakon," Zelda cut in, taking up Saria's explanation. She finally pushed herself back up to a sitting position and met Link's frantic gaze, trying her best to sound calm and reassuring, "He's the one who shot Anju. Kafei chased him off, and I don't know where they went, but just before it happened, Sakon ordered one of those guys to take Aryll to Ganondorf. I don't know why, but... he did say they were supposed to make sure she wasn't harmed..."

She tacked the last part on to the end in the hopes that it might buoy Link up a little bit. It didn't. Link sagged to his knees, his eyes wide but blank, his expression lost.

"He got her..." he whispered to no one. "I... I didn't get to her in time..."

"I'm sorry..." Zelda said softly, feeling her heart go out to him. Saria broke down in silent sobs on Malon's shoulder.

"Enough!" Sheik spat, making everyone jump. "Link, pull yourself together man, this isn't over yet. He said she wasn't to be harmed, so we still have a chance. In the meantime, a girl is dying, and her life depends on us, so come on!"

"Well, what are we supposed to do?" Malon asked bitterly, glaring up at Sheik through red-rimmed eyes.

"I'll tell you what we're gonna do," Sheik replied, lifting Anju's hands to place the wad of ripped shirtsleeve over her wound. "We need to get Anju out of here ASAP, so four of you are going to
carry her while maintaining pressure over the bullet wound to slow the blood loss. Head to the 
kitchens; it may seem like there's an unlimited amount of maniacs with guns, but that's not true. Their 
resources are stretched thin as it is, so I doubt there will be anybody there since they're mostly 
concerned with guarding what few students they have left."

"Ok, but… who's gonna carry Anju?" Saria asked softly, smoothing Anju's sweaty bangs from her 
forehead.

"You and Malon," Sheik said, "and me and Link."

"Wait, what about Aryll?" Zelda cried, her heart hammering frantically at the thought of abandoning 
that sweet underclassman. "We can't just leave her behind!"

"We're not going to," Sheik answered patiently, letting his eerie red eyes meet Zelda's emotional 
violet ones. "Link and I will guide you to the kitchens, then go back and get her."

"But what if you don't have time!" she blurted out.

"We don't have a choice!"

"Yes, we do!" All of a sudden she felt bold. Aryll had been taken, and Zelda had done nothing to 
save her. She wasn't about to delay her rescue a moment longer, not when there was something she 
could do about it. "Look, we don't need you. There are enough of us to carry Anju and keep a 
lookout. You two go and find Aryll."

"But-"

"No buts! We can handle this!" Zelda glanced around and was surprised and relieved to find the 
same look of steely determination reflected in the eyes of the girls around her, even the ones with 
tears still rolling down their cheeks. Sheik looked doubtful, but Zelda wasn't taking no for an answer. 
"Go."

"She's right," Saria said, hastily wiping tears from her eyes. "Really, we've got this covered."

Sheik sighed heavily, looking like he wanted to argue some more but finally he gave in. "Alright, if 
you say so. Come on, let's get you ladies ready."

The rest of the girls flew into motion at once, all seemingly battling over the chance to be the one to 
carry Anju. She wasn’t sure if it was because they wanted to feel like they were doing something, to 
distract them from the very real possibility of being found and killed at any moment, or if they felt 
some sort of duty to the older girl and her boyfriend for helping them to get out of their prison. 
Whatever the case, they were eager to help.

Zelda, however, stepped away from the milling throng and approached the quiet boy who was 
leaning against the lockers.

"Hey…" She offered softly, unsure of what to say.

Link's gaze was still hollow with grief, but he looked at her and nodded briefly. "Hey."

"You ok?" She asked, feeling stupid as soon as the words left her mouth. Up close, she could see the 
cut on his forehead really wasn't that bad, it had just bled a lot because it was a head wound. Then 
again, that wasn’t really what she was talking about.
He let out a bitter snort and said, sarcasm dripping from his voice, "Oh yeah, I'm really great. I'm trapped inside a school full of homicidal maniacs and my little sister's just been kidnapped by my archenemy. I'm fantastic."

There was a pause as Zelda and Link each looked down at their shoes, unsure of what to say next.

"...I'm sorry." Zelda finally whispered.

He frowned. "For what?"

"For Aryll. She was taken, and I just... I just sat there like a lump and let it happen. I didn't even say anything, I just..." She took a deep, shuddering breath and willed herself not to cry again. Goddesses, this was getting pathetic... Hugging herself tightly in an effort to quell her shaking limbs, she turned away and tried to blink away her rapidly gathering tears.

"Zelda..." Link started, then sighed heavily. "Don't be stupid, it's not your fault. There was nothing you could have done anyway, and besides, you had Anju to look after. It's ok."

Zelda said nothing, still staring intently at the dingy lockers and trying hard to stop herself from trembling. Whether it was from despair or fear, she didn’t know, but it was infuriating and it needed to stop.

"Are you cold?" He asked out of the blue.

She blinked. "What? N-no, I'm just-"

"Here," he cut in, pulling his sweater off over his head and holding it out to her, revealing a rumpled T-shirt bearing the band name 'Skull Keeta'.

"Oh, Link, no, I don't need-"

"Take it," he said softly, pushing it into her arms. "It's a little too hot in this school for my liking anyway."

There was a pause in which Zelda stared into his pained-blue gray eyes before smiling slightly and whispering "Thank you."

He shrugged and looked away. "Um, yeah. No Problem. So... you should probably get going..."

Zelda swallowed and nodded. "Yeah. Ok."

There was another pause, then Link slowly turned and walked toward Sheik who was talking to Malon and Saria near Anju.

Before she knew what was happening Zelda found herself blurting out "Link, wait!"

He stopped and turned back, confused. "Um... yeah?"

"Just... Stay safe, ok?" She mumbled pathetically, inwardly chastising herself for sounding like an idiot. Really, had she never talked to a guy before? Though in her defense, she wasn’t exactly in a right state of mind and the two of them were practically strangers after all. He probably thought she was being weird. Nayru, she thought she was being weird!

He stared at her for a moment as though not sure what he was looking at, but then a moment later, a startlingly warm smile blossomed across his face.
"Only if you do," he said, and she was so taken aback by the sight of his smile that she momentarily forgot what he was talking about.

"Deal," she said, hoping he’d take the slight breathlessness in her voice for something other than what it was.

"Good. Then I’ll see you when this is all over."

He turned his back on her and continued on towards Sheik. It took her a second to realize she had a stupid grin on her face and hastily wiped it away.

Come on, Zelda, get a grip… It’s not like he meant… He didn’t mean that in any special way, he just…

Shaking her head roughly, Zelda tugged Link's sweater on over her head, poked her arms through the sleeves and pulling her long hair out of the hood. Though a little dusty and worn, it was warm and soft and smelled rather nice… She put that thought firmly out of her head and marched over to the others. Honesty, she could be such a girl sometimes…

Saria and Malon were carefully supporting Anju in their arms along with three other girls, one of whom was dutifully holding Sheik’s torn sleeve over Anju’s still-bleeding bullet wound. The injured girl looked paler than ever.

"Ready ladies?" She asked, trying her best to sound more confident than she felt, and the together they met her gaze and nodded. Apparently, she'd taken over as the leader now that Kafei was gone and Anju was out of commission. She didn't know exactly how she felt about that, but… well… Somebody had to do it.

Looking back, she gave one last thankful nod to Sheik and Link and received an encouraging smile from the latter in return.

Turning back to the girls, she motioned them to follow closely behind her, and together they headed off down the hall.

"Sir!"

Rusl turned away from the traumatized student he was interviewing with an impatient sigh.

"I believe I specifically asked not to be disturbed, Osfala."

The young officer swallowed nervously. "Uh, yes. Yes, you did, sir. It's just… Well, there's an elderly woman here causing a commotion, and-"

"And? Can you not handle one old lady, officer?" Rusl demanded, feeling his already brittle patience threatening to snap. "In case you hadn't noticed, we've got a bit of a situation here and I haven't the time to handle each and every random little distraction!"

"Sir, please," the officer pressed, sounding desperate, "she wouldn't take no for an answer. She said to tell you… t-to tell you, ah… 'If you don't march your skinny butt out to talk to her this instant, she's going to take a butcher knife, chop you into tiny pieces, and toss you into the Kakariko Well, so help her Farore.'"

There was a pause in which Osfala looked as though he were about to wet himself from sheer terror at what he’d just said, before tacking on belatedly, “Er, that was a direct quote.”
Rusl, who had been gaping stupidly at Osfala, shut his mouth with a snap and let out a low groan.

"Granny Hero…” He grumbled, snatching up his coffee and coat, preparing himself for the worst. "Take over for me here. And let me know if there's any more movement!"

"Yes, sir!" Osfala replied, saluting for no good reason, but Rusl was already hurrying off.

To say that the grounds around the school were busy was the epitome of understatement, but that didn't stop Rusl from getting frustrated as he was forced to shove his way through the mass of cops, EMTs, and news reporters. Honestly, as if he wasn’t dealing with enough already; the situation in the school hadn’t changed one whit in the past hour since the quarterback had led the heroic escape. There hadn't been any news at all, and no communication from the inside.

What was the most frustrating, however, was that he had absolutely no clue what this Ganondorf kid wanted. Why attack the school? Why was he holding kids hostage? And how in the Goddesses’ green earth did he manage to put together such a large group of assailants?! It defied all logical description.

School shootings were never this intricate, never this involved, and the perpetrators were usually emotionally unstable teenagers who ended their lives almost as quickly as the shootings begin. Clearly, Ganondorf wasn’t cut from the same cloth. The boy was many things; delusional, narcissistic, insane, bloodthirsty, but not emotional, not impulsive. He was cold, cruel, and calculating, and Rusl hated him all the more for it. He wasn't likely to make a mistake, and that meant Rusl couldn't afford to make one either.

When Rusl arrived at the edge of the parking lot, he wasn't surprised to find Granny Hero engaged in an intense standoff with three other officers. The disapproving glower that she normally reserved for only the most rambunctious of hooligans was so reminiscent of her granddaughter that he had to pause a moment to quell the rising sense of despair for the umpteenth time that morning. Anything that reminded him of his son tended to evoke that sort of response.

"…care about rules and regulations!” She was shouting energetically, displaying a remarkable amount of gusto for a woman her age. "You lot should be ashamed of yourselves! Taking it upon yourselves to accost a poor old lady; why, if my husband were still alive, I…! Rusl!"

Despite Rusl's obvious physical dominance over Granny Hero and the fact that, of the two of them, he was the only one currently carrying a weapon, Rusl still found himself flinching as the tiny woman directed her wrath in his direction.

"Rusl Smith, you cretin!" Grandma Hero bellowed in her scratchy yet still impressively loud voice as she brushed impatiently passed his officers and began hobbling in his direction.

Taking swift advantage of the momentary gap in her tirade, he turned towards the three baffled men and said, "I've got it from here. Get back to work."

"You!” Grandma cried in outrage, jabbing Rusl in the chest with a surprising amount of force. "You! You call me up, leave me the most terrifying message I've ever received in my life, and then refuse to answer my calls?! Do you have any idea what I've been through the last couple hours trying to get a hold of you?!"

"Mrs. Hero," Rusl said, putting his hands up in what he hoped was a pacifying gesture, but elderly woman bulldozed right over him.

"Of course not! It's been a nightmare, Rusl! A nightmare! You have no idea what it's like! I've been
reliving all the horrid moments of my life—the call I got when my sons were killed in Labrynna, when my daughter-in-law got in her car accident, when my husband got his diagnosis…” All at once she broke down, her domineering façade crumbling like a sandcastle before the evening tide, years of bottled pain she’d been so adept at hiding finally managing to burst through.

"I can’t… I can’t go through it again, Rusl, I just…”

Wordlessly, Rusl opened his arms and let the tiny woman fall into them.

"They… They're still in there, aren't they?" she managed to choke out between sobs.

The truth was, he didn’t know, but he decided to keep things optimistic. Choosing to believe Aryll and Link were dead meant believing the same could be true for Colin, and he refused to even consider the notion.

“Yes… Yes, they're still alive."

"And… And Colin?"

Rusl's throat caught painfully, and he was able to do little more than nod. He hoped she didn’t see his uncertainty.

They stood like that for a moment, clinging to each other as though they were lost at sea amidst a storm, Grandma Hero trembling uncontrollably in his arms, Rusl fighting in vain to keep his look of stoic calm firmly place, alone together in the back of the high school parking lot. A breeze rustled through the trees, making the branches sway and sending an icy wind slicing through their thin coats. Granny began trembling worse than ever.

"Listen," Rusl said gruffly, pausing for a moment to clear his throat, "why don't you go visit Uli. Neither of you should be alone right now, and you can bet you'll be the first to hear once we've got some news."

"Y-yes," Grandma Hero muttered, detangling herself from Rusl’s hug and wiping at her blotchy face. "Of course. Uli… she'll need company now while you're away. Of course I'll go, Rusl."

She glanced up wordlessly into the Chief of Police’s eyes for a moment before turning away jerkily and beginning to walk back towards the street where he assumed she'd parked her car.

"Granny, there's something you should know," Rusl blurted out before he could help it, surprising both the elderly Hero and himself. She stopped walking but didn't turn around.

"Yes?" She asked, sounding as though she was bracing herself for the absolute worst.

"About an hour ago, the quarterback led an escape from the school. He led a good dozen students or so to safety."

He hesitated before continuing, not sure if it was wise to get her hopes up when in reality, the very worst was still very much a reality.

"When we interviewed him, he… He told me that he'd been rescued. He said that… that Link saved his life and the other students as well, and that it was because of Link that they were even able to escape at all."

Grandma Hero’s entire body had gone completely rigid, though without seeing her face Rusl couldn’t tell what kind of effect this news was having on her.
"The boy, Darunia, told me that Link refused to escape with them. He told him that he refused to leave the school without his little sister."

The wind blew once again, but this time from the opposite direction, catching him beneath the arms as though trying to lift him into the air. Rather than the piercing chill he’d experienced before, this wind carried a subtle warmth, the promise of the approaching spring.

Grandma Hero’s body seemed to sway with the trees as the wind blew past her, all the rigidity leaving her frame. Slowly, and with a surprising smile, she turned to Rusl and murmured softly, "Of course he did. Did you really expect anything less?"

With one last nod of farewell, the older woman turned and shuffled off.

"So…” Sheik drawled languidly as he and Link traipsed slowly down the second-floor hallway, casting around awkwardly for a topic to ease the tension that lay thick in the air. "What's the story with you and that girl?"

Link shot Sheik a bemused look. "What girl?"

"You know, that pretty blonde one. The one you gave your sweater to. Grade-A move, by the way, very Prince Charming."

"What? No, that wasn't- Ugh, look, nothing’s going on, alright? She’s just some new girl I met yesterday and she looked cold."

Link was running his fingers through his hair in frustration, a sure sign that Sheik had poked a nerve. Sheik chuckled, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans in a faux-casual manner. "Right. Cause you let random people borrow your favorite sweater all the time."

"Sheik…” Link grumbled warningly.

"Dude, just admit that you think she's hot. You don’t gotta be embarrassed, this isn’t mid school. It's not like I’m gonna tell her or something-"

"Is now really the time to be talking about this?" Link cut off darkly.

Sheik sobered up in an instant. "Right. Sorry, I… uh, forget it."

The truth was, he knew it was insane to start teasing his friend about something as absolutely pointless as a high school crush, but… lightly teasing Link just felt so… normal. Comfortingly so. And he missed normal; he felt like it had been years since he and Link had ribbed one another, even though it can’t have been more than a week or two at best.

And in a weird way, a part of him wanted to keep teasing Link about stupid, pointless things. Because as long as he was focusing on that, he could distract himself from anything else.

“Anyway, what do you think?"

"Think about what?" Link snapped.

"About Aryll. About getting her out of here. That is our goal, right? Get her, get Midna, get out."

Sheik took a few more steps before realizing Link wasn't following him. He’d stopped dead in his tracks and was staring slack-jawed at the ceiling. Turning back, Sheik cocked his head to the side
and said, "Uh… Link? You alright?"

"Midna!" he exclaimed, slapping his hand to his forehead in shock. "I forgot all about her! She’s here?! Where is she? Is she alright? Was she-"

"Whoa, whoa, Link chill," Sheik said, waving his hands in the air. "She's fine. She's locked up in the computer lab in the Library. Ganondorf…" He cleared his throat roughly, feeling awkward bringing up that his involvement with the one in charge of the shooting, "Ganondorf told me I could only save one person in exchange for my… you know, so… I picked Midna. She's fine. We'll be able to swing by and get her as soon as we think of a way to get Aryll out."

Link let out a heavy, relieved sigh, but then paused and shot Sheik an odd look, "Wait, hold up… why’d you pick Midna?"

Sheik scowled defensively, not making eye-contact. "What do you mean, why Midna? You think I should've picked you?"

Link snorted. "As much as I’d appreciate the confirmation that our bromance was mutual, no, that’s not what I meant. It’s just, y’know, interesting is all…"

"What about that could possibly be interesting?" Sheik asked bluntly, shooting his idiotic best friend an irritated look.

Link was smirking coyly. "Nothin’, just… well, Midna’s kinda cute, isn’t she?"

Sheik rolled his eyes. He would go there…

"You're such a douche. I thought we said this wasn't the time for that crap."

Link sighed again. "Well, alright then, Bourne, tell me. How do we get Aryll out? We don't even know where she is."

It was Sheik's turn to smirk. He held up his fingers and counted them off, adopting a lecturing tone. "First, we do know where she is. Principal's office, third floor. Second, never fear my friend, for I do have a plan. And third, I'm not Bourne; we're not playing assassin. If anything, this is Ocean's Eleven."

"Yeah, but that makes you George Clooney, which means I’m Brad Pitt."

"What's wrong with George Clooney?"

"Nothing. I just don't want to be Brad Pitt."

"What's wrong with Brad Pitt?"

"He's such a pretty boy!"

"You could always be Bernie Mac."

"Ok, can we get back on topic here. How do we get her out?" Link shouted, bringing them both back to reality.

"Well… ok, here's what we do," Sheik said, stopping at an adjoining hall and checking to make sure nobody was within hearing range. "Ganondorf took Aryll up to the third floor, and he's holding her hostage. Think, Link - why would Ganondorf want Aryll?"
Link scowled. "What? How in Din’s name should I know?"

Sheik rolled his eyes. "Come on, man, this isn’t that complicated. Who would taking Aryll piss off most?"

"I dunno, Granny? Colin…? Me, obviously, and."

"There. You. You more than anyone else."

"Me?" Link asked, perplexed, "Why would Ganondorf want to piss me off?"

"Come on, Link. We know Ganon's got some sort of plan, but we don't know what it is. What we do know is that he's taken a special interest in kidnapping your sister, and we also know that you and Ganondorf have a history."

Sheik could see the sudden understanding dawning in Link's eyes. "Oh, Din… You think he kidnapped Aryll so he could mess with me? But… that means that any attempt to get her out would be playing directly into his hands!"

"Not exactly," Sheik said slowly, and Link growled in frustration.

"Well, come on Clooney, what is it? What does he want?"

"Look, Ganondorf doesn't know where you are. For all he knows, you're holed up in some class somewhere, cowering like everyone else. If this were the case, you'd have no way of knowing he'd taken Aryll until someone told you."

"And?" Link asked, clearly impatient.

"I know Ganon's been working on getting the security cameras up and running. I also think he was doing something with the TVs."

"TVs?"

"The ones that tell the time and junk, the ones hanging in all the classrooms," Sheik said impatiently, and Link nodded in understanding.

"Are you going to get to the point or not?"

"What I'm saying," Sheik replied impatiently, "is this: I have good news. I think Ganondorf wants to bait you, and I think he wants to exact his revenge on you by doing something to your sister, and I think he's going to broadcast it around the school on those TVs."

Link looked positively horrified. "How…?! What…?! How is that good news?!"

"Because!" Sheik exclaimed, throwing his hands up in the air. "He's not ready yet! We have a window of opportunity! They're short staffed, and he'll have to oversee a few things himself, meaning-"

"Meaning we'll have a chance to get her out before this happens!" Link replied, understanding blossoming in his eyes coupled with momentary relief that crumpled suddenly when his face fell again. "But… There'll be guards, Sheik. He's not just gonna leave a prisoner alone."

"You're forgetting one thing, mate." Sheik intoned with a lopsided grin.

"That… you're Captain Jack Sparrow?"
"No. Dude, I'm one of them! Not only that, I've got authority! The little people have to listen to me! We march up there, I demand they let her go, and you and I waltz on out of here with your sister in tow like a gay couple picking up an adopted child from a daycare!"

"Sheik… I don't think they're just gonna give up their prisoner that easily."

Sheik waved off Link’s concern without hesitation. “Whatever, I'll just say we're moving the prisoner to the computer lab with Midna or something. That way, we can swing by and pick her up, too.”

"What about me? Won't it seem odd that I’m tagging along with you?"

"Nah. You'll be my prisoner."

Link looked less than thrilled with that idea until Sheik said softly, "Dude… I think it's our only shot."

Link took a deep, steadying breath, then let it out in a rush. "Alright. This is stupid and suicidal, but whatever. Anything to save Aryll. Lead on, Clooney."

"Aye aye, Bernie."

"I'm not Bernie Mac!"

"Are you sure you ok?"

"Zelda-"

"Because I can take over if I need to. Or one of the other girls. Just let me know if one of you is getting tired, and we can definitely switch-"

"Zelda!" Malon blurted out in exasperation, "We're fine! Anju doesn't weigh a thing, now come on!"

"Sorry!" Zelda groaned anxiously. "Ok, come on, the hall's clear, let's move."

Their procession went as follows: Zelda out in front, checking the halls ahead for movement. Directly behind her, the girls whose arms formed Anju's makeshift litter followed at a lumbering pace, trying hard to simultaneously hurry so that they didn’t get caught and move slowly so as not to jostle their precious cargo.

Malon and Saria were both supporting Anju's upper torso, with her head resting on Malon's forearm, putting them closest to Zelda, which helped to reassure her somewhat. The rest of the girls followed behind, checking their trail and generally trying not to descend into mass hysteria.

Thankfully, they weren't that far from the kitchens, having already been on the ground floor. Unfortunately, that didn't help ease Zelda's nerves at all. After Link and Sheik had disappeared back upstairs, she’d felt noticeably less calm about the entire situation and it didn't help that she as though she’d taken responsibility for the lives of the girls who followed behind her. For some reason, she'd become the unofficial leader ever since demanding that Sheik and Link go search for Aryll, a decision she was beginning to regret more and more with every corner they approached and every new opportunity that they might get caught.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity of agonizing sneaking around but which couldn't have been more than a minute tops, they arrived at the cafeteria.
"Ok," Zelda breathed bracingly, "this is it. We're almost there. Just… wait for me to give the all-clear then head to the kitchen, but don't come in till I check in there too, ok?"

Malon and Saria nodded in assent, and with a hesitant gulp that she hoped nobody heard, Zelda slowly crept forward.

To her immense relief, the cafeteria was abandoned. Maybe it was because it was too open and didn’t exactly provide a strategic place to defend yourself, but there was nobody in sight, be they helpless student or attacker. She could see from here that the single exit to the front patio was a crumpled mass of bricks and shrapnel. A few solitary rays of sunlight were peering through the cracks, but aside from dust motes, nothing could fit through them. There was still the matter of the staircase that led up to the second-floor balcony, but she couldn't see the top of it from her vantage point. She supposed that somebody could be waiting there, keeping watch, but if she couldn't see them they couldn't see her, so as long as they were quiet, things ought to be fine.

With a heavy breath, Zelda waved to the girls in the hall before starting towards the kitchen, her footsteps echoing in the silence.

She stopped just before the door to peer through the small circular window. Nobody… well, nobody she could see, that is. Hand trembling, she cautiously pushed the door open.

There was an ominous creak that made her heart leap into her throat, but other than the buzzing of appliances and fluorescent lighting, no other sound could be heard.

The kitchen looked virtually undisturbed; no signs of violence or aggression. All of the cafeteria workers seemed to have escaped before being captured, and Zelda felt an irrational surge of loathing and jealousy towards them for it.

Turning around, she let out an embarrassing yelp before realizing that the figure standing behind her was Saria.

"The coast clear?" the green-haired girl whispered breathlessly.

"I… yeah, I think so. Get the others."

With a curt nod, Saria darted back to the cafeteria. Zelda took a deep breath to calm her erratic heart before walking deeper into the kitchen. When the door swung shut behind Saria, she felt like she was trapped in a museum. The silence was loud and unbearably oppressive. She waited there in isolation until she heard the rapidly shuffling footsteps of the girls carrying Anju, then hurried to grab the door.

"Zelda!" Malon squealed in barely-suppressed excitement once the girls arrived, though she was clearly winded from carrying Anju, "We made it! We're almost there! Quick, where's the back door?"

"It's over there," Zelda answered, feeling the exhilaration coursing through her veins. They were almost out! This nightmare was almost over…!

For them, at least. Not for Link, or Aryll, or Kafei, or Sheik, or Midna… No, there was no time to waste worrying about them. There was nothing she could do for them, and right now, Anju, Saria, Malon, and the other girls needed her.

"Come on!" Saria cheered, and together the girls moved toward the back of the kitchen. The back door was situated between a large stainless steel dishwashing sink and what appeared to be a jumbo espresso machine. This door had a square, rather filthy window on it, and Zelda quickly darted
forward to peer through the foggy plastic window pane to get a glimpse of what awaited them outside.

"What do you see?" one of the girls standing in the back asked impatiently.

"Police," Zelda replied. "Tons of them. I think they've circled the school. There are flashing lights everywhere."

"And? Is there anyone in the way?"

"No… I think it's a straight shot to them, across the pavement. The gate's on the left!" Zelda could almost taste freedom, it was so close…!

Stepping back to let the makeshift litter through first, she cried, "Ok! Anju first, let's go!"

"I wouldn't do that."

Everybody froze.

"I would simply hate to have to shoot one of you lovely ladies. Prisoner escapes just aren't very becoming of a young woman, you see."

Rigidly, Zelda turned to face the source of the voice and felt her stomach drop out.

There, standing behind them, was yet another boy from the graveyard that morning. The one who was obsessed with purple. She didn't even bother trying to remember his name; her mind had become paralyzed with fear.

He stepped forward slowly, letting the door to the cafeteria swing closed behind him with another pained creak. The grin on his pallid face was purely condescending; clearly, it amused him that he'd managed to catch them at the last possible moment.

"W-what…" Zelda tried to ask, her throat painfully dry, "How…?"

The boy let out a derisive snort. "Oh, please. You left a trail of blood all the way down the hall. How could I not find you?"

The lavender boy was still stalking forward, gradually closing the distance between himself and the gaggle of would-be escapees. Zelda found herself moving to stand directly in front of the espresso machine in order to risk a quick glance over her shoulder. The girls had frozen in shock directly in front of the door, with Saria's hand laying limply on the handle. Farore, they were so close…!

"Don't even think about it," their assailant barked as though reading her mind. "You'd be dead before you took your first step, and then who would save your poor little friend?"

Something erupted inside of Zelda then; a white-hot flame of rage and hate, licking at her insides. They were so close, so Din blasted close to escaping, to being free, to saving Anju… And now at the last moment, she's stopped by him? The purple midget wonder? No. She wasn't going to fail again. She couldn't save Aryll, but she was going to save Anju, no matter what it took.

And suddenly, it hit her. She knew what she had to do.

"Aw, what's wrong, princess?" the boy taunted snidely. Under the pretense of averting her gaze from his own, Zelda turned her head and made eye contact with Saria, trying desperately to somehow communicate with her through her eyes.
Amazingly, her message came through, and Saria's hand tightened on the doorknob.

"Really, you shouldn't frown so much, you'll get wrinkles on that pretty face of-"

"Now!" Zelda shouted, and as Saria shoved the door open and the group of girls surged out into the sunlight, Zelda did perhaps the craziest thing she'd ever done in her entire life; she tackled the boy with the gun.

Thankfully, she had the element of surprise on her side. The boy's eyes went wide in shock as Zelda's form crashed into him like a linebacker, knocking them both to the floor, the arm holding the gun trapped beneath her weight.

"Go! Go! Go!" she shouted repeatedly, and to her relief, over the frightened screams of the other girls, she heard the sound of stampeding footsteps and the rusty squeal of the back door closing.

"No!" the purple boy bellowed in outrage, smashing his fist into Zelda's eye and effectively knocking her off of him, but it was too late. By the time he'd managed to scramble back to his feet, the girls were out the door and long gone.

Zelda, her cheek throbbing, lunged forward toward the door on her hands and knees, desperate to join them, but before she could make it more than a couple of feet she felt the boy's foot slam into her side.

She was knocked to the ground again with a wail, and through tears of pain, she watched the boy, his face contorting with rage, point the gun directly at her face, his whole body quaking.

"You know," he seethed breathlessly, "there's nothing I'd love more than to kill you right now. Unfortunately, it would seem we have a shortage of prisoners. Instead, I'll just have to take you to Ganondorf and let him decide what to do with you."

Already, Zelda could tell she'd rather be dead.
"Do you seriously have to keep doing that?"

"Dude, you're supposed to be my prisoner. We gotta look the part."

"I thought that was what the duct tape was for."

"Yeah, but we can't take any chances, now can we?"

Deep down, Sheik had to admit – a part of him was really enjoying this. With barely suppressed glee, he dug the gun into Link’s back with a bit more force and barked "Keep moving!" in his most authoritative voice.

"You're getting some sort of sick pleasure out of this, aren't you?"

"Who, me? Never!" Sheik quipped.

"If we get out of this alive, I'm going to kill you…" Link muttered darkly, glowering over his shoulder.

"Isn’t that a touching sentiment. I feel so loved." And on that sanctimonious note, the duo arrived at the top of the stairs and turned to walk down the short, garishly lit hallway toward the main office.

"Alright, remember the game plan," Sheik whispered fervently as they drew near their destination, thankful the tall glass windows on either side of the door had their blinds drawn. “I take you in, we get Aryll, and leave. You don't make a sound, ok? You're supposed to be a prisoner. Hopefully, and if Nayru's in a good mood, all should be well."

"And… If Nayru’s not in a good mood?" Link asked, clearly trying to hide his unease.

"Then we wing it," Sheik said simply.

"We wing it?"

"Yeah. Like in that one cowboy movie. You be Jackie Chan, and I'll be Owen Wilson."

"Dude, enough with the movie references! Seriously, we could die in the next couple of minutes!"

Sheik sighed and turned to face his panicked best friend. Truth be told, he was terrified, too, and of more than just potentially dying. Thoughts of his connection to the shooting, of his part in planning it, and the guilt that invoked weighed heavily on his conscience, but he pushed the guilt away, ignoring it, focusing on anything else instead.

He’d helped save Anju, hadn’t he? He wasn’t all bad. He wasn’t like… like the others. And now, he was helping to save Aryll, and once he got her and Link and Midna out, then everything would be ok. Everything would… go back to the way it was before. It would. It had to.

The guilt rushed in again and he shook it off desperately, focusing instead on his best friend and the look of anxiety on his face.

"Link, calm down. Remember why we're doing this. Aryll is in there. Aryll, your little sister, is in trouble and she needs your help."
Link swallowed gruffly. "Yeah… you're right… Ok, yeah, let's do this."

"Alright," Sheik said, pushing Link forward the last few steps to the door, "Let's go."

"Wait, one more thing." Link blurted out quickly, turning back to Sheik.

"What?!"

"Why do you get to be Owen Wilson?"

Sheik couldn't help letting loose a snort of laughter. "Because. I have the gun."

Reaching his hand over Link's shoulder and making sure that his gun was still pressed firmly into his back for dramatic effect, Sheik knocked on the door.

To his immense displeasure, his hands were shaking. His fake confidence could only get him so far, it seemed. He was relying on terrible jokes and movie references too much; Link had to know he was forcing it, trying to pretend to be normal again, but his façade was starting to crack. If he could just maintain this illusion for just a little while longer...

With a gush of conditioned air, the door swung inward and they were met with the pale face of the guard.

"Sheik," the boy intoned dully, nodding in greeting, his spiky Mohawk standing out dramatically.

"Grog," Sheik replied, keeping his tone curt. "I've got-"

"The girl's brother, yes," Grog cut in in his omnipresent monotone before Sheik could finish, "Ganondorf will be pleased. He's waiting in his office."

Sheik felt his blood run cold. Great. Apparently, Nayru was not in a good mood after all. Ganondorf was here… Well, he knew it was a long-shot, but he could still feel the familiar pangs of despair sweeping over him. How were they gonna save Aryll now? For that matter, how was he gonna save Link?

"You've got good timing. He was about to call you. He says you've got a problem."

"Uh… Great." Sheik said, trying hard not to lose his cool. "I'll just take him in then."

It took a bit of prodding with the pistol, but Sheik eventually managed to get Link to move forward. His footsteps were stiff and jerky and his face had gone unnaturally pale.

The office still looked pretty much the same as it did every other day of the week, sans the receptionists. In their place were Grog and two other guys who were crashing on the overly-starched couches in the corner.

The office contained only one other door which led to the faculty meeting room, as well as a narrow hallway which led to the offices for the Principal, Vice Principal, and a small storage room. Sheik could see through the window of the meeting room that the vending machines had long since been broken into and raided.

"You know where he is," Grog said simply, shutting the door behind them with a soft snap. With a wordless nod, Sheik urged Link on ahead of him.

The hallway was short so there wasn't another opportunity to talk, but then what could Sheik have said anyway? 'Hey man, sorry the plan backfired. Good luck not getting killed!' That hardly seemed
appropriate.

From the door of the storage room, Sheik could hear the muffled sobs of the secretary and the vice principal. Or at least, he assumed it was them. He knew Principal Sahasrahla and Officer Viscen were already dead, but he didn’t know if Ganondorf had decided to end the women since last he’d been here.

Sheik paused for a moment in front of the principal's office and turned to Link. They couldn't say anything without being overheard, but Sheik tried to communicate some of his sorrow and apology through his eyes.

Honestly, inside, Sheik felt numb. Seeing Midna and fighting with Link in the hallway had jostled him pretty good inside, and he felt like his eyes were opening for the first time in weeks, but his mind was still hazy… He didn’t care about the shooting or Ganondorf’s plans any longer, and he wanted no part in them. Right now, all he wanted was to run away and take his friends with him. As for the rest of the school...

To his surprise, Link shook his head, his eyes looking fierce and determined. 'This is it,' he was saying, 'No regrets, no turning back.'

With a resigned sigh, Sheik once again reached up to knock on the door.

"Who is it?" Came a plain, level voice from inside the room.

Sakon… Sheik mentally cursed.

"Sheik," he replied, willing his voice to be cold and composed. "I've got a prisoner for Ganondorf."

"Come in."

This second voice was loud and dominant; Ganondorf.

With a deep, steadying breath, Sheik pushed the door open.

Ganondorf sat languidly in the principal's office chair, his legs propped up on the desk, fiddling with a computer on his lap. When Link entered the room, his eyes seemed to sparkle malevolently in the dim lighting. Link returned his gaze with obvious contempt.

To their right Sakon stood against the wall, awkwardly trying to bandage his bleeding arm with his left hand. There was a large bloodstain on the center of the floor as well as the broken remains of a police issue walkie-talkie, but aside from that, the room looked unchanged.

"What happened to you?" Sheik asked before he could stop himself, regarding Sakon's arm with amusement.

"I could ask you the same thing," he replied coolly. Sheik stared, not understanding, until he remembered the bloodstains on his shirt and his torn sleeve.

"This one put up a fight," He said, shoving Link forward.

"Too much for you to handle, Sheik?" Sakon asked sarcastically.

Sheik was about to shoot back an insult when Ganondorf spoke up.

"Well well, Link Hero…” he murmured softly, setting the laptop up on the desk and placing his feet back on the floor, leaning forward intently. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"
"Ganondorf," Link spat back in response, his face twitching.

"You know, I have someone here who's been dying to see you. Ugly little runt; I can see the family resemblance."

"You let her go!" Link roared, suddenly losing his composure, his arms straining against his duck tape binding. "This is between you and me, keep her out of it!"

Ganondorf snorted, clearly entertained by his outburst. "You took years of my life away, Hero. It's only fair that I take something of yours."

Link let out a vicious snarl, but Ganondorf turned away from him dismissively to regard Sheik. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest as he mentally willed Link to cool it; angering Ganondorf wasn't going to help them get out of here.

"Sheik, you've done well," Ganondorf said, his eyes flashing with amusement at some secret joke, "but I'm afraid we have a small problem with our previous arrangement."

"I… don't understand," he said slowly.

"You asked me to spare your friend Midna, and I allowed you to stash her in the computer lab so that she'd stay out harm's way. However, it would seem that she's taken it upon herself to stage an elaborate escape attempt."

"She… she got out?" Sheik's voice sounded strange and distant in his ears.

"Yes," Ganondorf replied simply, and it became obvious to Sheik that he was enjoying the panic that was coursing through his subordinate. "See for yourself."

He swiftly turned the laptop to face him. There, on the screen, was a miniature black and white video clip which clearly displayed Midna creeping slowly down the hallway, Linebeck the janitor close behind her.

The surveillance cameras… Ganondorf had got them working? Did… did that mean that… he saw Sheik helping Saria and Malon?

"And, it would seem that she, along with that oaf of a janitor, are attempting to free the student's trapped in the gymnasium."

Sheik swallowed thickly, forcing his fear behind him and focusing on the here and now. "So… then I'll just go grab her again, and this time I'll put her somewhere she can't get out."

"Mmm," Ganondorf grunted, smirking. "See that you hurry. I've got Zant positioned in the gymnasium, and you know how he detests disturbances."

Sheik felt his heart stop cold. Zant? And Midna? Together?

He didn't even so much as glance at his friend on his way out; Link was on his own now, and there was nothing he could do to help him. He didn't even have time to feel sorry about it. The only thing he saw now was stopping Zant from hurting Midna. Nothing else mattered.

Sheik fled from the office, Ganondorf's booming laughter hot on his heels.

At the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps echoing around the corner, Ashei found herself freezing in terror.
Casting about desperately with her eyes, she noticed the door to a supply closet on her left. Seizing the back of Shad's collar, she quickly jerked him inside the small dark room, grateful it was unlocked, leaving the door cracked ever so slightly so she could keep watch.

Come to think of it, this was the second unlocked closet she'd hidden in today. What was Linebeck even doing?

With a startled wail, Shad stumbled forward in the semi-darkness and crashed noisily into a shelf full of cleaning products.

"What was that for?" he squawked indignantly, grabbing hastily at bottles that had toppled over, their contents spilling onto the grimy tiled floor, filling the confined space with their acrid scent.

"Shh!" Ashei hissed, waving frenetically over her shoulder for him to shut up. "Someone's coming!"

"Can you see who it is?" he whispered, suddenly tense as he straightened his glasses and stepped closer to her, wiping his hands on his pants.

"They're not here yet," she growled in frustration, peeking out into the empty hallway.

They stood there for a moment, two teens hunched over awkwardly together in the tiny closet, silently gagging on the cloying scent of the cleaner that puddled at their feet, gradually beginning to burn their eyes and noses. Squinting out into the hall beyond, she could hear nothing but their own panting breaths and the rapidly approaching footsteps.

All at once they came into view, and Ashei gasped.

"What? What is it?" Shad whispered frantically, silently trying to angle himself around her to get a better glimpse out the door.

"It's Vaati! We found him! And he's got a student!"

Shad cursed, stunning Ashei; she'd never heard him do that before. She didn't even know he knew how. "He already got the kid he was looking for?! Well, how are we supposed to save him?"

"Her," Ashei corrected automatically, "and I think I have a plan…" Vaati and the blonde girl he was escorting were rapidly drawing closer and she only had a moment before they'd pass her. Nayru, please let this work…

"Stay here, wait for your opportunity, then jump him!" she ordered quickly, ignoring his incredulous splutter before opening the door and dramatically stepping out into the open.

Vaati stopped dead in his tracks, clearly startled. The girl, whoever she was, lifted her head and regarded her with defeated curiosity.

She looked a little worse for the wear; her clothing ruffled, her hair all over the place, and her eyes bloodshot as though she'd recently been crying. She was clutching her stomach fitfully as though it were in pain, despite the fact that her hands had been bound with duct tape, and the bottom portion of her jeans were stained dark red. Was that… blood…?

Vaati recovered from his surprise quickly and turned the gun from the girl to Ashei. "Who are you? Why aren't you in a classroom?"

"I…" Ashei was having trouble thinking straight; those cleaner fumes really must have gotten to her. She knew she somehow needed to get Vaati between her and the closet so that Shad could attack
him from behind. It was the only way she could think of at the moment to get him to drop the gun so they could escape with the girl. Not the best plan, admittedly, and one that was likely to fail what with Shad doing the attacking, but her befuddled brain wasn't capable of creating a better one on such short notice. In retrospect, she should have made Shad be the one to be the distraction, but she couldn’t be certain that he'd be able to pull it off.

"Just… Shut up and get over there!" Vaati demanded, gesturing to the wall opposite her with his gun. Oh, Din, this was perfect! He was playing right into her plans!

Silently praising the Goddesses, she made sure to carefully mask her glee. She turned and slowly walked across the hallway, trying hard not to slip on the slimy residue that had stuck to the bottom on her shoes, and placed her hands on the wall like she'd seen criminals do on Law and Order.

Ok, Shad, she instructed mentally, trying to keep her thoughts in order as Vaati cautiously approached her from behind, clearly trying to keep both her and the girl in his line of sight, now's your chance… don't mess this up…

…any time now…

…please?

With a frustrated hiss, Ashei turned to glance over her shoulder, startled at the wave of dizziness that swept over her. Vaati was fumbling through the large pocket on the front of his lavender sweater, perfectly positioned for Shad to make his move, and yet the door remained closed. She could see the tiny puddle of cleaner leaking out through the bottom of the door, but other than that, there was no movement.

I swear, she thought viciously, turning back to scowl at the wall, if he's decided to climb back into that air vent…

Vaati suddenly let out an annoyed sigh that had her attention immediately. Holding up what appeared to be a nearly exhausted roll of duct tape in one hand, he turned to her with a wry smile and said, "Well… Looks like tying you up is out of the question."

Ashei scowled darkly. Tie her up? Oh, if that little runt thought he could even so much as lay a hand on her, she was going to-!

"I guess Ganondorf will merely have to accept the fact that sometimes, casualties are to be expected."

Ashei’s mind went blank with shock as the meaning of his words washed over her. She opened her mouth to protest, but oddly, no air was passing through her throat. It was as if all of her words had been trapped within her chest, which now felt oddly constricted.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the blonde girl’s eyes widen, horrified, and her mouth open as if to call out a warning, but everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. Leisurely, almost painfully so, the gun rose from his side to point at her chest…

There was a cough from the closet.

Vaati twitched his head to the side and glanced over his shoulder, but still, the door remained closed.

"So… you are not alone. Funny. I never really pegged you as a team player, Ashei."

Ashei couldn't even muster the energy to respond to his quip. Her legs were wobbling unsteadily, and she was still having trouble forcing herself to breathe. But for the life of her, she couldn’t
understand why Shad wasn't coming out.

"No matter," he said, shrugging as he turned back to face her. "What is another casualty in the grand scheme of things? I will be sure to end their life next, no need to worry."

There was another cough from the closet, this one more of a hacking fit, but Ashei no longer cared. *That bloody coward*… she thought weakly, turning from the wall to face Vaati. She'd given up hope of being saved by Shad, given up hope of making it out of that goddess-forsaken school alive. She was done. This was it.

Her last thought before closing her eyes was that she couldn't believe she was being done in by a runt like Vaati…

With a resounding crash, the closet door burst open, finally, revealing a red-faced Shad who was grabbing at his chest, coughing wetly, clutching in his hands a sodden rag of all things and emitting a wave of noxious fumes that made Ashei's head spin.

"What-" Vaati managed to utter, turning his head to the sound, his face contorting as the chemical smell washed over him, but he was cut off as with a roar that sounded more like an almighty croak, Shad threw himself slipping and sliding at the purple-haired boy.

The dripping rag was somehow forced over Vaati's mouth from behind with Shad's left hand while his right groped for the gun. In a stunned stupor, Ashei watched dumbly from the sidelines feeling like a spectator as Shad and Vaati tussled before her, Shad's face red from the effort of keeping the rag pressed over Vaati's mouth and nose while simultaneously trying in vain to catch the gun that Vaati inexplicably managed to keep just out of his grasp, Shad coughing roughly all the while.

Vaati's face was also beginning to turn red, though for him it was likely out of rage. His right arm was flailing about wildly, trying to keep the gun out of Shad's grasp. His other hand was groping blindly behind him, clawing for Shad's face. All the while, both boys were slipping on the greasy floor, trying to keep their footing through the ever-expanding puddle of cleaner.

Vaati suddenly whipped his head back violently and with a dull crack, she heard Shad's nose break, sending little drops of blood spattering everywhere. To Shad's credit, he miraculously managed to keep the rag pressed over Vaati's mouth, but he let go of Vaati's gun arm as he staggered backward, losing his balance and slipping on the wet floor, dragging Vaati down on top of him.

There was an ear-splitting bang that was swallowed by the agonized scream that tore itself form Ashei’s throat, white-hot pain lancing through her thigh, her vision going momentarily white. When next she opened her eyes she was laying on the floor, not knowing how she got there, both hands clutching fitfully at her left leg as she stared through blurry, tear-filled eyes at the red that was now blossoming through her jeans.

The pain was like nothing she had ever felt before; it was as though someone had stabbed a red-hot knife into her leg, straight into the bone, and had decided to twist it around in circles for the fun of it. Willing herself not to scream out again, she clenched her eyes shut and bit her lip so hard she drew blood, aware that despite her best efforts, tears and sobs were still leaking out of her.

After a moment, she realized she couldn't hear any other sounds. Wrenching her eyes open and blinking through the tears, she could see the crumpled mass that was Vaati and Shad lying in the middle of the floor; Vaati completely still, his face white as a sheet and his eyes rolled back into his head, Shad struggling to rise, still coughing intensely.

When his eyes fell on her they bulged, and he scrambled on hands and knees across the slippery
"Ashei!" he gasped, his voice sounding raspy and hoarse. "What- *cough cough* -happened?
*Cough* Are you- *cough*- …can you-?"

"What do you think happened?" she managed to cut in, snarling weakly, only now realizing how short of breath she was. "Maybe if someone had decided to help me out a little sooner…"

"I couldn't," he started, shaking his head anxiously before he was seized by another coughing fit. "You don't realize what you-*cough cough*-did when you shoved me-*cough*- into the closet! Those cleaners we spilled…"

This time he doubled over, clutching his knees with knuckles that were white from strain as he apparently attempted to hack up his lung, though the rest of his hands seemed to be red and puffy. His face was covered in blood that was still gushing from his swollen nose, and his glasses were snapped clean in two and hanging from one ear. All in all, he looked about as bad as her leg currently felt.

"Um… excuse me…” came a timid voice from over Shad's shoulder, and for the first time, Ashei remembered that there had been another girl there the entire time.

"If you cut my hands free, I think I can help you…” she said, gesturing lamely with her hands that were still bound together with duct tape, though the tips of her fingers could still wiggle with some freedom.

"Oh!" Shad gasped, rising up on unsteady legs. "Right. Of course. Um…*cough* There ought to be something in that closet that I can use… *cough cough* If you wouldn't mind getting it while I move Ashei away from the stuff on the floor. Also, don't-*cough*-breathe while you're in there. The air is toxic right now."

Both the girl and Ashei sent Shad peculiar looks, but before she could question him he'd seized her by her arms and started dragging her backward.

The sudden movement of her injured leg sent bolts of pain arching up her leg and made her whimper in the most pathetic way imaginable, but at the moment she couldn't care less about her image; she had a freaking bullet in her leg, for Din's sake!

Still, it irked her when Shad sent her that apologetic look. She didn't need pity from some geek, especially not one who had decided to wait before coming to her rescue at the last possible moment…

By the time the girl had returned with a pair of scissors pinched carefully in her fingertips and a first aid kit she must have found in the closet tightly wedged between her stomach and her arms, Shad had managed to take her a good twelve yards or so down the hall, well away from the closet and the scent of cleaner and leaving an impressive trail of blood from her leg in their wake, as well as splattered droplets from Shad's ruined nose.

His coughing seemed to have improved a great deal, but his breathing was still ragged. He'd managed to prop her up against a wall before turning to accept the first aid kit from the girl.

"What did you do to that guy back there?" the stranger asked quietly as together she and Ashei watched Shad fumble with the catch on the stark white metal box. His hands had grown even puffier, and he was apparently having trouble making his digits work.

"I… ah, ow… sorry, it's just… my hands…” His face was still red, but Ashei had the distinct
impression that now it was due to embarrassment rather than strain. He coughed again; a wet, hacking cough that made him sound like he had emphysema.

"Here," Ashei said irritably, snagging the scissors from the girl and cutting through the tape that bound her wrists. "Let blondie here do it."

"Yeah…" Shad said, frowning as the girl's newly liberated hands opened the kit with ease. "Ok, you work on her, I'm gonna go wash my hands."

And with that, he once again struggled to his feet and set off down the hall, presumably in the direction of the bathroom just around the corner.

"You didn't have to do that…" The blonde girl whispered softly once Shad had vanished from sight, his coughs fading off into the distance.

"Do what?" Ashei groaned quietly, leaning back as the girl began using the scissors to cut away her pant leg directly above the bullet hole. Thankfully, it was midway from her hip to her knee, else she might have some compunction against Shad looking at her. Not that she was a prude; she just didn't like nerds checking her out, and Volleyball had given her some nice legs.

"Rescue me," she said, wincing slightly as she examined the now uncovered wound. The entire area around the hole was red and puffy, with blood still leaking out around the edges of the raged opening. The inside of her leg looked a lot like meatloaf, she decided. Just more pink and red; it was a good thing she wasn't squeamish.

"Sure we did," Ashei replied, waving her hand through the air dismissively in an attempt to hide her pain, though she was surprised at how weak she felt. "We overheard Vaati earlier saying that Ganondorf wanted this one student in particular, and we knew that once he got them, the rest of us were done for. So me and Shad followed him to stop him from getting them, and Linebeck and Midna went after."

"Midna?" The blonde girl gasped, startled, dropping the wad of gauze she'd been holding.

"Uh… Yeah?"

"You mean she's ok?"

"The last I saw…" Ashei replied slowly, not wanting to get the poor girl's hopes up too much in case something had happened to the small gothic girl and the hapless janitor since they'd last been together. Still, she seemed happy to hear it, and her posture slumped slightly as she let out a relieved sigh.

"So… Midna and… Linebeck, was it? Where'd they go?"

"They went to go stop this freak from shooting up the gym. I don't know if they've managed it or not, but I haven't heard any gunfire lately, so…"

The girl nodded, looking troubled as she riffled through the contents of the box.

"Still, at least me and Shad managed to thwart Ganondorf's master plan. If only we could see the look on that demented mug of his when he finds out…" Ashei half-gloated, half-grunted, trying her best to sound cheerful about their accomplishment but the massive hole in her leg seemed to be letting all her joy ooze out of her.

"Oh…" the girl said sadly, turning hesitantly away from Ashei's leg, "That's not entirely true…"
"What is that supposed to mean?"

She sighed, her shoulders drooping slightly within the overly-large green hoodie she was wearing. "I… I'm not the person Ganondorf wants. I was only being taken to see him because I'd helped a bunch of girls escape through the kitchen and Vaati said they didn't have enough prisoners to waste killing one."

"But…" Ashei said, the thrill of success turning to cold horror in her chest. "Then… who is he looking for…?"

"Actually," she answered softly, "I think he already got her."

Ashei groaned, letting her eyes close and her head fall back, thudding painfully against the brick wall behind her.

"Do you know who it was?" she asked softly, feeling the bitter taste of failure settle in her mouth.

"Yeah… Aryll Hero…"

Ashei’s eyes shot back open. "Wait, Link Hero's little sister?"

The girl merely nodded, tears welling up in the corners of her eyes, but Ashei merely sighed and let her eyes close again. Inwardly, she was praying Link had decided to escape rather than keep looking for her, because there was nothing he could do now. Ganondorf had gotten what he wanted. She didn’t know why, or what Aryll had to do with anything, but that didn’t change the fact that they were doomed. All of them.

But… if that were true, then… why were they all still alive? Once he found what he was looking for, was there any point to keeping the rest of the hostages alive? What did he want Link's little sister for anyway? Why was she so important?

"What we really need…" the girl mused softly after a few moments of pained silence, "is some water so we can wash this before I try to bandage it."

"Got that covered," came Shad's scratchy voice from a short distance down the hall. Jogging quickly to meet them, he sunk to his knees beside the girl and held out numerous wet paper towels. His hands were still just as red and puffy as ever, but he seemed to have stopped coughing. He was panting heavily though, as if that short jog had winded him.

"It's the best I could do…" he mumbled, grimacing as he noticed Ashei's wound for the first time.

"It'll be fine," the blonde replied bracingly, taking them and gently mopping up the blood around the hole.

"So, you never told us your name," Ashei said for lack of anything else to say. It was taking supreme effort not to wince with every touch of her especially tender leg, though the coolness of the water felt good on her burning flesh.

"Oh!" The girl blushed and offered an embarrassed smile. "I'm Zelda Nohansen. I actually just moved here. This was my second day of school."

Shad offered a hollow whistle and Ashei grunted with dark amusement.

"That sucks."
"Yeah, well…” she muttered, tossing the red-stained paper towels to the floor and pulling out a cotton swab and a bottle of iodine from the first aid kit, "Aside from the guns and shooting and death, the school doesn’t seem half bad."

Shad let out a soft chuckle. Ashei might have joined him if she wasn’t too busy cursing as Zelda started rubbing the brown liquid around the wound.

"Sorry," she whispered hastily.

Gathering a ball of gauze, she placed it gingerly over the hole and then started to wind something cottony and white tightly around her leg. Ashei kept her jaw clenched tightly shut and refused to make a sound, all too aware of the tears still leaking from her eyes.

"Actually, I've already made a couple friends,” Zelda continued, keeping up the conversation only to help distract Ashei from what she was doing to her leg. “Midna, Anju and Kafei, Link, Aryll…” She stumbled over the last name, then bit her lip, looking grieved.

"And now, us," Shad chimed in with a cheeky grin, catching Ashei off-guard with his surprising show of tact, and Zelda returned his smile tremulously.

"Yeah… Thank you. You saved my life."

Shad flushed profoundly, but Ashei merely snorted and spat out a bitter, "Yeah. I got shot and he spilled cleaner everywhere. Fantastic heroes we are."

"Yeah, what was that anyway?" Zelda asked in an off-handed sort of way, busting out the medical tape to secure the cotton bandage, only adding to Ashei's discomfort.

"Chlorine Gas," Shad replied nonchalantly.

Zelda and Ashei stared.

It took Shad a moment to notice, but when he did he frowned self-consciously back at them.

"What?"

"Chlorine Gas?" Ashei hissed incredulously, "Are you freaking kidding me? What are you, Bill Nye the Science Guy or a terrorist?!"

"How on earth did you make chlorine gas?!" Zelda chimed in, giving Shad a disgruntled look, momentarily forgetting about taping up Ashei's leg.

"Actually, it was an accident. When Ashei shoved me into the closet, I knocked a bunch of cleaner onto the floor and the bottles spilled everywhere. Well, chlorine gas is technically simple to make; just mix bleach with ammonia, both of which are common ingredients in most cleaning products."

"How do you know that?" Ashei accused suspiciously.

"It's common knowledge," he replied, recoiling defensively, sounding more than a little offended at her tone, "People are all the time accidentally mixing the two and end up getting hospitalized for one reason or another."

"Ok, ok, fine," Ashei said, throwing her hands up in the air. "Whatever. That doesn't explain why you felt the need to use Mustard Gas to take out the Lavender Boy Wonder."

"Chlorine Gas," Shad corrected acidly, "and as I said, it was mostly an accident. By the time you'd
gotten Vaati positioned so that he wasn't facing the door, I was starting to get really dizzy and I couldn't figure out why. That's when I noticed the labels on the bottles that were spilled and realized what was happening."

"So you decided to try an impromptu science experiment. You realize that if you'd just tackled him like I'd told you to, none of this might have happened!" She spat angrily, gesturing at her bandaged leg. She wasn't entirely sure why she was blaming her injury on Shad, but at the moment she didn't care; she needed to take out all her pent up aggression on someone, and he seemed the best candidate.

"Look," Shad snapped, raising his voice for the first time she could remember, "There was no guarantee that I would have been able to get that gun away from Vaati, and if I'd messed up you'd be dead right now. So I'm sorry that I decided to play to my strengths and go with chemistry rather than brute force, but it worked didn't it? You're still alive, aren't you? I dumped the rest of the bottles into the mop bucket and soaked a rag in the stuff, then used it to knock out Vaati because I knew it had a better shot at working than wrestling him did!"

Even with his broken nose making his voice all nasally, he still sounded scathing. Ashei found herself struggling to sit up a little straighter, inhaling deeply so as to give Shad a piece of her mind when Zelda cut in.

"Um… I thought mixing bleach and ammonia made stuff blow up."

From the look on her face, she was apparently trying to ease the tension by changing the flow of the conversation.

Shad stared at her in surprise, looking as though he'd forgotten she was even there. Ashei settled back against the wall, folding her arms and looking thunderous.

"It… Well, yes, it can explode if mixed incorrectly…"

"So how'd you know how to mix it? That's pretty impressive. You must be really smart."

Shad opened his mouth then closed it, looking distinctly uncomfortable. Ashei snorted in derision. Of course, she thought bitterly, just go on feeding his ego…

"I didn't," he finally answered, his voice sounding oddly quiet after all of the shouting, if still a little raspy. "It was too dark in the closet to see much anyway. I just guessed... N-not that it was very likely to happen at these concentrations!"

Zelda looked stunned. "So, wait… You willingly mixed two chemicals together, knowing that at any moment they could explode in your face and kill you?"

Shad shrugged uncomfortably.

"Is that what happened to your hands? And your throat?"

He licked his lips hesitantly than said, "The gas burns your esophagus and eventually causes lung paralysis and potentially death. That's why I sound the way I do. As for my hands… well, the chemicals can be caustic sometimes…"

Ashei's jaw dropped.

"Are you… Are you gonna be ok? You breathed a lot of that stuff in…" Zelda asked, sounding horrified.
"I should be fine," he replied, swallowing gruffly. The act looked especially painful. "It hurts to breathe and all, but I'm still able to function. I mean, I don't think I can run… But I couldn't run very far to begin with."

He offered up a weak smile at his own attempt at humor, and Ashei felt her heart lurch. He'd done that for her? Risked his life, his lung function, and severely burned his hands all because she had decided to play the hero? And here she was yelling at him… Something sickeningly close to guilt began settling in her gut.

"Why didn't you just tackle him?" she whispered softly. "Both ways had risks, but at least you wouldn't be…"

He shrugged, averting his gaze. "Well, I just figured I'd rather bet my life on science than on strength. I mean, who in their right mind would stake their life on me in a wrestling match anyway?"

Ashei punched his arm but smiled at him warmly all the same. Maybe he wasn't so bad, for a geek…

"Ok," Zelda said, cutting their brief bonding moment short. "You two really need to get out of here."

Their protests fired up at once.

"But the other students-!"

"Ganondorf's still got-!"

"No!" Zelda cut off sternly, fixing them both with an authoritative gaze. "Ashei, I did the best I could, but I'm hardly a specialist. You're still likely to bleed to death soon without medical help."

Ashei glowered at her but she couldn't exactly deny that fact. She could barely move without spots of color blooming in front of her eyes, and she'd already lost a lot of blood…

"And Shad, you've said yourself that that gas has burned your throat and lungs. You need medical attention too. The last thing we need is for your lungs to give out."

Shad opened his mouth to argue, probably to explain the actual steps that would lead up to that happening, but Zelda cut him off.

"No, no excuses. The both of you are getting out of here, now."

"Really?" said Ashei sarcastically, "You wouldn't happen to have an exit in the pocket of that hoodie of yours now would you?"

"No," Zelda said, answering the question as though it was a legitimate query, "but I do know that the kitchen has a back door that's still intact. That's how I got the other girls out. I can take you there right now."

Shad and Ashei exchanged surprised looks, then quickly agreed.

Getting Ashei up was a laborious process. She was much weaker than she had thought, so she wasn't able to lend much help to the effort, and with Shad's difficulty breathing and muscle weakness, most of the work was dumped on Zelda. Still, after a couple minutes of strenuous tugging and incredible jolts of pain for Ashei, they managed to get her up with one of her arms around each of their shoulders.

"Ok," she panted, trying in vain to stave off the wave of nausea that had seized her the minute she
was elevated, "Lead on, blondie, Captain Kirk. Let's get out of this place…"

"Which way?" Shad gasped, wheezing heavily.

"Straight. Past the closet. It's right beside the cafeteria."

"Right…” he gasped, "I knew that…”

Ashei and Zelda exchanged worried glances.

"Shad… are you gonna be ok?"

"'Course," he replied in a somewhat encouraging tone. "I have to be, so I will be."

"Ok…” Zelda said cautiously. "We'll take it easy then. Come on."

"Wait," Ashei gasped as they passed Vaati’s body, still lying pitifully on the floor. "Shouldn't we tie him up or something?"

Together the three of them regarded Vaati, his body crumpled in a broken heap, his hair and clothing damp from the deluge of chemicals that had spilled on the floor. His face was pale, even by his standards, and his eyes were still showing all whites. She couldn't tell if he was breathing or not. The rag that Shad had used to knock him out lay discarded a few feet away, but the gun was still clenched tightly in his hand.

Shad was silent for a moment then said, softly, "…When Vaati wakes up… If he ever wakes up… He likely won't be in a fit state to do much of anything for a while…"

Despite what he had just put them through she couldn't bring herself to be happy with that pronouncement. Zelda tore her gaze away from the boy, looking ill. Shad had his eyes shut tightly, and was trembling in a way that Ashei could tell had nothing to do with the gas.

Squeezing his shoulder in what she hoped would be taken in a reassuring way, she gave him a small, sad smile, then whispered, "You did what you had to, Shad."

Sighing tremulously, he gave short, curt nod, then tore his gaze away from Vaati.

Without another word, they continued on.
Linebeck, Midna had decided, was not the most reassuring of companions.

"Oh, Farore, this is madness, total madness, they could be anywhere, behind every door, around every corner, waiting with their guns and their creepy little eyes, waiting to kill us, waiting to pounce on us like the bloodthirsty savages they are, ah… Why didn't I listen to mother and go to college, meet a nice girl, get married, have a couple of kids, the kind who wouldn't grow up into sociopaths or join cults or shoot up their schools…"

He'd been managing a steady stream of moans and complaints ever since the two of them had left the library together, stalking Zant on his way to the gym.

Normally, their journey would have only taken a minute or two, but the second floor had considerably more shooters than the first and on numerous occasions they found themselves ducking into abandoned classrooms or bathrooms to avoid passing sentries. Couple this with Linebeck's dragging feet and Midna's own overwhelming anxiety that was inwardly screaming for her to listen to the ranting of her portly custodial sidekick and make a break for it, and it made for one terribly slow, agonizing progression.

Still, they'd managed to make it to the stairwell before too long and were even now creeping carefully down the main hallway to the gym. Not that this made Midna feel any better; if anything her heart was pounding louder than ever and her limbs wouldn't stop trembling. The door was just a little further down the hall… she could see it now, drawing steadily nearer…

"…can't believe I've been dragged into this! You children, always so bossy, telling the older generation what to do, parading around like you know something, dressing like a vampire, dying your hair bizarre colors, and for what? Only to die in some pathetic educational institution because you've all lost control of your hormones-"

Pressured as she was under the weight of the present situation, Midna finally felt something inside of her snap.

"Linebeck!" Midna hissed in exasperation, whirling around to confront him head-on, her eyes blazing maddeningly. "Shut up! For once in your pathetic, wasted existence, just shut your mouth! Goddesses!"

Linebeck had flinched when she'd turned on him but now scowled back at her, red-faced and indignant, his chest swelling like a bullfrog.

"No!" he spat, drawing himself to his full height (which meant he literally towered over Midna) and placing his hands on the hips of his grey, wrinkled jumpsuit. "No! I've had enough of you and your little friends bossing me around all the time! I'm the grown-up here, and I deserve some respect! It's time you did what I say for a change!"

"The grown-up?" she sneered, making him flush. "What are you, five? How about I start giving you respect once you earn it? Stop acting like a child, pissing and moaning about how unfair life is and actually do something for once! I thought you said you were a soldier before coming here! So come on, show me some of that war expertise and help me save those students so we can all get out of here in one piece!"
Linebeck crossed his arms sourly and averted his gaze, muttering something incoherent under his breath.

"I'm sorry," Midna said in a falsely sweet voice, "I didn't catch that."

"I said…" he took a deep, steadying breath, looking very much as though the effort of speaking was costing him dearly, "I wasn't a soldier."

Midna threw her hands up in the air in disbelief. "Unbelievable. That's just fantastic. Are you actually good for anything other than making up lies and cleaning floors? Scratch that, just the lies; these floors are filthy."

"It wasn't a lie," he said flatly, fixing her with a stern look. "I was a sailor, not a soldier; there’s a difference. My father had been a famous Captain in the Phantom Isles’ Navy and they’d named a steamship after him; the S.S. Linebeck. I served on that ship for a number of years and I left the service after the war. So yes, missy, I do know a thing or two about hostile situations, and what I know is that I want nothing to do with them ever again! If you'd seen even half the things I've seen-!"

He bit his last sentence off short and turned away, huffing.

"So? You're going to leave who knows how many students to their deaths, knowing that you could have done something to stop it?"

Linebeck glared at her heatedly but said nothing. A moment passed by, then another, and silence reigned in the hallway. Finally, he let out a defeated sigh, his shoulder slouching comically.

"Ok, ok, you're right… Not that there's anything I think we can do anyway, but the only exit is in the gym and I'm just as likely to be killed trying to find another one. Lead on, Sparkles."

Midna grimaced, both at his attitude and at his insistence at using this terrible pet name, but she accepted it anyway. It was likely the best she was going to get from him. On both counts.

Sighing, she seized his arm in one hand and, turning, tugged him down the hall to the closest entrance to the gym. A little way down the hall curved to the right, and they'd find the cafeteria, which was sure would be crawling with people. To the left, the student parking (the exit to which she could see was a misshapen heap of bricks and twisted metal), as well as the locker rooms and the offices for the coaches. It was too much to hope that any of the faculty were still there; in all the rooms they’d passed, the teachers had either been cowering in the corner with the students or conspicuously absent. It didn't bode well for what she was sure she'd find in the gym.

Reaching the wide, grey, metal double doors, she paused and motioned Linebeck closer.

"You said the stands were closed?" she whispered softly, her heart threatening to burst from her chest now that they were so near to their destination.

"Sort of." He muttered, looking pale and sweaty. "They're partially open, but they only extend about six feet from the wall. Why? You thinking of climbing them? I don't think you'd get very far without getting spotted and shot down like that arcade game with the ducks."

"No," she said, thinking quickly, not even trying to puzzle out what he was talking about. "But maybe we can sneak behind them without being spotted. It'll give us time to check out the situation before we try something."

"Yes," he said, sounding strangled. "Right. Ok. Let's go with your plan."
Reaching out an unsteady hand, she seized the cold metal handle in her sweaty grip and hesitantly cracked the door open. To her immense relief, the hinges didn't squeak; maybe Linebeck wasn't a completely hopeless janitor after all. Leaning forward, she carefully peered into the room beyond.

The gym was eerily quiet. The silence felt stiff and unnatural as it forced itself upon Midna. The gymnasium's lights were blazing at their highest capacity, illuminating its occupants in stark clarity. From her awkward vantage point, she could make out the forms of what looked like forty or so figures laying every which way, all face down on the waxy floor, none of which were moving.

Midna felt her breath catch. Were they too late? Had they taken too long? Were the lives of forty innocent students now lost because she'd let fear rule her actions and delay her steps? She could feel the rising sense of sorrow beginning to overwhelm her when a movement on the other side of the gym caught her attention.

There were three figures moving about by the gym's far wall. The first two, one tall with broad shoulders, the other short and squat, were moving about the bodies on the floor, occasionally nudging one of them with their shoe, but otherwise making no other motion. The last figure, lanky and bald, stood talking animatedly into an object in his hand. Though he was too far away to hear properly, Midna knew; it was Zant.

"What's going on?" Linebeck hissed, making Midna jump. She'd forgotten he was there.

"Um, there's..." She swallowed gruffly, trying in vain to steady her nerves, "uh, about forty students in there. They're all laying on the floor though. I can't tell if..."

She trailed off, not willing to admit the possibility that they had failed.

"How many guns?" He asked quietly, seeming to understand what she was feeling.

"Three," she said, taking a deep breath.

"Well, we can't just give up now that we're so close," he said resolutely, making Midna stare at him, flummoxed. Was Linebeck really showing guts? She was almost impressed...

"So, go ahead! You make your move towards the bleachers, and I'll stay here and keep watch."

Of course, she thought wryly. She shot Linebeck her most contemptuous look and he responded in turn with a winning smile. From somewhere down the hall, there came the sound of a gunshot and a scream of pain. Groaning, he relented, muttering a petulant, "Fine, fine, let's do this already..."

Peeking into the gym once more, she made sure that they had a clear shot to the space behind the bleachers before turning to watch the guards. Zant was still standing by the wall, cackling madly for some odd reason, though he was facing the outside exit. The other two were heading back to him, facing away from her door. Realizing that this might be her only chance, she seized Linebeck's sleeve and slipped quietly inside.

The air conditioners were on at full blast for some odd reason, and as soon as she entered she felt the chill seep through her black sweater, sending goosebumps all up and down her arms. Darting forward in full-on stealth mode, she fell to her knees and slid the last couple of feet on the wood-paneled floor to the relative safety that was the filthy underside of the bleachers.

She turned to tell Linebeck off for being a horrible janitor, but her voice died in her throat. Linebeck had stumbled and fallen onto the floor almost as soon as he'd entered the gym and was lying in plain sight of everyone. Quickly scrambling to his feet, he hurried over to join her, but it was too late; the damage was already done.
"Hey! You two!" Barked the deep, authoritative voice of one of the shooters, and Midna felt her heart stop for the umpteenth time that day; clearly, if she somehow managed to survive this, she was going to wind up with a major arrhythmia or something, although that probably wasn't going to be a problem since ‘living’ didn't seem like a very likely result with the way things were going.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she silently said a prayer to all three goddesses, pleading for help, for safety, for something…

"What are you staring at?"

Midna's eyes popped back open in surprise. That hadn’t been directed at them… Had he not seen Linebeck after all?

Quickly and quietly, she picked her way closer to the wall of bleachers that separated her from the rest of the gym and tried her best to catch a glimpse of what was happening through one of the narrow spaces between stands.

From what little she could see, it looked like the tall, broad-shouldered gunman had accosted one of the students and was now holding him up in the air by the front of his shirt with one hand. Whoever he was, he had some seriously impressive muscles, and Midna might have found him attractive if it wasn't for the ridiculous green neckerchief he had tied around his throat and the long black ponytail he seemed to be fond of that reached down to his lower back. Well, and the whole homicidal maniac thing of course.

"Well?" Spat the voice again, and Midna realized it wasn't ponytail boy who was talking, but the shorter one. Midna couldn't see anything other than the top of his head through the crack.

"Answer me!" he shouted when the boy remained silent, backhanding him across the face, and Midna was shocked to realize that she recognized that mop of curly red hair; it belonged to Mido, one of Aryll's friends.

"I-It was nothing!" He said frantically, rubbing at his cheek and looking terrified. "I was just moving my neck around 'cause it's all stiff!"

Midna felt her heart go out to him; he had obviously seen her and Linebeck sneak in and was trying to cover for them.

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The shorter boy gave a derisive snort and said mockingly, "Yeah, right. And you too, pretty boy? Were you also just flexing your neck?"

With a grunt, the shorter boy heaved another one of the students to his feet, this one with neatly combed brown hair. He looked every bit as terrified as Mido, and he was holding a flute of all things protectively to his chest. He must have been in the band room when the attack had started.

The boy's jaw was quivering, but he didn't say anything, even when the shorter boy decided to backhand him as well. Ponytail had set Mido down by this point and Midna could barely see more than his curly head, though he was obviously being held against ponytail’s chest, the boy’s gun trained against his temple.

"Look, either you talk, or I take that bloody flute of yours and use it for target practice!"

It seemed like an odd threat to Midna, particularly since shooting at a flute seemed both difficult and pointless, but the flute boy stared at the shorter of the two attackers in horror, holding the tiny silver instrument protectively behind his back as if damaging it would be worse than if they damaged him.
Zant's high pitched voice cut in from across the gym. "What are you morons arguing about?"

"These two were staring at something, and they won't tell me what it is!"

The sound of Zant's footsteps drawing nearer had Midna going into full-out panic mode. She could hear Linebeck's frantic panting behind her and she was thankful he had decided to stop his mantra of pathetic moaning.

"'These two were staring at something…' Really Arrghus? Byrne? Do I honestly have to do everything for you two?" Zant taunted softly, and the two boys glanced at each other in obvious annoyance. Clearly, they didn't like Zant much either.

Finally entering Midna's line of sight, she felt the familiar pangs of revulsion upon seeing his pale skin, stretched taut over his bald skull, his wide, staring eyes glimmering with the light of the madness he was so fond of showcasing, and the numerous tattoos that covered his body. He had a small smile on his face which seemed completely incongruous with the atmosphere of the gym.

"Well…" said the shorter boy defensively, sounding slightly offended, "Of course not. It's just-"

"If you want to get results, Arrghus," Zant cut in patiently, "you need to put more effort into it."

And then, without any warning at all, he lifted his arm and shot the boy with the flute.

Midna slapped her hands over her mouth to keep from screaming. The boy's eyes were wide with surprise as he fell, the bullet hole hidden in his now ruffled hair, the flute still held gripped tightly in his hand. There was a heavy thud when he hit the ground, as well as a hollow 'thunk!' from the metal instrument, and Midna was grateful that she couldn't see the ground where he had fallen. Forcing back the tears and bile that threatened to overwhelm her, she forced herself to keep watching.

Mido had bellowed when the gun rang out and now stood rigidly in Byrne's grip, his face a sickly shade of green. Even Byrne looked aggravated; his arms had gone very stiff and his red-rimmed eyes stared down where the boy had fallen, apparently troubled.

Arrghus, however, was chuckling darkly to himself as if he'd been the one to do the deed, but the only one not to show any reaction was Zant. He looked on calmly, that small smile still apparent on his sallow face, his eyes wide with childlike wonder.

"Now then, boy," Zant said, giggling oddly before continuing, "We'll try this again. What was it you were staring at?"

To Mido's credit, he kept his mouth shut, but he couldn't stop his eyes from glancing in the direction of where Midna and Linebeck were hiding.

Zant followed his gaze to the bleachers and, with a slowly blossoming look of wonder, exclaimed in a hushed breath, "They're here?"

Midna felt dread flood through her system. How…? How could he have possibly known that-?

Zant suddenly began cackling madly, doing an impromptu jig on the spot, turning at the end to point his finger exactly where Midna was standing. "Oh, Midna… Come out, come out, wherever you are! Oh, and that stupid janitor, bring him too!"

Midna's mouth went completely dry. This was impossible… There was no way he'd seen them, and even if he had he wouldn't have gone through that whole charade of questioning Mido and
murdering that poor boy just to keep up a ruse.

In her moment of hesitation, Zant let out a dramatic sigh and trained his gun at Mido's chest.

"Come out now, or I kill the ginger."

His voice had changed from the childish tone to one that was more feral, but he kept on giggling and swaying back and forth as though he were drunk.

"Ok!" Midna found herself calling out, her voice sounding hoarse and desperate, an entire octave too high, “Ok, I’m c-coming! Don’t hurt him!”

Slowly, and with mind-numbing terror clawing at her insides, she stepped out from behind the bleachers to face the room at large, Linebeck stumbling along tepidly in her wake. She kept her hands clenched at her sides, unable to move them, but Linebeck’s were held up in the air as though he were a prisoner of war, surrendering.

For an odd moment, she felt as though she were walking to the gallows. Her every step was heavy, weighted down with the impossible gravity of what could be her final moments.

Her breathing had grown erratic, as though her lungs knew that at any moment that breath she gave could be her last and were trying to catch up on the lifetime of oxygen that she would be missing out on. Her heart, likewise, was pounding in her chest for all she was worth, increasing the circulation of her blood so that when that bullet tore itself through her chest, it would be better able to splatter the ground and stain the floor with the proof of her existence.

She could feel Zant's eyes on her, judging, weighing, caressing, but she kept her gaze averted and instead focused on anything and everything but him.

Mido's expression was apologetic, but she didn’t blame him for accidentally giving them up. The last thing she wanted was another death on her hands; the Goddesses knew that the boy with the flute might still be alive if she had thought of a better plan. Carefully, she resisted looking at his body. She wanted the last thing she saw to be beautiful, not depressing.

Byrne regarded her with calculating eyes, though he still seemed to be troubled by something, and she was surprised to see he was every bit as large and muscular as he had seemed from a distance.

Arrghus, however, was sneering at her, silently enjoying their triumph, his portly visage almost quivering with glee. She did her best to ignore him.

Letting her gaze sweep to the rest of the students, she was surprised to see a large number of teachers in the room, scattered amongst the students. Mr. Oshus, the elderly marine biology teacher, met her gaze sorrowfully, seeming to see and understand the pain that echoed across her heart for the boy with the flute whose death she had inadvertently caused. Coach Nabooru looked positively furious, livid at her inability to protect the students she’d been given charge over, and from her position on the floor, was snarling up at Zant with barely contained fury blazing in her verdant eyes. To her left, her assistant Jolene lay with her head on her arms, looking lost, her gaze unfocused, having retreated into her mind to pretend she was anywhere but here.

"Well, well, well…” Zant intoned imperiously once Midna and Linebeck had come to a stop just a few feet away from him and the others. "I think I'm a little disappointed, Midna. I mean, that was your plan?"

He cackled maddeningly, his eyes opening even wider, his pupils positively enormous. Midna swallowed and found herself leaning backward; she'd always known Zant wasn't all there, but he
seemed to be even more insane than usual today. He was dangerously close to losing his grip on reality, something that didn’t exactly inspire confidence in her.

"W-what?" she asked, genuinely confused. Her voice sounded like a frog, her windpipe threatening to constrict. Linebeck was trembling silently beside her, his face as pale as a sheet.

Zant let out a theatrical groan, clearly enjoying himself. "Ganondorf called me." He held up a walkie-talkie, and it occurred to Midna that this must be what she'd seen him talking to against the wall earlier. "He told me that a certain birdie had decided to break out of her cage and that she, along with that oaf of a janitor, were following me. Cameras," he added upon noting her shock.

Midna felt her heart sink. Cameras… how had she forgotten about the school’s security cameras? Of course Ganondorf would have control of them, meaning that no matter the situation, they never would have managed to rescue the students in the gym. They had been doomed from the get-go, and likely so were Shad and Ashei if Ganondorf could merely radio Vaati and tell him he was being followed. That monster… he really had thought of everything.

"I just can’t imagine why you would be following me around… Unless you were trying to save the students in the gym? Well, that went about as well as could be expected." And he sniggered.

"You're sick," she spat, and he shrugged bashfully as though it were a compliment, his smirk turning into a sinister full-mouthed smile that showed all of his pointed yellow teeth.

"Maybe. But you're a fool. And now you get to watch the fat guy, the ginger, and every other person in the room die before I get to enjoy the pleasure of draining the life from your eyes myself…"

Byrne stiffened almost imperceptively but Zant caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to stare at the hulking boy with a glower. "What?"

"Ganondorf told us that none of the students were to be killed if it could be avoided. We've lost too many captives as it is. He hasn't rescinded that order."

Byrne's voice was quiet but powerful, seeming to rumble from somewhere deep inside his barrel-like chest.

"What Ganondorf doesn't know won't hurt him. Besides, there weren't near as many cheerleaders in here as I had hoped, and I'm bored…” Zant pouted with startling petulance, looking for all the world like a whiny child.

"Ganondorf promised Sheik her safety," Byrne added, and to Midna's immense disbelief he actually looked concerned. But was it for her, for Sheik, or for Ganondorf’s orders not being obeyed?

At his comment, Zant let out a derogatory snort. "Sheik? Sheik is a sentimental coward. Well, you know what? I didn't join up to help Ganondorf with whatever he's planning, like Vaati, or because I can't think for myself, like Sakon, or because I'm a useless pawn, like-

"Like who, exactly?" came a soft voice from somewhere behind her.

Relief and joy exploded through her chest and Midna felt her heart soar. Whirling around to face the door she had entered, she was met with what was, in her opinion, the most wonderful sight in the entire world.

Sheik was striding toward them calmly, his hands stuffed lackadaisically in his pants pockets, the handle of a gun poking out of the back of his jeans. Yet in spite of the fact that he was technically 'one of them', she couldn’t fight the inexplicably reassuring feeling that now that he was there, she
was safe.

At her side, Linebeck groaned. No doubt all he saw was another attacker. Mido's eyes seemed to bulge as he recognized the newcomer and he mouthed a silent, incredulous, 'Sheik?!

Zant didn't look the least bit abashed that he'd been caught mid-insult. "Why, if it isn't Sheik. What a pleasant surprise."

"Sheik," Byrne acknowledged stoically, though he looked a little relieved at his presence. Sheik returned the greeting with a nod. Arrghus merely grunted.

"So..." Sheik drawled lazily, coming to a stop beside Byrne and clapping the boy on the shoulder in a familiar sort of way, "Is there some sort of a problem here?"

The atmosphere was tense under the pretense of false civility, and lightning seemed to crackle between Zant and Sheik's eyes. They were standing about three feet apart from each other, with Arrghus on Zant's left side, glaring at Sheik with barely repressed venom. Across from Arrghus, Byrne stood on Sheik's right, still holding Mido, his slanted eyes regarding the situation with all the tension of a compressed spring.

Midna and Linebeck stood between Byrne and Arrghus, a step or two outside of the ring of males.

"It's none of your business, Shadow," Zant snapped, his voice sounding feral again. "I was given charge of the gym, not you. Aren't you supposed to be on the second floor?"

"I was," he answered simply, his red eyes seemingly devoid of emotion, "but then Ganondorf informed me that there was an... escapee... here with you. I was given leave to reclaim her."

"Fine!" Zant spat, his mood once again changing rapidly, looking comically furious with his eye twitching. "Fine! Take your stupid girlfriend! Just get out of here and leave me to my business!"

Sheik nodded with mock graciousness and gestured curtly to Midna, who took it as her cue to leave.

Turning on the spot, she took a step towards the door, hardly daring to believe she was going to be spared, but froze in her tracks when Zant suddenly shrieked "Stop!"

"The agreement was only for the girl. The janitor stays with me."

Midna hadn't even noticed that Linebeck had moved to follow her. He had frozen on the spot, one leg quivering in midair, his eyes clenched tightly shut as he fought off the despair that she could see spasming through him. A sudden feeling of dread swept over her.

Sheik nodded, accepting the terms without hesitation, but Midna blurted out a hasty, "No!"

There was silence as every head in the gym turned to stare at her as if she were mad... all except for Zant. He looked positively giddy at her outburst.

"You know..." he said slowly, "Ganondorf told me Sheik would be coming for you. He also told me that if you didn't leave quietly, that I was to kill you."

"What?" Sheik snapped, and for the first time, she registered an emotion in his voice: fear. Byrne shuffled uncomfortably and glanced down at the flute boy's body.

"Ganondorf's orders," he answered simply as if that explained things, and Sheik snarled. Quickly drawing his gun from his pants, he pointed it at Zant but was met with two guns facing him before he could finish the action. Zant looked positively mesmerized, his eyes wide and eager. Arrghus was
grinning gruesomely. Only Byrne hadn't drawn his gun because his hands were otherwise occupied securing Mido, but his face clearly said that he was willing to do so in an instant, but on who's side Midna couldn't tell.

"Now now, no need to be hasty," Zant chided gleefully. "Put your gun on the floor until we finish talking, Shadow, and we won't kill you. …Right now, at least."

Sheik looked furious. With a growl, he tossed his pistol on the ground where it slid a few feet, coming to a halt between Byrne, Arrghus, and Linebeck.

"Now," Zant said, his voice once again back to its usual puerile falsetto. "What were you saying? You don't want to leave with Sheik?" He moved his gun so it was pointed at her, Arrghus keeping Sheik in check.

Midna felt her heart climbing desperately into her throat. Her sense of self-preservation had her frantically opening her mouth to say she'd changed her mind.

Even as she gathered the words, however, her eyes landed on Linebeck who was eyeballing Sheik's discarded gun apprehensively. She turned to look at Mido, who appeared on the verge of soiling himself in Byrne’s solid grip, and at Oshus, with his kindly face, and Nabooru, with her righteous fury, and Jolene, with her hopeless despair, and finally at Sheik, who was staring at her in desperation, silently willing her to do what Zant said.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the nameless boy's discarded flute lying forgotten on the floor just behind where Sheik was standing, and she knew what she had to say.

Tears welling up in her eyes, she turned to Zant and, voice choked up with emotion, knew that she couldn't abandon these people just to save herself. Even if she would only die beside them, it was better than living and knowing she'd abandoned them to their fate, especially since she was the one who had brought Linebeck here, who had caused the disturbance that got the flute boy shot, who had angered Zant and got him into a frame of mind to disobey Ganondorf’s orders...

"No," She whispered, though it was loud enough to carry to the immediate vicinity. "I'm not leaving without them."

The silence that followed her statement was one of the loudest Midna had ever heard. Mido looked shocked, Linebeck disbeliefing, Byrne merely stared at her in consternation, and Sheik… Sheik looked like the world had just fallen apart. Zant's smile grew twisted, his eyes opening wider than she knew they could go as he tilted his head slightly to the side and studied her.

"Interesting," he said simply, and that was all. He jerked the gun up so it was level with her head.

Sheik moved. One minute he was staring at Midna in shock, standing in disbeliefing stupefaction beside Byrne, and the next he was at Zant's side. His left hand darted forward and seized Zant's wrist, twisting it roughly, jerking the boy closer to him while simultaneously forcing him to drop the gun. In the same movement, he stepped forward and threw a punch with his right hand, putting his entire body into it, his face a mask of rage and pain.

His fist slammed into Zant’s throat. There was a horrible crunching sound as his windpipe was crushed, and then Sheik released the boy's arm. It took all of two seconds.

Zant staggered backward, shock evident on his pallid face as his hands grasped fitfully at his ruined throat, his mouth gaping like a fish out of water. His face began turning blue as he struggled to breathe, a hollow rattling sound emitting from his mouth that echoed across the stunned silence of the
Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he stumbled back and tripped over the body of a prone student, falling to the ground, his eyes bulging out of his skull, his body spasming.

After an eternity and a moment, he was still. He never moved again.

Sheik’s breathing was haggard, staring down at Zant as though in a horrified trance. Byrne and Mido had identical looks of incredulity on their faces as their minds and the minds of everyone in the gym struggled to comprehend what their eyes were telling them had just happened. Linebeck looked grim, his face a sickly green hue, but he regarded the scene with the uncomfortable familiarity of a war veteran. Midna herself was numb. Zant was dead. Sheik had killed him. Sheik, her Sheik, had just killed somebody. She found herself clutching her own throat as she replayed the scene in her head and made herself stop and take several slow, calming breaths.

Arrghus’s face was purple with outrage, his eye twitching madly. With a sudden roar, he turned and began firing off his gun in every direction.

Midna dove to the floor without thinking, feeling rather than seeing Linebeck do the same beside her, though forward instead of back. Sheik, across from her, had turned in surprise at the sound of gunfire and had slipped on the flute beneath his feet, tumbling to the ground.

Byrne yelled out a surprised "No!", and to her incredible shock, lifted Mido, hugging his body to his chest as he turned, shielding the smaller boy with his body as two bullets ripped through his back, sending out splatters of blood and an anguished roar of pain as he collapsed, landing on top of Mido.

Midna heard herself scream. Reaching out a hand in a desperate attempt to help them, she froze as another gunshot rang out and suddenly all was quiet.

Turning her head to see why it had stopped, she felt her jaw drop in amazement. For there, kneeling on the ground and holding Sheik’s discarded gun in a shaky hand, was Linebeck, his arms trembling and his face sweaty and pale.

With a hollow gurgle, Arrghus fell to the floor.

Sheik was up before Arrghus hit the ground, ignoring the dying boy and the rigid janitor before him. Scrambling on his hands and knees, he broke the stunned silence that had gripped the gym with a frantic cry that startled even him, his voice two octaves too high. "Byrne!"

Seizing the larger boy's shoulder, he gave a short grunt and rolled him over, pointedly ignore the two gaping bullet holes on his back. He didn't even spare a glance for Mido, knowing somehow, intuitively, that the boy was fine. Byrne had saved him. Shielded him from the danger with his own body. But why?

Byrne's face was pale and his breathing shallow. His eyes were half-lidded and vague, but Sheik forced the boy to focus on him. For the first time, he noticed that they had the same eye color; only one of many things the two boys shared. Had shared. Reaching out blindly, he grasped his limp hand in his own.

"Why?" Sheik whispered, trying hard not to let his emotion show through his words. "Why, Din burn you?!"

"Not… Right…” The boy gasped, shuddering. "Grandma… Would've…”

There was small cough and then a horrible rattling gurgle as his friend's eyes bulged slightly, looking surprised… and then he was still. Sheik watched stiffly, trembling as the light of life slowly dimmed.
in Byrne's scarlet irises.

Sheik felt his face contort in pain. Gently, as though he were handling porcelain, he laid his friend's hand on his now still chest. A blaze of rage suddenly exploded within his chest, and with a roar he slammed his fist into the ground, not caring if he bruised his knuckles.

For the first time since the shooting had started... no, for the first time since his mother had died, he felt completely awake. Byrne’s death before his eyes had been like a bucket of freezing water straight to the face.

How many others had died because of them? Because of Ganondorf? Because of him? How many lives was he now responsible for? Squeezing his eyes shut tightly, he unwillingly relieved every moment since the first bomb went off. Principal Sahasrala, dead. Officer Viscen, dead. How many students had been added to that list by now? The order had been given not to hurt more than was 'necessary', but that didn't count for much. The teachers, however, had been fair game...

And the boys who had followed Ganondorf; boys like Byrne, who weren't really evil, just lost and hurt and angry. Abandonment by family or society and corruption by Ganondorf had turned them into this. How many would have been different? How many could have been heroes, like Byrne, with a bit more acceptance and a little more friendship?

His eyes stung as he went over the names of the fallen shooters. Onox, Byrne, Arrghus, Zant... he shuddered again at the last name. He could still feel the boy's esophagus crunching beneath his knuckles.... No, he thought savagely, denying the guilt that threatened to overwhelm him, some really were evil. Some had deserved to die...

But was it my right to do it? A quiet voice whispered in his head.

A hand suddenly touched his shoulder and he started in surprise, jolting out of his anguished reverie, drawing back reflexively before realizing who it was.

Turning, he was met Midna's tear-stained face staring back at him, looking both anxious and tentative as she knelt at his side. Her eyes were swimming, and to his shock, she leaned forward and enveloped him in her tight embrace. After a slight pause, he slid his arms around her as well and tried to stop himself from collapsing.

They were silent for a moment, kneeling beside Byrne’s corpse, and Sheik felt all the hate and rage inside him slowly ebb away, replaced by stark grief. Mido had righted himself and was crouching on Byrne's other side, looking muddled and grieved.

"I don't..." he started, then paused to clear his throat, looking anywhere but at Byrne. "I don't understand. Why did he... I thought he was..."

He trailed off, shaking his head wearily and massaging his wrist, which looked a little swollen.

"Byrne died to save your life." Midna's sudden fierceness surprised him, and Mido stared at her, eyes wide as she pulled back from Sheik slightly to regard the startled teen. "It doesn't matter what else might have happened. What did happen is all that counts. He died a hero, and that's how he's going to be remembered."

Sheik and Mido both stared, but she merely returned their gazes levelly. After a moment, Mido nodded. Looking satisfied, she leaned forward and gently slid Byrne's eyes closed, and Mido, scrubbing at his eyes with his forearm, drew a tiny triangle over his heart.

"May the Goddesses welcome you home..." He whispered softly, and Midna echoed him.
Squeezing his eyes shut, he felt an incredible surge of love and affection for Midna, and gratitude toward Mido. Silently, he said his own prayer to speed Byrne's soul on his way. *May the holy light shine on you, my friend, and may the Goddesses welcome you home as the hero you are...*

Another moment of silence passed, but eventually, it became apparent to Sheik and the others that they needed to move.

"So... he was your friend?" Mido asked unsteadily as he stood, and Sheik and Midna followed suit.

"Yeah... He and I were... His grandmother passed away about a year ago and he's been living in a foster home for a while. We understood each other. He... He deserved better than this..."

Mido nodded as though he understood, and Midna traced soothing circles on Sheik's back. Clearing his throat, he turned to examine the rest of the gym for the first time in what felt like ages, and to his slight surprise, nothing seemed to have changed.

Linebeck was still kneeling on the ground, staring at the spot where Arrghus had been, his eyes wide with shock, the gun trembling in his unsteady hands. Around him lay the bodies of Zant, Arrghus, and some student who he assumed the randomly discarded flute belonged to.

A short distance across the gym, the rest of the hostages began to wake from their terrified stupor and climb to their feet. Most of the students were clinging to one another fearfully, the girls and most of the freshmen in tears. The teachers were doing their best to appear calm while shepherding the milling throng toward the wall of bleachers where Sheik and the others stood.

Sighing heavily, Sheik strode forward and held out his hand to the janitor. "Here, I'll just-"

Linebeck jumped up, startled, and whipped around, pointing the gun waveringly at Sheik's chest. Sheik's hands instantly flew into the air, stunned. He hadn't expected *that*.

"Get back!" The older man cried, sounding strangled. "Back! Or I'll do you like I did your little friend!"

"Linebeck!" Minda hissed angrily, reaching the elderly janitor in three long strides and smacking him soundly over the head. "Stop being an idiot! He's on our side!"

"Oh, uh... right! Yeah, of course I knew that!" He said sheepishly, wincing slightly as he massaged the top of his lanky, unkempt head. Holding his hand out again, Sheik waited for him to return the gun. Turning it over a few times in his hand, Linebeck eventually complied, looking both anxious and relieved to no longer have it in his possession.

"Shadow!" an authoritative voice barked from over his shoulder, and Sheik turned to find Coach Nabooru bearing down on them looking thunderous, her white tracksuit a little dusty from the gym floor. "Twili, Linebeck! What in Farore's name is going on here?!"

Linebeck looked positively terrified of the admittedly intimidating woman, and not-so-subtly shied behind Midna, which didn't do him much good since he was so much taller than her.

Oshus stepped up beside the coach, his once crisp brown suit wrinkled and dirty, examining them all through wizened, seafoam eyes. The assistant coach, Ms. Jolene, was standing at Nabooru's side in black gym shorts and a white tank top, but she seemed to be gazing avidly at Linebeck, not giving the others any notice.

Sheik and Midna exchanged silent glances, then Midna spoke. "They've got the whole school under lockdown, Coach. They've got armed guys like Zant and Arrghus everywhere."
Nabooru rolled her eyes, letting out an ungainly snort. "Thank you, Twili, I hadn't noticed."

You could have scraped the sarcasm off her voice with a knife. Midna’s face went beet red.

"I meant, what do you two think you're doing, barging in here like a couple of drunks at a saloon? You both could have been killed!"

"With all due respect, Coach," Midna replied tartly, not sounding respectful in the slightest, "you all would have been dead if Linebeck and I hadn't stepped in."

Nabooru quirked an eyebrow, her lips thinning at Midna's tone.

"Oh? And why do you suppose that? We hadn't received anything more than threats until you two came barreling in." She jerked her head to indicate she was talking about Midna and Linebeck. Midna's stony façade faltered slightly, her eyes darting toward the body of the boy with the flute, and Linebeck looked stricken.

"We overheard Zant when we were in the Library. He was telling Vaati that he was planning to come down here and kill everyone because he was getting bored. What exactly did you expect us to do, leave you all to your deaths?" Midna's voice had taken on a defensive note, and she'd crossed her arms over her chest, making herself look smaller.

"Well, you two did a fantastic job saving us, didn't you?" Nabooru retorted scathingly, and Midna flinched as if struck.

It took a moment for Sheik to understand what Nabooru was getting at. It wasn't unlike Nabooru to become angry at the slightest provocation, so it honestly could have been anything, but when Midna glanced at the flute boy again, it clicked. She was blaming the boy’s death on her.

Suddenly furious, he opened his mouth to defend her but before he could speak Oshus cut him off, his voice sounding old and tired.

"Now now, Nabooru, let us not get ahead of ourselves. I do not believe that it was their fumbled rescue attempt that set off the chain of events that led to the untimely deaths of these boys. From the sound of things, Zant was going to off us all for sport. We should instead be grateful for Mr. Shadow's timely arrival and fact that most of us are yet still living."

Midna was staring at her toes, her body trembling, and Nabooru looked away, abashed. Silence reigned in the gym once more.

"…What do we do now?" Jolene said softly, speaking for the first time.

"Escape," Nabooru said, clapping the smaller woman on the shoulder bracingly. "We still have students to protect."

"Indeed," Oshus agreed, blowing out a troubled breath through his bushy white mustache. "The question now is, how?"

"Well, there's a door just over there…" Linebeck mumbled, looking like he wanted anything other than the group's attention as he pointed over their heads toward the metal doors in the far corner. Sunlight was streaming through their windows, sparkling as it illuminated the dust motes in the air.

Sheik shook his head quickly. "No, that won't work. They've got the front of the school guarded. They've placed shooters at windows to deter the police from trying to break in. You'd all be shot down before you could make it to the police and safety."
Oshus nodded sagely as though he had suspected such a thing from the beginning. Linebeck, however, looked horrified that his escape plan had failed and his jaw hung open in comic horror, his red nose even more prevalent against his pale face. Nabooru sent Sheik a considering look.

"Shadow, you're one of them. Or were, I'm assuming, since you attacked Zant to save Miss Twili. Surely you must know of some way out."

Sheik met her gaze levelly, though he inwardly recoiled from her eyes. Her tone wasn't accusing, but he could almost feel it hiding underneath. How could she trust him with their lives knowing that he was part of the attack, knowing that he was one of 'them'?

As for a way out, he knew the kitchen exit was open… or had been open. He highly doubted it still was, and now that Ganondorf had the cameras up, there would be no navigating the halls in such a large group, and it went without question that he knew what had transpired here. They had minutes at most before reinforcements arrived, assuming Ganondorf could spare them, and Sheik didn’t want to take any chances… if only there was some way he could get the students out through the exit they had readily available. Some way he could ensure that they could all move across the grounds fast enough…

Suddenly, it hit him.

"What about the bus?" he asked quickly.

Linebeck snorted. "None of the busses are here, genius. They were out picking up the middle-schoolers when the attack started. Unless you mean the Special Ed bus, but that's way too tiny to hold this many people. Besides, it's on the other side of the school."

"True," Nabooru mused, understanding blooming in her eyes, "but not the bus that the athletic division takes to games and competitions… That should still be parked just outside my office."

"So…" Linebeck said slowly, glancing between Nabooru and Sheik dubiously, "We have a bus?"

"We have a bus," she nodded, looking triumphant.

"Fantastic!" He exclaimed, clapping his hands together greedily. "So then… where are the keys?"

"They should be in Darmani's office, just through the boy's locker room." She tapped Jolene and jerked her head, and with a brief nod the younger woman set off at a trot across the gym, her eyes still lingering on Linebeck with what looked disturbingly like admiration.

"Excellent," Oshus chimed in, bringing the attention back to him, "Well now, Linebeck, Mr. Mido, why don't we get the students organized."

"Er… Right. Sure. Whatever you say, old man."

Linebeck turned and quickly trotted off with the short ginger boy toward the milling throng of teens, a bounce in his step, and instantly began barking orders. Clearly, he was happy to be finally leaving. Mido merely looked relieved to be doing something, anything other than standing around uselessly.

"Wait!" Midna cried out unexpectedly, and Oshus paused, turning to regard her through curious, ancient eyes.

"We can't… We can't just leave them here…" She gestured feebly at Byrne and the nameless boy with the flute.
Oshus nodded gently. "Of course not, my dear."

He knelt down beside the brown-haired boy, gently wrapping his arms around his knees and shoulders, and with surprising strength for one who looked so old, lifted him effortlessly into the air.

"Such a shame..." The elderly teacher said softly, a note of sorrow in his voice. "He was so talented..."

Sheik quickly reached down and plucked up the silver-chased flute, laying it across the boy’s chest reverently. With a grateful nod, the man set off after Linebeck and Mido who were busy having the students gathering in two straight columns by the exit.

With panting breaths, Jolene returned from the locker room, the keys dangling in her hand. "I've got them!"

Nabooru nodded. "Alright then. Give them to Linebeck then come back and help me with Byrne."

"Ok!" she panted, sounding a little too excited, then darted off after Oshus.

"Alright, you two. Go ahead and get in line with the others. We're not out of the kettle yet."

Midna started forward briskly but hesitated when she saw Sheik wasn't following.

Nabooru fixed him with a stern look. "What are you waiting for, Shadow?"

Sheik met Midna's worried expression for a moment, then shook his head with a heavy sigh. "I'm not coming. You guys go on ahead, I've got something I need to do."

His grip on the gun in his hand tightened painfully until his knuckles whitened.

"Shadow..." Nabooru started in a tone that brooked no nonsense, but Sheik cut her off.

"Look, Coach, we really don't have time to waste arguing. You need to get these students out of here."

"Exactly, and that's what I intend to do. All of them," she said, gesturing to include him and Midna, but Sheik shook his head again, feeling determined.

"I can't go with you, Coach."

Nabooru planted her hands on her hips and glared at Sheik. "Listen, boy, if you think that getting yourself killed like Byrne here is going to absolve you of your guilt for your part in today's events, then you're a fool. As far as I'm concerned, you've already done that, and forty people have you to thank for their lives. Now stop playing the hero and come on."

"This has nothing to do with that," Sheik returned stiffly, and it was only partly a lie. His main reason for staying was to rescue Link and Aryll, but he couldn't deny that part of him was hoping that if he could stop Ganondorf once and for all, he might be able to assuage some of his guilt for joining up in the first place.

"I'm not taking no for an answer, Shadow."

"And I'm afraid you're not the one giving orders anymore, Coach," he replied softly, and the older woman sighed.

"Fool boy..." she muttered, then turned as Jolene jogged back over.
"Everything's ready, Coach," she said, leaning down to grab Byrne's legs. "Linebeck's already in the bus. He's gonna wait to start it up until everyone's in."

"Good work," Nabooru said, stooping low to grab the boy's arms, and together they heaved his body into the air.

"Wait, what about those two?" Jolene asked, gesturing to Zant and Arrghus awkwardly with her foot.

"Leave them," Nabooru said, at the same moment that Sheik spat out a savage, "Let them rot."

There was an awkward pause, then with a grunt, the two women headed off to the door where students were already pouring out into the sunlight beyond. Jolene gave them a quizzical look over Nabooru's shoulder, but the Coach never looked back.

"Where are you going?" Midna began instantly the moment the adults were out of earshot, turning her question into a demand and fixing Sheik with a glower.

"There's just something I need to do real quick," he said in what he hoped was a reassuring voice. "I'll be out in a couple of minutes, ok? Just go get on the bus with the others and I'll see you soon."

Midna didn't budge. "And what's so important that you seem to think it's worth risking your life over?"

"It's... It's nothing, ok?" he lied, knowing full well that if he told her of Link and Aryll's predicament, she'd demand to come along. "Just go and-"

"If it's nothing, then forget it and come with me!"

"I can't! Midna, come on. Get on the bus."

"No! Sheik, tell me right now, or I'm not leaving!"

Sheik groaned, massaging his eyes with his palms. "If I tell you, will you leave?"

"No," she replied primly, and he threw his hands up in exasperation.

"Then why on earth should I tell you?! Midna, please, get on the bus. Get out of here. I need to know you're safe."

"Well, then it's a good thing I'm staying with you," she said matter-of-factly, stepping closer to him and slipping her hand in his.

"What? No-!"

"Sheik, I'm not leaving you again." Her expression had gone suddenly fierce, her eyes flashing dangerously. "Never again. I'm not gonna sit out there, wondering where you are and if you're ok like some princess from a story. Either you're taking me with you, or we're both getting on that bus with Linebeck and Nabooru and going home."

Sheik met her determined gaze with his own pained one. His choices were either ensure Midna's safety and abandon Link and Aryll or attempt to save them and risk that Midna might be killed alongside them all. It was a lose-lose situation. He groaned internally, his hand tightening on hers.

"You stay next to me." He grumbled and she gave him a short nod in reply, an impish smile blossoming on her face, her orange-streaked hair bouncing in it messy ponytail.
Hand in hand, they left the gym, Sheik silently cursing all the while.
Link was still snarling at Ganondorf when the door slammed behind his friend.

"Sakon!" Ganondorf barked, abruptly cutting off his insane laughter. Sakon, who'd been cackling along with him in traditional henchman fashion, flinched and quickly turned to face the larger male, carefully avoiding making eye contact.

"Y-yes, my liege?" Sakon inquired timidly. To Link's astonishment, the twitchy boy sounded at once fearful and... awestruck? His deference seemed more appropriate for a servant to his master rather than two homicidally inclined teens who were working in tandem. And what was up with this 'liege' nonsense?

"Leave us. I need to speak with Hero alone. Go and check up on Vaati; he hasn't reported in, and these cameras can only see so far."

Sakon quickly gave his assent, performing a jerky yet unmistakable bow before all but fleeing from the office, letting the door slam shut behind him.

Link was baffled for a moment at the boy's behavior before remembering he was supposed to be terrified. Straining his arms against his duct tape bindings, he silently cursed Sheik for wanting to keep up pretenses, though deep down he understood that it was necessary for them to have even gotten his far. Still, he didn't have to restrain him so tightly...

Turning slowly, he quietly examined Principal Sahasrahla's office with feigned interest, carefully avoiding looking at Ganondorf lest he fly off the handle again. It was dim; the blinds having been drawn to keep out prying eyes, and the overhead lights remained off. Narrow beams of sunlight lanced through the gaps between the blinds, the only source of illumination in Ganondorf's center of command.

Grimacing at the rather large blood stain beneath his feet, he turned to examine the shattered remnants of some sort of electrical device, then jumped when he heard another wail come out of the closet across the hall.

Ganondorf chuckled at his reaction. "Yes, Hero. Your precious little sister, along with a few others, are being held in the storage room. She's only a few feet away. Go on. Go to her."

Link almost did it. He shifted his weight as though preparing to move, but something in Ganondorf's sinister smile had him pausing. He swallowed, mulling it over, then eventually decided to stay. If anything, Ganondorf’s smile widened.

"What is it, Hero? Don't trust me? That is wise. You ought to know by now that I intend to see you dead."

Deep down, Link knew he should have been more frightened by this information, but somehow he'd known this all along. Ganondorf wanted him dead. Well, so what? He wanted Ganondorf dead too for the things he'd done today. It only seemed fair for him to reciprocate his feelings. Unfortunately, only one of them could get their wish, and at the rate things were going, it wasn't going to be Link.

"Still, no need to be uncivil. I don't intend to kill you just yet. I need an audience first, you see, which is why I need Vaati to get here. And Zant, once he's finished with his business in the gymnasium.
Until then, you're more than welcome to spend your last few minutes with your sister. Don't worry, though… She'll be joining you not long after. Along with the rest of the pathetic urchins in this school."

He felt a dark hatred rising within him, seething in his gut. "You're a monster…" he growled, and Ganondorf laughed menacingly.

"Monster?" He tilted his head to the side, seemingly tasting the word, mulling it over as if not quite sure what it meant. "Monster? No, not quite. Not yet at least. But soon… Yes, soon I'm sure there will be many who will call me that. Those who are weak-minded, those who cannot even begin to comprehend what I am destined to become. They will be jealous, of course, but then, who would not be? I will be the envy of every man and woman in the world."

Somehow, Link had the distinct impression that Ganondorf wasn't talking to him, but rather aloud to himself.

Sneering derisively, he spat, "Jealous? Of You? All you are is a dead man walking, Ganondorf. Even if you kill me, even if you kill everyone in this school, your death is assured. Whether the police do it or you're sent to the electric chair, you're going to pay with your life for the things you've done here today."

He was breathing heavily, and his arms were sore with the effort of straining against his bindings, but at the moment all of his attention was focused on the tall, impassive boy sitting before him. His dark red hair was neatly pulled back into a tail, his eyes flickering with a cruel light, the whites of his eyes contrasting with his dark skin. His jaw was firm, a crooked smirk stretching humorously across it as he regarded Link calmly over the desk.

Abruptly, he laughed, throwing his head back and roaring as though Link had just told a funny joke. Link found himself stepping back, stunned. Goddesses above, he really was mad…

"You have courage, Hero. Yes, perhaps you could be the one… It would be fitting. Already, my hatred for you burns above that of any other. You are, at the moment, my greatest foe. Not that there's anything great about you, of course." He scoffed at the notion, but Link didn't care. They were long past the point where insults still stung.

"What are you talking about?" Link spat, "What 'one'? You already said you were going to kill me. You're not chickening out, are you?"

Inwardly, he was screaming at himself to shut up, to stop antagonizing the psycho, but he ignored the voice. The blood was pounding in his head; something about being near Ganondorf was messing with his mind. He wanted nothing more than to rip his pompous head off with his bare hands. His arms strained again, the tape starting to cut into his wrists.

Ganon's eyes flashed malevolently, but he was silent. For a moment the two remained perfectly still, eyeing one another—Link furious, Ganon strangely considering.

Finally, Ganondorf broke eye contact, standing and drawing a gun from his pocket. He toyed with it for a moment looking thoughtful before setting it on the desk and striding to the window, peeking out through the blinds.

Link didn't feel any ease at Ganondorf relieving himself of his weapon. The man exuded such an air of malevolence that he made the cold metal weapon seem almost friendly by comparison; if anything, Link felt safer when the man had the gun in his hand because he knew what it could do.
He didn't make any motions toward grabbing it either. His hands were still bound, and at the moment there was little he could do but wait and watch. Out in the hall, the crying subsided a bit.

"What are you planning?" Link asked quietly. "I don't understand. Why not just kill me and be done with it? Spare the other students, they're not important anymore. I'm the one you want. Just kill me and let it end…"

Ganondorf snorted. "Not important? Hardly. Your death may be the final step, Hero, or it might not. They are insurance, you see. Now that I've managed to snag the attention of the entire nation, I'm going to execute you on national television. You'll be on your knees, beginning for me to grant you death, and I, the great and merciful Ganondorf, will oblige. And, if ending your life isn't enough to demonstrate my worth, I will kill each and every last person in this building, until the Goddesses see how powerful I've become, see that I am willing to do whatever it takes, and give me what is rightfully mine!"

He spoke the entire time facing the window, but at the end, he turned abruptly raising his right hand into the air and clenching his fist. There, barely perceptible on the back of his fist, was the faint outline of three golden triangles, the top-most one slightly darker than the others.

Link stared blankly, not comprehending. "So… You drew the Triforce on your hand?"

Ganondorf laughed mockingly, his broad shoulders shaking with mirth. "You truly do not understand, do you? I drew nothing, Hero. What you see before you, etching itself into my skin, is the sacred Triforce of legends. A part of it, at least. I intend to claim the blessing of the mighty Din, the Triforce of Power. It is nearly complete. And soon, I shall be more powerful than any other man or woman on the planet!"

*He's insane… Link thought weakly, shock rolling over him at Ganon's words. It's not possible… They were only legends! The Triforce wasn't real…*

Ganondorf was watching Link's expression with amusement. Quickly, Link drew himself out of his reverie. "You've lost it. The Triforce is just a-"

"Legend?" Ganondorf cut in, and Link bit his tongue. "Indeed. There are many old tales that speak of the Triforce. The golden triangles, the very symbols of the goddesses themselves. When brought together, they possess the ability to grant the deepest desire of your heart."

Link tried to keep up his façade of cool disbelief, but inwardly he was hanging on Ganon's every word.

"I'm sure you recall a few of them, Hero. There are many."

"Stories!" Link cut in sharply. "Just stories! A load of fairy tales!"

"Perhaps." Ganondorf mused, leaning back against the desk, folding his arms across his chest. "Tales have a way of distorting with time. However, even the most outlandish of tales contain a scrap of truth."

"So, what? You're trying to tell me that the Hero of Time really had a magical ocarina that he used to travel through the ages? That the Hero of Winds could really make the air obey his every command and saved the world with a pirate princess and an enchanted talking boat?" He tried to insert every ounce of sarcasm he could muster.

Ganondorf chuckled mirthlessly. "All that and more."
Link groaned, rolling his eyes. "I'm going to be killed by a lunatic…"

Ganon went on, not hearing him.

"There really was, once, a line of Hylian monarchs whose noble blood protected the Triforce of Wisdom. Always, whenever one owner died, another princess would be born, bearing the golden mark upon her hand. There really were legendary men who, with the Triforce of Courage, transformed into wolves or traveled the Realm of Darkness freely, capable of performing extraordinary feats. And… there really was a King of Thieves, who ransacked the country with his armies of the night... Who, with the Triforce of the Power, evaded death for thousands of years…"

His voice had grown deathly quiet, but his eyes glowed with a sinister light.

Link had gone very still. Every part of his mind was rejecting what Ganondorf was saying, writing it off as delusions of grandeur, arguing that all the silly legends his grandmother had told him as a child were nothing more than puerile nonsense. But somewhere in his gut, he couldn't resist the allure of Ganondorf's words.

Everything he was saying sounded… right. Familiar, somehow. Almost nostalgic. The back of his left hand began to itch slightly, and Link struggled to scratch it, welcoming the distraction.

"You sure know a lot about history…" Link muttered, trying to change the topic to a safer one, away from heroes, princesses, and villains. Anything to help him clear his head; he was almost starting to believe Ganondorf's mad ranting.

He smiled thinly at Link's comment. "I learned a great deal during my stint in Juvy."

Link cringed; Ok, not a safer topic…

"You see, I had an… inspired… teacher." Ganondorf laughed slightly at some private joke. "His name was Aghanim, and he was once a famed historian. Unfortunately, he was shunned from the rest of the historical society for the direction his studies were taking him. Greatness is often misunderstood in its time. He was forced to take up a job as a counselor for troubled teens in order to make some money. It was there that he taught me all that he knew of the legends of old.

"Of how, when the King of Thieves had broken into the Sacred Realm to take the Triforce for his own, it split into three pieces, embedding themselves into the bodies of those who were most in tune with their values. Those who possessed one of the Triforce pieces were said to receive incredible blessings, becoming demi-gods in their own right. The Triforce has passed itself on, from person to person, many times since. And soon, I will become one as well, and my power will be unrivaled!"

Ganondorf's slow, malicious laughter chilled Link to his bones. Licking his lips, Link took another step back. "Well… Your teacher must be… proud…"

Ganon laughed all the harder. "What, you think I allowed him to live? I could not risk giving him the opportunity to interfere with my plans. He was never strong enough to do what I knew must be done. Once I take Power, I will rule this land!"

Link felt sick to his stomach. He wasn't worried about his plan; surely not. After all, it was literal insanity. Just old, religious hokum, nothing that needed to be considered seriously... Still, maybe if he could shut Ganondorf up he'd feel better.

He silently wracked his brains, struggling to remember how the heroes of old defeated the King of Thieves.
"Ah, but- What about the other two pieces?" Link blurted out, and Ganondorf's laughter ceased. "All the Goddesses are equal. That means each Triforce piece wielder must be equal! Even if you do take Power, Wisdom and Courage will just team up and beat you. Just like they always do in the stories."

Ganondorf smirked. "Bah! When any two Triforce pieces are near each other, they resonate. I'll be able to feel when I'm near the other two. And when I am, I'd kill them, and seize their piece for my own. Before long, I'll be able to reassemble the actual Triforce, and with the Goddesses own sacred power, I shall do what none before me has done. I will become immortal. I will become a god."

The itchiness of Link's hand intensified, and he wriggled around in his bindings, seeking relief. "How do you know they'll even show up? Nobody has possessed a piece of the Triforce in centuries, and the royal family's bloodline has been lost for ages."

Link decided to ignore the fact that he now apparently believed that Ganondorf's plan was possible. Goddesses, his hand was driving him crazy…

"Your concern is touching," Ganondorf mocked, "but quite unnecessary. The Triforce pieces call to each other; they yearn to be reunited. Wisdom will come to me, whether she wants to or not. And when the princess is endangered, Courage will come to her rescue. He won't be able to resist the call, the singing in his blood. He will come, and then they both will die."

"How do you know it's a guy?" Link asked. He was just trying to buy time now. Maybe, if he could work his hands free… and scratch that blasted itch… he could figure something out before Ganondorf killed him.

Ganondorf burst into laughter again, but this time it seemed as though he actually saw humor in something. After a moment of Link's confused stare, Ganon let his laugh die, looking surprised. "You actually don't know? Idiot boy… What do they teach you in this school? There is a uniqueness about the Triforce pieces, Hero. They don't go to just anyone."

"I know, I know," Link cut in bitterly, not enjoying getting his intelligence mocked by his archenemy. "The person who claims it has to exemplify the trait unless you take it from someone who already bares it, you already told me."

"No, Hero. There is a second stipulation. The three who the Triforce pieces originally fled to, they are the only rightful bearers. And for that reason, every wise princess, every courageous lad, every man of power… they are the same."

Link stared at him blankly. "The same what?"

Ganondorf rolled his eyes. "The same person. They are reborn, time and time again. Their bodies may change, but their souls do not. The conflict never ends for them, just as time never ends for the Goddesses. They are legends in truth, for you see, legends never truly die."

Link felt like all the air had left his body. Wait, was that true? How had he not known that? Had Auru ever mentioned that in class? Every hero was the same boy, reborn? Every princess who bore the mark of wisdom on her hand was the same as the one before? And every greedy pig who bore power…

His eyes darted quickly to Ganon's hand then away again. If Ganon actually managed to take power, then did that mean…?

Ganon was smiling cruelly down at Link. "I see you've come to the obvious conclusion. Yes, Hero. When I claim the Triforce of Power as my own, as is my right, it will be proof that I am the same as
those who have come before me. I am the King of Thieves, reincarnate."

Link's throat felt dry. Everything he was saying was impossible, and yet... Somehow, in the depths of his gut, he knew he was telling the truth. Ganondorf, the legendary King of Evil, was standing in front of him. And somewhere in the world, there would be a girl, unaware of her royal blood, who would soon claim Wisdom if she had not already and become the Princess of Destiny...

And somewhere, there was a boy who...

Suddenly, something Ganondorf had said earlier popped back into his head.

"You have courage, Hero. Yes, perhaps you could be the one..."

He felt as though he'd been punched in the stomach. He could be the one... The One. The bearer of the Triforce of Courage. The Hero of Time.

His hand was itching so badly it was painful, but he no longer tried to scratch it. He was too terrified to even touch it. It couldn't be him... It wasn't possible! He didn't feel courageous, he felt like wetting himself! No, no, he couldn't be the one... Ganondorf was just saying it was a possibility...

Ganondorf looked down at the laptop, scowling at something Link couldn't see. "Sakon and Vaati should have reported back by now... Incompetence as usual."

He turned to look back at Link, and he subtly adjusted himself so his left hand was completely hidden behind his back.

"Well, Hero, you're in luck. Your last few moments with your sister have been granted." Striding forward, he seized Link's arm and dragged him backward. Link didn't even try to fight, his mind was too busy whirling.

He flung the office door open, letting crash against the wall, then two steps later he heard the sound of him throwing open another door in the same manner.

"Wait here, Hero. And do try to be patient; I promise, I'll be back to kill you soon."

And with that, Link was shoved into the dark storage room with a grunt, the door slamming shut behind him.

"Alright, hurry up and go. And make it quick, that girl's life is in your hands now."

The EMT gave Rusl a rather flat look as if to say he knew how to do his job, thank-you-very-much. Over his shoulder, Malon sent him a tremulous smile from within the ambulance where she was sitting awkwardly in a stiff plastic seat, desperately clinging to the unconscious girl's hand. The door to the ambulance was slammed in his face before he could think of anything comforting to say to his son's friend, and with a piercing wail the ambulance set off down the road.

Rusl sighed wearily, wiping the sweat from his brow. He knew, at least on a logical level, what must be happening in that school, but nothing could have prepared him for that sight. In his mind's eye, the image of the pale, dying girl instantly became Colin, and with a grunt he shook it off, steeling himself for the task at hand.

Silently whispering a prayer for her survival, he turned back to the green haired teen who stood awkwardly to the side, blood covering her clothing and tear stains on her cheeks. She was trembling as she stared blankly at the spot the ambulance had vanished from, her dark verdant eyes sunken and
"Saria?" He nudged gently, hoping he'd gotten her name right. Colin had so many friends, it was sometimes hard to keep track. It would seem he was correct, however, because with a jolt the girl jerked her head in his direction, her eyes widening with panic.

"It's ok," he reassured quickly, making soothing gestures as he placed his hand on her shoulder, trying to calm her frantic breathing as he gently steered her to a quieter place. "You're safe now. You got out, and you got the girl to the ambulance. You've done all you can. It's up to her and the doctors now. Just… try to relax."

He had some serious questions he needed to ask her, but before he could do that she needed to calm down. She'd been near hysterical ever since she and the other girls had managed to escape the school.

About ten minutes ago, he'd been trying his best to quell the ever-imposing media when the officers surrounding the southern face of the building had given up a cry of alarm. Completely forgetting about the reporters, he'd full-on sprinted the length of the frontage road, dodging cops and medical personnel alike until he'd gotten there.

By the time he'd arrived, the small, rag-tag band of girls had already completed their mad dash to safety. Most of them had been on their knees, hugging each other and sobbing in relief, all except for three.

Two of them he'd recognized on sight as friends of his son, though their names took him a second to recall. Both of them, the rebellious one with the short green hair and the pretty red-head from up north were covered in blood, pleading feverishly with an EMT as he loaded their friend, a senior by the look of her with a horrible gunshot wound to the abdomen, onto a gurney. It seemed they were both uninjured, all of the blood on their clothes belonging to the unconscious senior who they'd carried from the school, but both were begging to be allowed on the ambulance to accompany the girl to the emergency room.

Rusl had stepped in at that moment, allowing Malon to accompany her but keeping Saria at his side; he told himself it hadn't mattered which one stayed and which one left, but deep down he knew why he'd chosen that way. Saria had been Colin's friend since they were in elementary school; Malon he hadn't met until seventh grade.

Finally arriving at his squad car, he opened the trunk and handed her a bottle of water. She took it gratefully, first taking a long swig before using the rest to wash the blood off her arms.

"Do you think s-she'll be ok?" she asked shakily, her arms still quivering. Unable to completely control her limbs she accidentally spilled half the water on the floor in her effort to clean herself.

Rusl sighed, not wanting to lie but not knowing how to answer without driving the girl further into despair. "I… don't know… But who's to say. Young people are terribly resilient. Honestly, I'm amazed she lasted as long as she did. You did well."

"It… It wasn't me…" she said, hiccupping softly. Rusl quirked an eyebrow.

"What do you mean? You weren't one of the ones who carried her out?"

"N-No, I mean, I was, but…" Here she swallowed, and her eyes swam with tears once more. "Me and Malon, we only carried her. That's all. It was everyone else who…"

"Everyone else?" He said gently, glancing in the direction they'd come from, "You mean the other
"No, I meant... It's just... there were so many..." Her voice choked off, and Rusl gently patted her on the back.

"It's ok, take it easy. Here, how about you tell me what happened from the beginning to the moment you and Malon brought the girl out-"

"Anju," she cut in fiercely, as though saying her name would keep her alive, and Rusl nodded, conceding.

"Anju. Of course. Until you and Malon brought Anju out, and then we can call your parents. I'm sure they'll be glad to hear you're safe."

The girl nodded rather jerkily, taking a moment to swallow and steel herself before beginning her tale in a wobbly voice. Rusl had hoped that somewhere along the way she'd mention Colin, but she never did. He had to stop himself from cutting her off and asking her outright; he couldn't allow himself to show her weakness, not when she desperately needed to lean on his strength. Besides, there were more lives than just that of his son at stake today, he couldn't allow himself to show favoritism, not even for his son.

Still, despite his anxiety for his boy, he couldn't help but stare in amazement at the tale she was unfolding. From being herded into a classroom full of other students by strange men with guns, to watching as all of the boys were separated from them because Ganondorf was looking for a particular individual; all of it was useful information that helped to construct a better picture. Most of it was news to him; so Ganondorf did have a plan after all... But why would he hold an entire school hostage just to find one person? Shoving the question to the back of his mind, he continued listening.

After hearing of the new girl, someone named Zelda, who was brought in later on and hearing of the boy, Kafei (his first thought was of the mayor's son, but he quickly banished it; surely the mayor's children didn't attend public school), who'd stayed in with the girls to protect his girlfriend, the one who was now on her way to the emergency room, he jumped at the sound of a name.

"Wait, Aryll? Aryll Hero? She was in the room with you?" He felt his heart rise. Here, finally, was a chance to segue into Colin's whereabouts.

"Y-Yes..." She said, her voice sounding strangled.

"Well, where is she? I didn't see her with the others..."

Saria's lip quivered, and then suddenly she was bawling noisily into his chest. Rusl felt his blood run cold. Closing his eyes, he took a deep, steadying breath. That wasn't a good sign... He hoped he wouldn't have to make an unpleasant phone call to Uli and Granny Hero. Gently patting the girl on the back, he tried his best to keep his voice steady.

"Shh, come on. It's ok. We'll get back to that later. What happened next?"

As the girl pulled back from him, he tried his best to banish the image of that sweet blonde girl from his head. *Please, don't let her be dead...* he pleaded inwardly. *Please let her and my son be alright.* Saria continued her story through wracking sobs.

"W-We were in the c-class, and... The shooter g-got mad at us for b-being loud, so he... He tried to s-shoot A-Anju, but Zelda... She kicked him, and then Kafei tackled him, and we took away the gun, and then we tied him up like Jason Bourne..."
Rusl was admittedly impressed. He didn't know Zelda or Kafei, but whoever they were, they had twice the courage of any man in his squad. And twice the recklessness. He chose to ignore the bit about Jason Bourne; the poor girl was clearly emotionally unstable.

"Ok, so then what? You tried to escape?"

Saria nodded frantically, her fists burrowing into her eyes as though trying to squash her tears. "Kafei took his gun and led us out, but then we... We got caught by S-S-Sakon, and he tried to shoot K-Kafei, but Anju j-jumped in the way, and then Kafei... He just left us! He ran off after Sakon, and there were bullets flying everywhere, and Anju was dying on the floor, and we were captured again by a bunch of guys, and they took Aryll away..."

So... that was how the girl was injured... She'd selflessly risked her life to save her boyfriend. If Zelda and Kafei had a great deal of courage, then Anju must be the Hero of Time reincarnate. And Aryll? They'd taken her? Why? And Where?

"Saria," he said slowly, "Why did they take Aryll? And to where?"

She seemed to struggle for a moment, her eyes looking distant as if she were seeing something in her head. "They... They took her to Ganondorf... Sakon said that Ganondorf wanted her for some reason and that she wasn't to be harmed..."

Rusl gaped in shock. "Ganondorf wanted her? She was the student Ganondorf was looking for? But why?!"

Saria looked frightened and Rusl's change in tone. Her eyes widened uncertainly and she shook her head frantically from side to side to say that she didn't know. He made a mental note to tone it down a bit. It wouldn't do to scare her into silence before he could glean any pertinent information out of her.

Regardless, the things these children had gone through today... Still, he couldn't imagine how they'd managed to escape being captured again with an injured girl. He asked as much.

"I-It wasn't us..." She mumbled, wiping her face on her sleeve. "It was Link and Sheik..."

Rusl's eyebrows shot into his hair. Link? Again? How many people would that foolish boy try to save today?

"Link and... Sheik? How did they save you?" In his mind, he imagined a similar scenario to what the quarterback had reported; Link tumbling dramatically through the ceiling to save the day. That seemed unlikely though. He waited patiently for Saria to answer; she was staring at the road beneath them in confusion.

"He... Sheik, I mean, he just came up and told them to leave. And they listened to him. I-I don't know why... Unless..."

The conclusion dawned on them simultaneously.

"He must be one of them," Rusl said, looking furious, but Saria quickly shook her head, looking panicked.

"N-No! That can't be! He's Link's best friend! I've known him for ages, and he wouldn't do that! Besides, if he was a bad guy, why did he help us?"

"Help you? How?" Rusl's face was a cool mask. Inwardly, he felt rage seeping through his gut.
Ganondorf was the leader, so logically only he could give orders like that. Clearly, he had others, captains he supposed, who were in control of the 'little people'. It was too early to make assumptions like that, but it made a certain amount of sense; it explained how he was able to control so many students and how he managed to pull off a stunt of this magnitude. But how many were there other than Sheik?

Saria still looked frightened as she hastily tried to explain. "He told us what to do! He used part of his shirt to cover the bullet hole and told us where the exit was! He and Link stayed behind to find Aryll once we told them what had happened! I promise, he's on our side! He has to be!"

Rusl was silent for a moment as he contemplated her story. Assuming that Sheik was working alongside Ganondorf but hadn't known of Aryll's abduction, then Ganondorf wasn't fool enough to trust all of his cronies with his true intentions. All the worse for him; it'd be harder to figure out what he was up to. It wasn't likely that an escaped student would be able to tell him much, even if they had heard one of the shooters talking. Link and this Sheik kid were clearly working together in some fool scheme to rescue Aryll. He could only pray that Saria was right and that Sheik really was on their side. Still… One student shot, one kidnapped, and one missing in action… Their escape didn't come without sacrifice…

Saria wasn't liable to give him anything else of any use. He'd need to corroborate her story with another… What was the name of that other girl she'd mentioned, the one who had kicked out the shooter’s legs? He wouldn’t mind talking to her.

"Saria… what about the other girl? Zelda, was it? Where is she?"

He regretted his question immediately. Saria, who was only starting to regain composure, instantly lost it again, sagging to her knees and wailing. Rusl twisted his mouth wryly. Sure, she'd been through a great deal today, but this was starting to get ridiculous. Maybe he should hold off the rest of his questions until she regained control of herself…

Between sobs, he managed to understand a few words. "She was… leading us… to the exit… but Vaati… tried to stop us… She distracted him so… we could escape but… b-but… she never…"

He understood. She'd provided the distraction so the others could get out but hadn't followed. Clearly, Saria expected the worst, and inwardly Rusl agreed. He highly doubted she was still alive.

So. One shot, one taken, one missing, and one dead. And those were only the ones he knew of. Truly not one of their better days.

Sighing, he leaned down to tell her that they were going to take a break and let her call her parents, but he froze as panicked yells came from the east. Straightening up quickly and jerking his head toward the sound, he caught sight of the cause of the commotion and felt his jaw drop in shock. For there, careening wildly around the side of the school building, teetering on two wheels as it made a daring hairpin turn, was a bright yellow school bus.

Even as he watched, utterly floored, something slammed into the roof of the vehicle, puncturing the ceiling with a bang. It took a second for him to realize what it was: bullets. Someone from the school was shooting at the bus as it made its getaway.

"Return fire!" he bellowed, running forward to the line of caution tape that surrounded the school, barely aware that Saria had followed him as he struggled desperately to be heard over the terrified screams of reporters and students alike and the pinging of bullets on metal. "Cover them! Protect that bus!"
As it turned out, he hadn't needed to give the order. Even as he yelled himself hoarse, members of the S.W.A.T. team were darting forward, crouching down behind cars and shooting at the windows. For a moment all that could be heard was the sound of gunfire, the tinkling of glass as windows broke both on the bus and the school and the roar of the bus engine as it lumbered speedily toward them.

Almost too late, Rusl realized where the bus was headed: directly towards him. Seizing Saria's arm, he bolted, dragging her as far away from the area as he could.

Some of the other officers weren't so lucky; they dove aside mere moments before the bus came blazing past, bullets ricocheting in every direction as they hit the bus or the surrounding emergency response vehicles. Some of the officers got up and continued returning fire, but the rest darted after the bus.

Rusl joined them, not even realizing he was still holding on to Saria's arm. The bus broke straight through the police perimeter, yellow tape dangling from the front bumper like streamers, zooming quickly over the road and swinging out onto the abandoned gravel parking lot next door where it attempted to skid to a halt. The result was a wild fishtail as the wheels spun on loose dirt. The bus swung around, and the occupants slammed into the windows, screaming in fear. Finally, in a dramatic cloud of dust, the bus came to a stop and the engine went dead.

There was a pause as the officers stopped and stared bewildered at the bus, panting heavily. With a metallic creak, the door swung open, and in a rush the students began pouring out in a veritable flood, running to the officers, some crying, some whooping with giddy, adrenaline-fueled delight at the craziness of their ride. Rusl found himself straining to examine every face as it exited, scanning hopefully for a glimpse of his son. But as more and more students got off and the bus eventually emptied, he felt his heart sink. He wasn't there.

He came to a halt a couple feet from the headlights, his shoes crunching pitifully on the gravel beneath him, feeling the chill of the wind and the feeble sunlight attempt to warm him. To his surprise, Saria jerked her wrist out of Rusl's hand with a shriek.

"Mido!"

The short, curly red-head who Rusl recognized as his son's best friend had just barely stepped out of the bus when he was tackled to the ground by the excitable girl. Rusl felt his heart jump. Mido… perhaps he knew…

Stepping forward intently, he froze when his eyes caught sight of the next person exiting the bus. An elderly man, with white hair and a bushy mustache, delicately cradling a small boy in his arms. Rusl's throat clenched as he saw the blood that stained the boy's hair, and he knew.

The man caught Rusl's eye, and he moved toward him slowly. His limbs were trembling, though from the strain of holding him or from his emotion Rusl couldn't tell.

"Here," Rusl said, holding his arms out to take the boy, but the old man shook his head.

"No, son," the man replied, sounding weary. "I've got him, he doesn't weigh much. They might need you at the back though. There is another."

Rusl nodded, and together they walked the dusty length of the bus, passing Saria and Mido still embracing on the dirt, coming to a stop by the emergency backdoor. Rusl was the only officer left, the rest having left to escort the other students back to join the girls who had escaped a few moments earlier.
The back door stood ajar, and inside he could see two athletic looking women trying to hoist the body of a large, muscular boy out the back door. The smaller of the two who sported a long brunette ponytail was outside of the bus, clearly straining, trying to support the boy's weight by holding his legs while the other woman attempted to angle herself out of the bus without dropping him.

"Here," Rusl said quickly, stepping forward and grabbing the boy bridal style, relieving the two women. With a grunt, he slowly lowered the body to the ground, careful not to step on his long black hair. His body felt so cold…

With a heavy sigh, the taller woman, with darker skin and shorter, red hair, wiped her brow and leaped out of the bus, landing beside Rusl with a crunch of tiny pebbles.

"Jolene," she said tiredly, "go check on Linebeck. I don't think he's gotten out of the bus yet."

The shorter woman, Jolene, nodded fervently and climbed back into the bus.

"Was he injured during the escape?" Rusl asked quietly, referring to the man on the bus as the old man gently knelt and laid the smaller boy's body beside the muscular one. He'd gotten an ornate silver flute from somewhere and laid it across the smaller boy's chest.

"No," the taller woman snorted, rolling her eyes. "Likely he's just scared stiff. He's a strange man, Linebeck."

"A teacher?"

"A janitor," the old man answered, rising to his feet. "Though one to whom we owe our lives, at least partially."

The taller woman rolled her eyes and scoffed.

"I'm sorry," Rusl said, clearly missing something, "I don't know your names. You're both teachers?"

"Yes. I am Oshus, the marine biology teacher, and this is Coach Nabooru."

"Hello," he said, shaking their hands. The formality felt strange as they stood over the bodies of two dead teenage boys. "I am Rusl Smith, the chief of police."

The two adults nodded politely though they looked bone tired, and Rusl sighed.

"Here, I'll go get some officers to take these boys, and then you two can get some rest. But you can't leave the area until I ask you some questions. That goes for Jolene, Linebeck, and the students too."

The two teachers nodded and sat on the bus's bumper with quiet groans. Turning away, Rusl headed off, feeling grim. Two more deaths and all he cared about was finding his son. He needed to remember that there were more lives at stake here than just his child's. It was time to stop waiting; they needed to get in there and take Ganondorf out. As soon as they got these boys out of here, he'd give the order.

Passing Mido and Saria, he suddenly remembered what he'd meant to ask him. As he turned back, he caught a glimpse inside the bus where Jolene was exiting, arm in arm with a frazzled looking janitor. As he slid by them to get to the kids, he heard her coo gently at him, a look of slobbering adoration on her face, "Oh Linebeck, you were so brave back there with that boy… and when you were driving us to safety…"

Coming to a halt beside the two teens, he watched them for a moment, bemused. Mido had managed
to get back to his feet, but Saria was still clinging to him, sobbing into his neck. Mido was
awkwardly stroking her hair, though he looked pleased with the new turn of events. Clearing his
throat roughly, he watched them separate, Saria still sniveling, Mido's face flushing scarlet until he
realized who had made the noise.

"Mr. Smith!" He said, relieved, "You have no idea how good it is to see you… It's been crazy in
there!"

Rusl smiled thinly. He was in no mood for Mido's antics today. "Mido, yes, it's good to see you're
ok. I have a question for you…" He swallowed roughly, steeling himself for the worst. "Have you
heard anything about Colin? Or Aryll?"

Mido looked confused. "Colin? You mean he's not out yet? I thought we'd be some of the last to
escape…"

Rusl felt his heart sink. Mido hadn't seen him…

Saria looked horrified. "Colin? Oh my Goddesses, I completely forgot about him! Oh, Mr. Smith…"

Rusl shrugged off her pity, and instead addressed Mido. "No, there are still a number of students in
there. You're sure you haven't seen or heard anything that might…?"

Mido shook his head. "No, sir. Not at all. In fact, until Midna, the janitor, and Sheik busted in, I
hadn't seen-"

"Sheik?" Rusl cut in. "Link Hero's friend?"

"Yeah," Mido said, sending Rusl an odd look before launching into one of his long-winded,
rambling explanations, "See, Midna and the janitor snuck in, 'cause I guess they were gonna save us
or something, but they got caught by Zant and two other guys with guns. Zant was gonna kill them,
but then Sheik came in. He and Zant argued because I guess Ganondorf had given them both orders,
but Midna was supposed to be under Sheik's protection. But then Zant tried to kill Midna, so Sheik
just punched him in the throat, and he just sorta… died… Then this other shooter went crazy and
started shooting at everyone, and the other shooter, Byrne, jumped in front of me and…"

His diatribe cut off with a strangled choke. After an uncomfortable pause, he swallowed and pressed
on, somewhat unsteady.

"Well… anyway. He saved me, but he's dead now. Then the janitor picked up somebody's gun and
shot the other guy, and then we escaped. Midna and Sheik stayed behind, though most of us hadn't
even noticed until the bus was already taking off."

He said most of it in a rush, but years of having the boy over at his house had trained Rusl’s mind to
be able to follow along relatively well.

He inhaled deeply, then let it all out in a rush. So… Sheik helped these ones escape, too. Perhaps he
was on their side… And Byrne, another supposed bad guy, saving lives rather than taking… This
was a confusing day.

Patting Mido on the back, he said, softly, "That's alright, Mido. I'll take your full story later. For now,
go with Saria and try to get some rest. You've had a rough day. You both have."

The two nodded and mumbled their assent, but Rusl barely heard them. As he walked back to join
the other officers, his mind whirled. Colin was still missing. Aryll had been kidnapped. Ganondorf
had some mad scheme that nobody knew about. And students were risking their lives, playing hero;
Link, Sheik, Midna, Kafei…

Some he knew well and cared for, others he’d never even heard of. But now, all of them were his responsibility.

And he would save them. All of them. He would.
When the door to her prison finally opened again, Aryll let out a frightened squeak and hid her head in her arms. Sitting there, trembling and hunched over in a corner next to a shelf full of computer paper, she silently willed herself not to start crying again.

_Please don't be here for me, please don't be here for me, please don't be here for me…_

"Wait here, Hero," she heard a deep, commanding voice say, “and do try to be patient; I promise I'll be back to kill you soon," and with an all-too-familiar grunt she heard someone stumble inside and fall to the floor.

Aryll whipped her head up in shock just as the closet door slammed shut, her eyes growing wide with disbelief. There, sprawled out on the thin, scratchy carpet in front of her, was Link. Her brother was here.

For a moment, she was stunned into silence. Warm tendrils of relief and joy at seeing him again began trickling through her, fracturing the wall of icy fear that had closed around her heart ever since being imprisoned there in the dark. She felt inexplicably drained as she watched her brother slowly struggle to his knees, straining against the tape that bound his wrists behind his back in obvious discomfort.

He had come for her. She couldn’t believe it. He had actually come for her…

She found her voice and let out an ecstatic, "Link!", suddenly all energy, launching herself from her sitting position in the corner and tackling her big brother back to the ground.

He let out a surprised 'Oof!' as their bodies collided, landing heavily on his back, but she didn't care about the awkward situation or the fact that she was crushing his hands. Winding her arms around his neck, she buried her face in his shoulder and began half-laughing, half-sobbing into his shirt, a wave of conflicting emotion threatening to consume her.

Shoulders quaking, her heart still pounding uncontrollably in her chest, she managed to choke out a weak, "You're here… I can't believe…"

"Yeah, it's good to see you too, sis," he grunted from below her, sounding breathless and annoyed, "Now could you get your fat butt off of me? You're crushing my pancreas…"

Giggling stupidly, she hastened to obey, straightening up and sniffing, wiping her eyes on the backs of her hands. She couldn't stop herself from doing a once over with her eyes; he looked a little worse for the wear, with a dried bloody gash on his forehead near his hairline. His hair itself was a mess, and his pants were covered with dirt and dust. Somewhere along the line, he'd lost his beloved green hoodie, and she could now see he was wearing that stupid T-shirt for that Terminian band he loved so much, Skull Keeta.

In spite of it all, his face looked stern behind the paleness and exhaustion, his lips pursed in thought, his eyes steely grey as they regarded her with concern.

With a start, she realized his arms were still pinned awkwardly behind his back with duct tape, and she leaped into action.
"Oh, your hands! Sorry, I just got caught up in... Hold on, I've got something that can help... Here." She rifled quickly through a file cabinet next to the door, pulled a screw out of a drawer labeled 'Miscellaneous' and hastened to her brother's side.

As she knelt down and began picking at his bindings, he muttered a cursory thanks before jerking his head to the far side of the room and grunted, "What's up with them?"

Glancing up briefly to see what he was talking about, blowing her bangs out of her eyes as she did so, she grimaced as she remembered that she wasn't the only person being held captive in the tiny storage room.

Leaning against the far wall with her eyes closed, apparently asleep although she twitched occasionally, sat one of the attendants who worked in the office. At her side, hugging her knees to her chest, her wild eyes twitching fitfully around the room, sat the other, her once prim hair now every bit as frazzled as her expression.

Neither of the women had spoken to Aryll since she'd been brought in to join them. She wasn't sure if it was simply out of fear or if something more sinister had happened to them, but at the moment she couldn't bring herself to care; she had too many friends who were in danger, too many who she didn't know whether they lived or had been killed, and she and Link were being held captive themselves. She had no energy to waste worrying over those two women, not when there was nothing she could do to help them anyway.

Removing Link's bindings was taking longer than Aryll had thought it would. His wrists had been bound with several layers of tape as if someone had feared he'd break through them through brute force like he was actually the Hulk. His arms were side-by-side, wrists together, making it difficult to cut the tape without accidentally hurting him.

Still, after a couple frustrated minutes, she managed to create a big enough tear to work with. Seizing both edges, she gave an almighty tug, simultaneously ripping the tape in half and peeling it swiftly from Link's skin.

"Ok!" She said brightly, tossing the screw and the tape to the side, ignoring her brother's hiss of pain.

Link turned and sent her a dark glare as he massaged his newly liberated forearms. "Well gee, thanks for ripping all my arm hair out."

Aryll rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah, whiny butt. Don't be such a wuss."

Link grumbled something under his breath as he absently scratched at the back of his hand. Aryll gasped, her eyes widening in shock when she noticed what he was doing.

"Link! What in Din's name did you do to your hand?"

He stiffened oddly at her words. Hesitant, he turned his hand over and together the siblings stared down at the golden triangles that adorned the skin on the back of her brother's left hand.

"Obvious signs of guilt."

Aryll gave a pointed sniff and folded her arms crossly. "I cannot believe you did that. Grandma's going to kill you when she finds out you got a tattoo. And on your hand, of all places! What are you, mental? Did you think nobody would notice? And you didn't even tell me!"
Her brother said nothing, which irked her. He was obviously trying to play dumb. She couldn't believe he'd go out and get a tattoo, a tattoo!, and then hadn't told her! What, did he think he could hide it until he turned eighteen and was legally allowed to get them, or that she and Granny just wouldn't notice? Sometimes her brother's stupidity astounded even her.

"What is it, anyway? It looks familiar…" She asked curiously, cocking her head to the side.

"The Triforce," he replied, his voice sounding hoarse. "It's the Triforce, the Golden Triangles of Legend."

Aryll snorted. "Well, someone has an ego…"

His eye twitched, but he let her jab pass. He gave a loud, frustrated sigh and clenched his fists. The sound of his knuckles cracking reverberated disgustingly around the small room.

Rather than let it go, however, she reached out and grabbed his hand, pulling it closer to get a better look.

"Well, even though I still think you're an idiot, at least you got one that looks cool. It's really well done, too. You can barely even tell it's a tattoo; it looks like your skin itself turned golden, not like you got it inked on there at all. How come this one triangle is brighter than the others?"

"Huh?" He asked, sounding genuinely confused. He leaned forward, and together they peered at the back of his hand. The bottom right triangle was brighter than the others; it actually looked as though it were glowing.

"It's… the Triforce of Courage…" He whispered, sounding almost awed.

"More like the Triforce of Stupidity," she muttered, but Link didn't seem to have heard her. He was staring at the back of his left hand as though it were a poisonous snake that was going to strike him at any moment. She supposed that if she were the one having to look forward to explaining a tattoo to their grandmother, she wouldn't be very fond of it either.

Rolling her eyes, she sighed and turned back to him. "Look, just relax. We have bigger problems right now than Granny finding out you went and got a tattoo without permission. Like, say… how we're gonna get out of here?"

Giving his head a quick jerk to clear his thoughts, Link hid his hand behind his back as though to remove it from discussion and sent her a dry look.

"Get out of here? My daring rescue plan didn't exactly go as I had hoped, so I'm fresh out of ideas. It's your turn to think of something."

"Daring rescue plan?" She repeated, curious, and Link let out a bitter chuckle.

"Well, it was kinda a long shot anyway, but it was the only thing we could think of-"

"Whoa whoa whoa, we? What are you talking about? Start from the beginning. Who is we, and what was your plan? And… how did you even know I was here?"

Sighing, Link turned to lean his back against the rickety metal shelf and began recounting his tale. Almost too casually, he stuffed his hands in his pockets to hide the tattoo and let his legs stretch out their full length, coming just short of the opposite wall.

He began with him climbing through the air vents with Ashei and Shad in order to escape the
shooters when the attack had started, which led to him seeing her in Miss Marie's geometry class. From there, he'd made the decision to leave the other two kids and find a way to rescue her.

"That was stupid," Aryll cut in, scowling at her brother. "Brave, but stupid. You could have gotten out!"

"What, and leave you behind? No way! Besides, Granny would have killed me if I'd left you anyway, and she's scarier than Ganondorf any day."

Aryll offered a small smile at his jest but still wasn't appeased.

"Link… You should have gotten out. We're all granny has left, and if we both die here today… I just don't want her to be all alone…"

"She won't be," Link said, determination flashing through his eyes. "You're getting out of here, no matter what. Both of us are. The Heros aren't losing any more family members; not to Ganondorf, not to anyone."

Aryll snorted, rolling her eyes at his bravado, but inwardly she felt warmed by her older brother's confidence; Link never went back on his word.

"You remember what Grandpa used to say when he'd talk about how dad died?" He asked suddenly, resting his head back against the metal shelf behind him.

"You mean how he disobeyed his commanding officer's orders and ran back to try and save our uncle in the middle of that skirmish in Labrynna?"

"Well, yeah," he said, shifting around awkwardly; he must have realized how similar his actions that day trying to save her had been to their father trying to save their uncle. In the end, bravery and loyalty hadn't turned out so well for their father… "But I meant more specifically that hokey little saying he had."

"Uh… No?" Aryll replied, wracking her brain but coming up with nothing.

Link sent her a cocky grin. "He always used to say, 'A Hero is braver in the midst of battle than at the end.' I think he got it from a fortune cookie or something. Anyway, he said that's why dad ran back for our uncle; because he was a Hero. Like, literally. It was kind of a pun. So… I couldn't just leave you behind. Not after what dad did, not after grandpa's stories. Besides, you're my little sister."

Aryll felt a sudden surge of affection for her brother and contemplated dropping her scolding tone and giving him a hug… until he added, "I mean, who else can I trick into make me food and do the dishes when I'm lazy?"

"Brat," she said, smacking his arm, and they both laughed.

"Do you know what happened to the other two?" she asked, getting back to the topic at hand.

"Shad and Ashei?" He shook his head. "Nah. But I'm guessing they managed to make it out alive. I heard this sort of crashing noise just before I got out, which I assume was them breaking out of the vent and getting outside."

"Ok, so… What happened next?"

So he continued his story, telling of how he saw one of the shooters was about to kill Darunia and Ruto, and how he fell through the ceiling at just the right time, landing on top of the would-be killer.
She got the feeling he wasn’t telling the whole truth there, but she let him press on, telling her how he’d wandered through the halls looking for another entrance to the vents where he could travel safely when suddenly he’d run into Sheik.

"Sheik?" Aryll exclaimed, stunned. "He’s ok? He was trying to escape too?"

"Er… Not exactly…”

As he told her about Sheik revealing he was working with Ganondorf and their ensuing fight, she was horrified. Sheik? One of the bad guys? There was no way! It wasn't possible!

As Link went on to describe how he’d ducked a rather ferocious swing and used his apparently impressive innate fighting talents to ram his friend up against the wall, Aryll cut in with an aggravated "Wait, hold up, I'm confused. How could Sheik be a bad guy? I mean, he’s… Sheik."

She didn't really need to expound on that. Him being Sheik was all the explanation she need give.

Link looked uncomfortable. "Look, he's not a bad guy anymore. Can I finish my story already?"

"Fine…” Aryll grumbled petulantly. She wanted to argue but figured it would be better to let Link finish one tale before forcing him to begin another.

And press on he did. From Sheik almost shooting Link and his shocking news that his mother had passed away to him and Link running off together to find her. She could honestly say she was touched that her brother and his best friend were so worried about her…

His next sentence blew her out of the water.

"Wait, Zelda? And Anju?!!"

He nodded. "Yup. Go figure; I find the group you were with not even five minutes after you left."

Aryll's mouth was gaping like a fish out of water. "But… But… Where are they? Are they all right? Is Anju-?"

"Sheik and I took over the situation," he cut in gently. "Sheik sent the other armed guys off, and we got Zelda, Saria, Malon, and the others to carry Anju to an exit that Sheik knew of. As far as we know, they made it out ok."

They'd gotten Anju out? Then she was ok! Aryll stared at her brother in shock and, admittedly, awe. He’d done so much, helped so many people, and all she'd done is cower in a classroom and get captured…

Leaning her head against his shoulder, feeling suddenly tired, she let out a soft, "Maybe that tattoo does suit you…”

For some reason she couldn't understand, Link tensed up. Then, with a hesitant sigh, he draped his arm over her shoulder, giving her a comforting squeeze.

"So… what was yours and Sheik's plan? And why are you captured like me? Is it a part of it?"

Link opened his mouth to answer when suddenly the door once again swung open. Aryll jumped and at her side, her brother snapped his arms back behind him to hide where he'd been cut free.

In stepped a gaunt, sullen-faced boy with a lethal-looking Mohawk. Aryll felt fear seize her heart as he calmly regarded the huddled secretaries through deadened eyes and then turned his attention
slowly to the siblings in the corner.

"Ah… Hero… You have a visitor."

Link blinked in consternation, moving as though to stand.

"Sorry, not you. The other Hero."

It was Aryll's turn to be confused. Exchanging worried glances with her brother, she slowly rose to her feet on trembling legs, taking a hesitant step forward.

"Where…? Who is…?"

Aryll swallowed hard, trying in vain to get her voice to work. Before she could manage another question, the boy cut in.

"He's waiting in Ganondorf's office," He said, voice eerily monotone, standing back to let her out.

She gave a faint nod, feeling ill. Ganondorf's office… This couldn't be good.

Before she could take a step, her brother spoke up from behind her.

"If you hurt her, I'll make sure your end is long and painful. You have my word." His voice was rough and grating, like the growl of a wolf. Before she could turn back to give him a reassuring look, the quiet boy strode forward and seized her wrist, jerking her out of the relative safety of the storage room.

The door slammed shut behind her with a loud crack, making her squeak. Before she could gather her bearings, the boy opened the door directly across from them and she was dragged into what had once been the Principal's office.

He threw her roughly forward and she staggered a few steps before losing her balance and falling. She managed to get her arms up, bracing for impact with the ground but to her surprise, she was caught by a pair of soft, warm arms.

"Aryll!" A voice gasped, sounding relieved.

Eyes snapping open, Aryll stared up in confusion at the gentle blonde-haired face above her.

"C-Colin?" She breathed, not understanding, letting him pull her to her feet and envelope her in a bone-crushing hug.

"Oh Goddesses, you're alright!" He let out a forced laugh, holding her out at arm's length to get a better look at her. Colin himself looked haggard; his skin pale, worry lines etched into his face. His slate-grey eyes bored into her own cerulean ones, almost as though they were palpating for injuries in her soul.

Finally, something within her clicked, and with a sudden cry, she rushed forward, hugging him fiercely.

"I thought… You were just gone, and I thought…" She managed weakly between relieved sobs, painfully aware of how warm and real and stable he was, letting him support her weight as her own legs didn't feel up to the task.

"Shh…" He whispered softly, stroking her hair softly. "It's alright. It's gonna be alright. I'm gonna get you out of here…"
With the shock of seeing her boyfriend alive and healthy before her, she hadn't spared a glance for the rest of the room. With her face buried in the crook of Colin's neck, she didn't see the indomitable figure sitting leisurely in the principal's chair. It didn't stop her from hearing him, however, and her body froze in sheer terror as the sound of his dark, booming laughter echoed around the room.

"Ah, how… touching." She heard him remark sadistically.

Rigidly, Aryll pulled away from Colin and turned to face the man behind the shooting. There, grinning humorlessly at her, his eyes like black pools that seemed to swallow what little light there was around them, sat the one who had started this all. Ganondorf.

"What…?" she began weakly, then stopped, distracted. Ganondorf sported the same odd tattoo as Link, though on the other hand.

"Y-You made a promise…" Colin said, sounding strained, almost pleading, and Aryll's attention was drawn swiftly back to her boyfriend with an alarming jolt.

Promise? Colin had made a promise with **Ganondorf**?

Ganondorf laughed again, sending ripples of ice through her veins.

"True, I did. Normally I'd just kill you both, but I'm feeling rather generous at the moment. After all, I have all the students I need; two more will avail me nothing. And I have my sacrifice. Yes, Smith, take your woman and flee. Flee like the coward you are. You have served your purpose."

Collin hesitated a moment, disbelief obvious on his face, then quickly grabbed Aryll's arm to drag her backward toward the door. Aryll felt numb, Ganondorf's words echoing in her head. He had served his purpose? What purpose? Colin couldn't possibly…

Link's revelation about Sheik secretly being in on Ganondorf's plans resounded throughout her head, and Aryll tore her arm from her boyfriend's grip with a snarl.

"Stop!" She cried out, ignoring the wounded, desperate emotion that tainted her words. Colin stumbled in surprise, looking frantic. Ganondorf merely cocked his eyebrow at her in amusement.

She directed her gaze at him, still terrified, yet somehow now emboldened by her fear.

"What do you mean 'served his purpose'?"

Aryll's vehement demand seemed to echo around the silent office for a moment, and all was still. Slowly, a cruel smile worked its way across Ganondorf's face, his golden eyes glowing with amusement.

"Aryll, come on…" Colin hissed hurriedly in her ear, once again grabbing her arm, but she slapped his hand away.

"Come now, Smith," Ganondorf chuckled darkly, "What's wrong? Isn't honesty the most important part of a working relationship? Surely you're not going to keep this from her?"

Colin had frozen, looking petrified, his wide eyes gazing at her, fearful and imploringly. The exit was so close, he seemed to be saying… Escape. Freedom. Safety. If she were being honest, a very large part of her wanted to ignore Ganondorf’s taunting words, take Colin’s hand, and flee.

But Link’s story about Sheik kept rebounding in her head along with the image of Anju lying on the floor in an ever-widening pool of her own blood, and she had to know.
"Tell me," she whispered, the quiet plea meant for Colin, but it was Ganondorf who answered.

"Early this morning, when we were getting set up for today's events, we were discovered." His voice was soft but no less powerful, and from the obvious pleasure she could hear in his tone, he was basking in Aryll and Colin's shared fear and pain. "Smith here overheard one of my less-intelligent pawns discussing my plans and he tried to run off to alert the authorities."

Here, Ganondorf's smile turned truly malevolent and he leaned forward, clearly enjoying himself.

"Naturally, I couldn't allow this. Smith was detained. Originally, I was merely going to end his life, until someone told me that he was the son of the Chief of Police who even now has this school surrounded as he tries futilely to interfere with my plans.

“So, I offered Smith a choice: either die then and there or make himself useful and perform certain tasks for me in exchange for his life… including telling me the locations of certain students who I knew him to be close to, and giving me whatever information he could about the police and the methods his father would use to try and rescue the students; as it turns out, your boyfriend has spent a great deal of time with his father and the officers of his precinct. He is unusually familiar with their modus operandi… Which was fortuitous for me. I suppose you can guess what he said, Hero?"

To her side, Colin was trembling, staring down at the large bloodstain on the carpet, refusing eye contact. Aryll kept her gaze locked on her boyfriend, but she drank in every word Ganon said. Logically, she knew the answer must have been yes, seeing as he was still alive and standing before her, but she adamantly refused to believe it. Colin couldn't have… He couldn't have betrayed so many lives just to save himself… had he?

"You didn't…" she quietly pleaded, and Colin visibly flinched.

Ganon let out a dark burst of laughter. "Correct. He did not."

Aryll whipped her head back toward Ganondorf, confused.

"What?" she asked thickly, sniffing, "Then why…?"

"He offered up a different stipulation. Rather than his life for the lives of countless others and the information I required… He asked for yours."

Aryll felt as though the ground had dropped out from beneath her. She bit her lip as tears flooded her eyes, streaming down her cheeks. She shook her head desperately, her golden pigtails whipping around, refusing to believe what he was telling her. He had agreed… Colin… Her Colin. Her boyfriend. Had exchanged her life for the lives of every student and teacher who had died thus far because the police couldn't save them. They were dead… because of her.

"He couldn't… He didn't…" Her breathing became erratic as she looked back and forth between Colin's rigid form and Ganondorf's greedy smirk.

Finally, he met her gaze, a weak smile faltering across his face.

"I… I couldn't let you die…" he whispered hoarsely, and she felt her stomach churn with revulsion.

"My life isn't worth it!" She managed to choke out weakly.

"Enough of this pathetic display."

Ganondorf's powerful voice cut through her tears, silencing her. "You've done well, Colin. You
found the ones I needed and for that, you have my thanks. Now, leave me. I have work to do."

Aryll went rigid. Slowly climbing to her feet, she turned to Ganondorf, tears still hot on her cheeks but resolve burning in her gut.

"Tell me…" She asked shakily, forcing herself to face the dark-skinned boy monster behind the desk. "Who… Who did Colin help you find?"

Inwardly, she knew that this information wasn't going to help anyone, but Colin had paid for her safety with their lives and when she got out she was going to find some way to make amends. If Ganondorf wanted them, it was obviously because he wanted them dead. She would need to tell their families, to help them out. Somehow… She would try to quell the guilt within her, somehow…

Ganondorf studied her for a moment, silently weighing and measuring. She returned his piercing gaze, though her hands were still trembling and tears were still leaking their way down her cheeks and dripping onto the floor.

"They were the ones necessary to my plans," he said finally, "Those who were marked for death for one reason or another. My 'Hit List', if you will. Those who I felt were the closest to the one I despise. I plan to end them in order to bring him greater pain, and to prove my power."

Something chilled in Aryll's heart, a terrible suspicion she already knew to be true.

"And… My brother…?"

Ganondorf's eyes seemed to gleam, reading her mind, eager to prove it true.

"Why… He was the first one I had Colin locate."

Anguish consumed her. She'd been betrayed by the boy who was supposed to care for her more than any other… and now he'd signed her brother's death warrant.

Lost in her despair, she didn't hear Ganondorf once again bark the order to leave, nor did she feel Colin grab her arm and tug her out of the office. She had gone completely numb.

Shad's wheezing was really beginning to worry Zelda.

Sure, he had assured them he'd be able to handle it, but there was something about his tone that had told her he was just trying to be tough.

*He's such a guy…* she grumbled inwardly, though to be fair Ashei was behaving in the exact same manner. The girl couldn't move without both Zelda and Shad supporting her, but she still insisted on behaving as though she were the one leading their expedition.

The trek down the hallway that would have taken a normal person all of thirty seconds had taken them what felt like five minutes. They had to go slowly so that they didn't jostle Ashei too much and cause the injured girl more pain than was strictly necessary. Her face was ghostly pale and sweaty, but she had a fiercely determined gleam in her eyes and she was constantly chiding them to move faster.

Shad hadn't said a word since they'd left Vaati's body behind. Zelda felt her heart go out to him but knew better than to try and talk to him about what had happened. It was too soon for one thing, and they didn't exactly have time to slow down for a gentle heart to heart. Their pace was slow enough as it was, and they had to stop every so often as Shad was overcome with periodic coughing fits.
Each time, he'd shake his head when Zelda would hesitantly ask if he needed a break, and Ashei would send him a quick, furtive, guilty look before urging them to press on.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity of awkward hobbling, they managed to walk the length of the hall and enter the eerily silent cafeteria.

"We're nearly there, guys," Zelda panted, trying her best to sound reassuring as they neared the familiar door with the grimy circular window that led into the kitchens.

"Good," Ashei grunted sourly, "Out of the death trap and into a hospital. Today's going wonderfully."

Zelda opened her mouth to take a stab at a lighthearted joke when suddenly she felt a strange pressure inside her head. Her steps faltered as she gingerly raised her free hand to clutch her temple. She had a brief second in which she saw Ashei cast her a look of concern before her mind went completely blank.

There was a pause in which she saw nothing but a foggy white expanse stretch out endlessly before her.

It was as if she were floating in a never-ending sea of clouds. She felt ethereal drifting there; panic beginning to set in when she realized that she couldn't feel the ground beneath her feet. Abruptly, the clouds before her began to shift and form, melding together into vaguely definable shapes, and in a moment she found herself looking at what was unmistakably three teenage figures awkwardly shuffling through a familiar cafeteria, two supporting the third between them as they crept through a doorway and into a kitchen…

With a jolt, she realized she was looking at herself, Shad, and Ashei. Even as she watched, the trio trudged toward the back door with increasing haste, not paying heed to their surroundings, so great was their excitement to escape from the school.

From the edge of her vision, various figures began to appear, popping up from behind counters, stepping out around refrigerators or other large appliances, surrounding the trio. They put their hands up, admitting defeat, but the shooters didn't give them a chance. Without warning, they opened fire, and in horror Zelda watched as the cloudy images of herself and her friends jerked and spasmed as the bullets tore through them, crumpling lifelessly to the floor like marionettes whose strings had just been cut.

Slowly the fog began to overtake the image, blurring the scene she had just witnessed. Even as the blank whiteness reclaimed her vision, she heard a strange voice whisper in her ear, the first voice she'd heard since the scene had begun, at once softer than silk and more vast than the ocean, "Turn back, my daughter… Turn back…"

Just as suddenly as it had started, it was gone. Zelda gave a brief start, staring around her in shock. She was still in the cafeteria with Shad and Ashei, standing right in front of the door that she had seen moments before in that weird expanse of fog.

"Zelda?" Ashei asked curiously, giving her an odd look, but Zelda continued to stare at the door before them, her heart hammering away in her chest.

What had just happened? What had she just seen? Was it some sort of… Vision? Premonition? Delusion? Fit of insanity spurred on by heightened stress? It felt so real… Goddesses, things like that don't actually happen, she needed to get a hold of herself! But… If they opened the door and entered the kitchen… were they going to be killed just like she'd seen in that bizarre, cloudy place that she'd
been floating in only seconds earlier?

No… No, that was impossible. People don't see the future, especially her. It was just stress getting to her. Yes, that was it… she was just paranoid. She'd been in there too long. Still… was it worth the risk? Walk into the room and possibly get killed, or stay and hide somewhere in the school and possibly get killed. Why did it feel like she had no options?

The ghost of a whisper brushed her mind.

"Turn back… Turn back…"

"Hey, are you ok? Can you hear me?"

Blinking rapidly, Zelda returned to reality just as Shad began waving his hand frenetically in front of her face.

"What?" she asked blankly, and Shad gave a raspy chuckle.

"Oh good, we thought your mind had shut down on us."

"And here I thought Shad was the unstable one," Ashei joked, and Shad sent her a disgruntled look.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"We have to turn back…" Zelda whispered to herself, but both Shad and Ashei heard her and turned to give her twin looks of confusion.

"Do what?" Ashei blurted out incredulously.

"Zelda, we can't afford to turn back," Shad offered, chuckling hesitantly as though not sure if she were joking, "Ashei needs medical attention, remember?"

"Yeah, and Einstein here is gonna cough up a lung any second now."

Zelda ignored them, however. Her heart was beginning to pound desperately in her chest. The whisper came again, this time more urgent. "Turn back!"

Something akin to dread was seizing Zelda's heart as she glanced at the door before her, and she turned to the other two in desperation.

"We have to turn back. Please, I know this sounds crazy, but you have to trust me! Something bad is going to happen if we go in there!"

"Zelda, what in Farore's name are you-"

"We can't just turn back! We've come this far-"

Somehow, Zelda knew that if she didn't move them that instant, they were doomed. With a wordless snarl, she jerked them to the side, hauling them back toward the hallway they'd just abandoned. She had the advantage; she wasn't overly strong, but with Shad and Ashei both in their weakened state, she was easily able to overpower them.

Shad let out an indignant squawk as she dragged them hastily out of the cafeteria, hurrying to support Ashei's weight before she fell. Just to their left was a doorway that led to the snack bar the school used during basketball games. Somehow, she knew that the door would be unlocked. Without pause, she turned on the spot, flung the door wide, and jerked the two teens inside and quickly shut the door
behind her.

In her desperation, she had forgotten about Ashei's injury. As Zelda turned to press her ear against the door, she let go of her arm. The wounded girl stumbled forward, desperately clinging to Shad to keep her balance. With a heavy grunt and a hiss of pain, the two teens fell against a nearby counter.

"Are you crazy?" Shad demanded hoarsely, steadying Ashei with one arm around her waist, the other one keeping them balanced on the counter. Ashei's mouth was stretched in a rictus of pain as she clutched fitfully at her leg, though it didn't stop her from sending Zelda a look of pure murder.

"Nohansen, I swear to Din, if you don't explain yourself right now-!"

"Shh!" Zelda hissed, waving her hand blindly behind her to silence them, her ear still pressed against the cold wooden door.

There was silence for a few moments, the quiet broken by nothing other than the trio's frantic panting; Zelda's from fear, Ashei's from pain, Shad's from his strained airway. A couple of seconds passed, and then from the hall beyond, they heard the unmistakable echo of footsteps and the indistinct murmur of voices.

Ashei and Shad had identical looks of dumbfounded surprise on their faces, but Zelda remained focused on listening through the door. The footsteps were growing steadily closer, and she could tell they belonged to more than one person. As they neared the room they were hiding in, Zelda felt panic begin to override her other emotions; were they too late? Had she not acted in time? The mysterious voice was no longer speaking to her, and she silently wondered if she had merely been imagining it all along.

A sudden coarse grunt from just outside the door cut through her thoughts.

"There's nobody here."

There was a muffled curse from further down the hall, this one high-pitched and nasally. "I could have sworn I heard somebody!"

A third, decidedly female speaker joined in with a raucous chuckle. "Yeah, sure. It's just those voices in your head again, Cole."

"Shut up, Aveil!" The second speaker spat, enraged, but the first speaker overrode him.

"Whatever. Let's just get back to the kitchen before Ganondorf sees we've left our post. He's got quite the temper on him." And to Zelda's immense relief, the speakers began to walk away.

Once the footsteps had completely faded into the distance, Zelda let out a relieved sigh and sunk to her knees, her forehead pressed against the cool wooden door. That had been close… If she had waited any longer…

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Zelda turned her attention back to Ashei and Shad… and froze. The two wounded teens were standing side-by-side, identical looks of surprise, apprehension, and anger reflected across their faces.

"How…" the taller girl began, pausing for a moment to lick her lips and send Shad a surreptitious look, "How did you know they were in there?"

"I…"
Truthfully, Zelda didn't know how to answer her question. What was she supposed to say? 'Oh sorry, I looked into the future and saw that if we kept going, we would have all been shot to death'? Yeah, that would go over well. They'd think she'd gone crazy, which was something Zelda couldn't be sure wasn't actually the truth.

But what had happened? One minute she'd been talking to the other two like normal (well… about as normal as one could be, given the circumstances), and the next she was watching them get murdered in that strange expanse of fog… And something had spoken to her. Some sort of presence had warned her about the trap Ganondorf had laid for unsuspecting students who were trying to escape…

Before she could formulate some more believable excuse, Ashei scowled and cut her off.

"Why am I even bothering to ask? There's only one way she could have known they'd be in there…"

Confusion bloomed into understanding and Zelda felt her jaw drop in shock. "You… You think I'm one of them?!

"Well, what other excuse is there?" Ashei shot back acidly.

Shad sent Zelda a calculating look through his bent spectacles, pursing his lips shrewdly as he considered Ashei's words. After a painfully drawn out pause in which Zelda considered various worst-case scenarios, he shook his head and sighed.

"No… That doesn't make any sense. If she was one of them, why did Vaati have her tied up in the first place? Why would she be helping us escape? And why would she have stopped us from getting caught in the trap?"

Zelda felt a sudden surge of relief; Nayru bless Shad for his cool use of logic!

Ashei didn't look appeased.

"Well then how did she know about them?" she snarled at Shad, and he shrugged.

"Why don't we let Zelda tell us?" he replied, sounding half amused at Ashei's anger, half curious at Zelda's answer.

"I… heard them…" she offered weakly, wincing at how horrible she was at lying. Ashei and Shad both sent her flat looks.

"What?" she snapped, suddenly irate. She absently began scratching at an itch on the back of her hand as she frantically sought for an answer other than the one she knew she couldn't give them.

"Look, Blondie," Ashei spat, somehow managing to appear threatening in spite of the bullet hole in her thigh, "We don't have a lot of time for this. Just tell us already!"

Zelda took a step back, then felt her spine stiffen and scowled. Why was she being put on the question here? Hadn't she just saved their lives? Who cares how she'd done it, it had been done and they ought to be grateful!

Putting her hands on her hips, she drew herself up to her full height and returned Ashei's glare with full force. Opening her mouth in fury, she only had a split-second warning before it happened again.

It was as though someone had thrown a sheet over her eyes; everything had gone white. The endless foggy expanse stretched out before her; there was no sound, and no ground beneath her feet to
support her. She was floating in a never-ending sea of clouds... again.

Just as before, the clouds before her began to twist and churn, coalescing into barely definable shapes. She recognized the outline of a building first, and with a gasp she found herself looking at Ordon High. As the image came into sharper focus, she realized she was seeing the scene outside of the building, and surrounding the school were swarms of police officers.

Her vision quickly grew blurry, and the scene changed. When it came back into focus, she could see a well-groomed, sturdy man with a fluffy mustache standing in front of a group of black-swathed cops, apparently giving orders. Whatever she was seeing, it seemed to be visually oriented; no sound. As she watched, he waved a single arm over his head in a beckoning gesture and set off at a trot towards the back of the school. Behind him, a team of men with dark S.W.A.T. vests followed, masks obscuring their faces, totting sleek, shiny rifles in their arms.

The scene blurred once again, and suddenly they were sneaking into a small door on the back of the school. They rushed quickly into the kitchens, fanning out in every direction, checking that the coast was clear before pressing on out into the cafeteria, the man with the mustache in the lead.

As the team spread out, quickly crossing the cafeteria threshold, Zelda managed to catch a brief flicker of movement out of the corner of her eye before it happened: the officers were ambushed.

From out of various doorways and around the corners of the halls, multiple gunshots rang out. Everywhere, officers began dropping like flies, clutching fitfully at legs or arms. Their body armor was doing some good, but not enough.

From the balcony that overlooked the commons area, she could see Ganondorf's wickedly leering face before he turned, striding back down the hall.

In the room below, the officers were struggling to rally, but they didn't stand a chance against the rain of bullets. A few of the officers managed to take down a number of attackers, but the losses were far greater on the side of the police.

With his face screwed up in pain, she watched the mustachioed man fall to the ground, clutching at his neck, crimson blood spilling out between his fingers. As his body stopped twitching, she saw light reflect off the badge on his chest, the words Chief Rusl Smith standing out clearly against the golden metal.

"Hurry, daughter."

The voice was back, whispering softly into her ear as the image of the dying man faded from view, his paling face growing blurry and dull...

"Hurry..."

She was once again lost, floating in the sea of white nothingness. She battled impotently against the fog, screaming as her heart thundered in her chest, her hand outstretched, straining towards the faded image. That man! He was going to die! She had to do something!

As she struggled to return to reality, the vast, bodiless voice continued to echo in her head. "Hurry... Hurry..."

"Zelda!"

Zelda came back to reality with a snap, her mind jarring with the sudden contact. Her knees gave out and she fell forward, her arms wind-milling frantically in the air. Luckily, Shad darted forward and
caught her.

"Zelda, what- Are you ok? What happened?" His voice, still scratchy and sore, contained a definite note of panic. His eyes carefully scanned her face, looking worried and confused.

Zelda quickly pushed away, running her hands frantically through her hair. "The police are going to storm the school! But it's a trap! Ganondorf somehow knows about it and he's gonna catch them off guard and kill them! Come on, we've got to do something!"

With the severity of the impending situation weighing heavily on Zelda's mind, she didn't even once pause to think about how the other two must be taking her pronouncement and how clearly ludicrous she must sound. Reaching the door, she turned around expecting to see them following her and instead found them standing still, staring at her apprehensively.

"Zelda…" Ashei said slowly, still clutching to the counter for support, "Are you… feeling ok?"

"What?" She replied breathlessly, sending the other girl a baffled look. "Yeah, I'm fine, why?"

Shad and Ashei exchanged a brief glance.

"Um… Well, you got all rigid there for a moment, and your eyes were all unfocused…"

"Your pupils were severely dilated," Shad explained softly, concern lacing his words. "And you were whimpering…"

Zelda stared at him blankly. Her pupils were what? Whimpering? What did that have to do with the police? They didn't have time for this now! They had to hurry up and…

The sudden understanding of their words hit her like a brick to the stomach. It had happened again; she'd had another vision-premonition thingy. Of course, they hadn't known that and she hadn't paused to consider what her body was doing while her mind was away; they must have thought she was having a fit or something.

Sighing heavily, she felt her mind spinning with ways to convince them to believe what she was saying.

"Zelda, I think the stress is getting to you…" Shad said gently, stepping forward and giving her arm a reassuring pat. "Maybe you should sit down for a minute…"

Jerking her hand away from where she had been absently scratching the area above her knuckles again, Zelda began nibbling anxiously at her lip. There was no way of knowing how long they had before her vision came true, of which she had no doubt it would. All she knew was that for some reason, something inside her was telling her she needed to get moving if they were going to have any hope of preventing it.

"Listen," she stated firmly, glancing quickly between the two worried teens, "I know this is going to sound absolutely insane, but you need to believe me. I knew something bad would happen if went into the kitchen; I don't know how, I just did. And just like then, I know that if we don't hurry, there's going to be a massacre in the cafeteria, but we can stop it.

"Please," she added in desperation, seeing the two exchange worried looks, "I know you think I've lost it, but it's true. I can't explain it, it's just…"

She didn't know what else to say. She hung her head in defeat, scratching at her hand again. It was so itchy all of a sudden… Softly, in her ear, she heard the whisper again. *Hurry*…
"What's wrong with your hand?"

Shad's question drew her out of her thoughts. Glancing down at her hand, she could see it had grown red from all the scratching she'd done. Except… something was odd about it. The aggravated area was somehow in the shape of a large triangle.

"I… I don't know…" she said, allowing a brief second of surprise wash over her at the oddness of the shape; surely she hadn't been scratching her hand in the shape of a triangle?

"You must have splashed some of that cleaner on you from before," Shad said chidingly, "I told you to be careful-"

With a jerk, she realized he was trying to distract her, to get her thinking about something else.

"Fine then!" she spat angrily, throwing her hands up in the air in frustration. "If you won't believe me, then I'll go do it myself!"

"Wait!" Shad cried out, but Zelda ignored him. Turning on her heel, she threw the door open viciously and stepped out into the empty hall, storming off on her own.

Maybe she was going mad… But the first vision had been correct, and if there was even the slightest chance the second one was too then she would do anything it took to prevent it from happening. Without really understanding why, she turned and headed toward the stairwell that led to the second floor, all the while listening to the urgent whisper in her ear.

_Hurry…_

Ganondorf sat impassively, his finger steepled as he stared at the door to his newfound sanctum, a pensive frown on his face. That girl had certainly been an emotional one; her pathetic simpering tears had drastically tried his patience. He'd been tempted multiple times throughout their brief meeting to simply pull out his gun and end her sniveling, but he knew he mustn't be hasty. Haste ruined the work.

Still… it had been reckless to tell the girl all that he had, though he doubted she understood it. Of his henchmen, only Zant, Vaati, and Sakon knew this truer extent to his plans.

Killing Hero, his enemy, was his Coup de Grace, his masterstroke, the key that he needed to obtain the fabled Triforce of Power. But even just killing his enemy wasn't enough; he needed to make him see, make him know beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he was the more powerful one. And it was for that reason that his 'Hit List' had been born.

He had used his men to gather intelligence before they'd planned their strike against the school; carefully, he'd compiled a list of the people Hero was closest to, written them down, planned out where'd they be, what classes they had and at what times, judged when it would be most profitable for him to strike… And soon, just before he executed Hero and claimed his birthright, he would force him to sit and watch as the ones he loved were murdered mercilessly before his eyes.

As it turned out, Hero didn't have many friends, but Ganondorf did what he could. Midna Twili. Sheik Shadow. Aryll Hero. And finally, Link Hero himself. He would end them all, right here in this room. If only he could have gotten his elderly grandmother… but no matter. Three would be sufficient. Hero would cower before his might.
A low, dark chuckle emanated from Ganondorf's throat. How perfect it would be! How brilliant and masterful! And that wasn't even the best part… One member of the list had come to him, Smith had been wrangled in, both had been working for him, and even now believed that they were safe from Ganondorf's wrath. And they had done so to protect the two other students who were also slated for death. Their faces when they realized that all their sacrifice had been for naught would be priceless. The anticipation was killing him.

He had instructed various subordinates to watch the exits, to kill any students who planned to escape, but he had given them special instruction for those on the list. They were to be taken and brought before him and made to kneel and await their demise.

Even now, the cowardly Smith boy was leading Hero's sniveling sister to what they both believed was safety. They would soon be captured and brought back. True, he could have just kept them here when Smith showed up and demanded for the girl's release like the insolent brat that he was, but watching his spirit break when he realized their 'deal' had all been a sham was too delicious an opportunity to pass up.

Then there was Shadow… Foolish boy. Foolish… and easily manipulated. He had brought Hero right to him and was even now bringing Twili. His little stunt in the gym was, in a word, unfortunate. Zant was a useful pawn, but his death was one less thing for Ganondorf to deal with later on.

Ganon's lips twisted wryly. Shadow's actions had been impressive though. To think he had the nerve to take Zant's life; perhaps he hadn't given him enough credit. Still, he seemed to have forgotten that Ganon had the surveillance cameras under his control and had witnessed the entire spectacle. It was a shame to lose so many hostages, but he had known that Shadow wouldn't abandon his friend, and he was pleased to see Twili accompanying him as they crept through the halls, heedless of Ganondorf's ever watching eye.

And yet…

Despite the near omniscience that the cameras afforded him, they couldn't see everywhere, and he still had no idea as to the whereabouts of Vaati… The boy wouldn't have abandoned him, of that, Ganon was certain; any number of witnesses could place him as Ganondorf's cohort and had he tried to escape he surely would have been arrested. It was possible that he was busy quelling insurrection amongst their prisoners, but that didn't explain why he wasn't answering his summons.

Frowning, Ganondorf opened the laptop on the desk and shuffled through the various video streams. Hallway after empty hallway met his eye, occasionally getting a glimpse inside the band room or the commons area. There, just now entering the second floor, was Shadow and Twili; he was drawing nearer but wasn't a threat. There was little he could do to stop him now. As soon as Sakon reported in, they could begin the final stages of his plan. Another blank hallway, the cafeteria, the kitchen with his foolish servants pigging out on tiny cups of pudding and diced fruit, a blonde girl, another hallway-

Ganondorf blinked and quickly shuffled back. A blonde girl, her face looking half infuriated, half terrified, was slowly making her way down one of the second-floor hallways.

His brows furrowed as he watched her movements. She wasn't headed towards an exit… In fact, she didn't seem sure where she was going at all. With a grunt, he flipped through a few more screens and paused as he saw yet another student wandering the halls; this one a male with rather long purple hair. Ganondorf sighed; yet another hapless would-be escapee. Soon enough, they'd be scooped up by a patrol or-

"My lord."
Ganon sighed, reaching for the walkie that sat on the desk to his right. "Speak, Sakon. Have you located Vaati?"

"Yes, sir. His body is located just below one of the camera's blind spots on the first floor near in the band room, in a puddle of some foul-smelling cleaner." Sakon’s voice was crackly with static but no less subservient.

"Body?"

"Yes, my lord. It would seem he was killed sometime recently, as his corpse is still warm. I don't see any wounds so I cannot say as to what killed him…"

Ganondorf sat back in his chair, looking thoughtfully at the boy who was skulking down the hall on his computer screen.

"Would you like me to bring his body up, Lord Ganondorf?"

"No," he replied tersely. "Leave it. Make your way back to my office… and take the stairs in front of you. You'll find a student wandering the halls with long, purple hair. Find him and bring him to me. He may be the one responsible for Vaati's death."

"Purple hair?" Came Sakon's questioning voice and Ganondorf scowled.

"Do I need to repeat myself with my every command?" He demanded through the small metal device, and he could imagine Sakon's stricken face as he quickly stammered his apologies.

"Good. Make it quick."

As he set the walkie down, there was a firm knock at the door.

"You may enter," he announced loudly, resting his chin on his fist, pushing the laptop closed.

"Ganon," Grog said, his tone flat and apathetic as always. "You asked me to report if anything came in through the police scanner."

The police scanner. Another lovely piece of knowledge, courtesy of Smith. To think that his father would have been foolish enough to have shared even the frequency of their broadcasts and one of their own scanners to his son, and that he would volunteer that information for nothing more than the promise of his girlfriend’s wellbeing… It was as though the Goddesses had ordained it themselves.

"I did." He replied simply. "And?"

"It would seem they are finally ready to take aggressive action. They are planning to storm the school by taking advantage of the kitchen's back door, led by Chief Rusl Smith himself."

Ganondorf growled bitterly. Curse Zant for overlooking that entrance! It had caused them no amount of grief already, even without this news. Still… Smith was coming in personally… This would be the perfect opportunity to take that man down a peg or two…

"Should I tell the men on the ground floor to move up?" Grog asked, and Ganondorf shook his head.

"No. The opposite. Instruct the ground parties to set up positions surrounding the cafeteria and await them. Well catch them off-guard and end this attack before it begins."

"Yes, sir."
As Grog backed out of the room, bowing slightly, Ganondorf felt a wicked smile cross his face. His plan would have to wait for a moment… He had some men to kill.
Moving to round the nearest corner, Midna found herself emitting an embarrassingly loud squeak as Sheik, his hand still clenched tightly around her own, jerked her roughly backward. Scowling almost as darkly as she was blushing, she gave her arm a fitful tug in a vain attempt to reclaim her captive appendage, but to no avail.

"Holy Din, dude, what're you-"

"Shh!" Sheik hissed sharply, cutting her off mid-sentence. Pressing his body flush against the brick wall, he slowly inched his way towards the corner to peer cautiously into the adjoining hallway, dragging a reluctant Midna along with him.

She sighed, frustrated, but let him do his thing. It had been slow going ever since leaving the gym. Sheik had insisted on making sure the coast was clear before they braved any stairwell or hallway, but thus far they hadn't seen a soul. Now that they were on the second floor, however, they were bound to run into at least a few people… but still, she couldn't see what the problem was. As far as the bad guys were concerned, Sheik was still on their side, so him wandering about shouldn't be an issue… right?

She opened her mouth to ask, but he interrupted her once again with an irritated grumble.

"They're blocking this hallway… We'll have to go around." And just like that, he turned on the spot and began pulling her back the way they came.

"Wait!" She exclaimed, planting her feet firmly on the tiled floor. It was useless, however; he continued to tow her down the hall as though she were on water skis. Really, Linebeck needed to do a better job cleaning these floors. "Wait, Sheik- ugh! Stop moving for a second, will you?"

"What?" he panted softly, halting so suddenly that she ran right into him.

She shot him an aggravated glare before giving her arm a sharp twist, violently breaking free of his grip and ending their physical connection.

"Look, I don't understand. Why are we sneaking around?" She asked, massaging her sore wrist. "You said you were sent to 'reclaim me' or whatever, so if we see anybody, they're just gonna think you're taking me in, right? I mean, they should still think you're one of them, so…"

There it was again, that brief glimpse of guilt and pain that flashed through his eyes whenever someone mentioned he had been one of them. She'd seen the same look on his face when Coach Nabooru had asked for a way out, trusting him to know of the enemy's weaknesses. Despite the fact that his knowledge of Ganondorf's movements had managed to save everyone in the gym, he still wouldn't forgive himself for his involvement in today's attack, and she was beginning to doubt he ever would.

Sheik looked troubled as he mulled her words over, shaking his head slowly. "I know, but… I just don't want to risk it. Something doesn't feel right, and I don't just mean all the psychos running around with guns. When Ganondorf told me to come get you, he looked… amused. I just feel like he's planning something. We should probably avoid others for the time being."

There was a rather intense moment of silence as the two teens stood still, staring mutely into each
other’s eyes, trying to convey thoughts and emotions that they couldn't bring themselves to voice aloud.

Finally, Midna found her resolve crumbling and she let out a shaky sigh, hanging her head in defeat. "Ok, I just… Ok. I trust you. If you think this is the best way, then I'll do what you say. It's just…"

"What?" he asked softly, and she felt her breath catch as he reached his hand up to cup her cheek, his fingers tangling in her hair. Well, this was new; Sheik usually wasn't so touchy-feely. To be honest, Midna usually wasn't either, but considering what was going on…

She closed her eyes, leaning into his touch, reveling at this small comfort as she struggled to put her thoughts in order. "I'm worried, Sheik. All this sneaking around… I know you think it's for the best, but if we're caught you might lose the only advantage you have; they'll know you've turned against them. I… I don't want anything to happen to you, and I just don't understand…"

Oh, Goddesses, her voice was cracking. No! Come on Midna, stay strong! Tough it out! Don't let on how weak and helpless you feel right now, how you've felt all day… You’re stronger than this! Try as she might, she couldn't stop the slight sniffle that escaped her.

Sheik didn't say anything. Instead, he wrapped his free arm around her waist and pulled her into a crushing embrace, burying his nose in her tousled black-and-orange hair.

She was stunned. For a moment, she heard nothing but the feverish pounding of her heart thundering in her ears. Vaguely, she wondered how smart it was to have their little tender moment in the middle of the hallway where at any second a homicidal gun-toting maniac could walk over and blow them both away… but then she decided she didn't care. She’d waited a long time for this, and this might just be her last chance. Who knew if they’d get out of there alive?

After a slight hesitation, she hugged him back just as fiercely, placing her arms around his torso and hiding her face into his shoulder, trying to quell her trembling body.

"I really hope that whatever you came back for is worth risking your life over…" She muttered thickly, trying to keep up pretenses even as she turned to jelly in his arms.

Sheik gave a heavy sigh, the sound abnormally loud to Midna's ears due to her close proximity to Sheik's chest and stirring through her hair wildly.

"Don't worry. They are."

Midna blinked, pulling back slightly to look at him directly in the face. "'They?' You mean you came back for people?"

Sheik opened his mouth as though to answer… then froze, his jaw falling open and his eyes widening in shock.

"…Sheik?" She asked, pulling free from his embrace rather reluctantly; she’d never admit it, but she immediately missed his warmth and comforting presence. Goddesses, she was turning into such a floozy…

"Sheik, what-?" With a start, she realized his gaze was fixated somewhere over her shoulder.

Sudden terror gripping her, she whirled around, expecting to see a whole concourse of psychos ready to kill them or even Ganondorf himself striding down the hallway with murderous intent shining in his eyes. Instead, she was met with the surprised faces of the two last people she expected to see.
"A-Aryll?" She spluttered in shock, staring wide-eyed at the frightened little girl who had just rounded the corner, her gaze set vacantly on the floor. Her boyfriend was clutching her hand, looking positively terrified as he froze, staring open-mouthed back at them. "C-Colin? What…? How are…?"

At the sound of Midna's voice, Aryll's head jerked up. She could see tear tracks marring her lightly tanned cheeks, her eyes were all red and blotchy from crying, and her usually prim golden pigtails were in complete disarray. Still, for the most part, Aryll looked fine. Her light cerulean irises, the exact same shade as her grandmothers, suddenly lit up as they fell upon Midna and Sheik, and with a frantic gasp, she tore away from her boyfriend and all but leaped into Midna's dumbfounded arms.

"Oh, Goddesses!" She breathed, relief evident in her tone, "Midna, you're ok! I've been so worried, I-I didn't know where anyone was or what was going on, and…"

Still reeling from Aryll's sudden appearance, Midna found she could do little more than pat the excitable girl gently on the back.

"And Sheik!" The little blonde girl suddenly exclaimed, jumping out of Midna's arms so she could latch onto the older boy. "You're still here! After what Link said about your guys' plan failing, I thought that-

"Wait, what?" Midna cut in, silencing Aryll's emotional tirade. "What do you mean, 'your guys' plan'? Sheik, what's she talking about? You and Link had…"

Something had been nagging at the back of her head ever since her eyes had landed on Aryll Hero, and suddenly it hit her with all the force of a brick to the stomach.

"Oh, Farore… Link! I completely forgot about him!" As the inevitable feelings of guilt and terror washed over her as she remembered that her other best friend was trapped in this indomitable house of horrors, she couldn't help but notice Aryll's surprised and disapproving glare and turned to gauge Sheik's reaction only to find his expression oddly blank. That was weird… Sheik hadn't said a word since Colin and Aryll had mysteriously appeared. Why was he being so quiet?

"Do we know where he is?" Midna asked frantically, "Is he ok? Did something happen to him?"

"Ganondorf has him," Aryll said flatly, relinquishing her grip on Sheik so she could step back to face Midna fully, crossing her arms stiffly in front of her chest, scowling. She looked visibly displeased that Midna had forgotten her older brother was in danger. "I only saw him for a couple minutes, but he said he got captured because he and Sheik were trying to save me."

"I'm so confused…" Midna said, massaging her temples in frustration. "You… saw him? Does that mean Ganondorf had you too? How on earth did you get out? And Sheik, when were you with Link?"

There was a slight pause as Aryll hesitantly watched Sheik, looking for any signs that he was going to speak first. Sheik, however, continued his strangely silent reverie, largely ignoring Midna and Aryll as he stared sternly at Colin for some odd reason. With a tremulous sigh, Aryll turned to face Midna, her face suddenly downcast.

"I… I g-got out b-because…" The smaller girl's voice suddenly broke, her eyes flooding with tears.

Midna was utterly baffled.

"…Aryll?" She asked, worry lacing her words, but the smaller girl merely shook her head, hiding her eyes behind her hand as she turned to face the wall, body trembling.
"I got her out," said a soft voice from behind her.

Midna spun around, nearly giving herself whiplash. Colin had finally joined them, and now that she could see him clearly, she could tell he looked a little worse for the wear. His face was pale, sweaty, and heavily lined with massive bags beneath his eyes. He looked absolutely exhausted. His hair was disheveled; a trait that everyone seemed to share today, she noted humorlessly. Most daunting of all, however, were his eyes; gaunt and haggard, they looked like swirling grey eddies of bottomless despair.

"Colin? But… how did you…?" She trailed off, confused. How in Din's name had Colin managed to pull off a daring rescue right under Ganondorf's nose, succeeding where Sheik and Link had failed? And even if he had managed it alone, why had he left Link behind?

As though sensing the direction of her thoughts, Colin's shoulders drew in tighter, his eyes refusing to lift up from the floor.

"I… I struck a deal… with Ganondorf."

Midna felt her blood run cold. A deal… with Ganondorf? She glanced at Sheik out of the corner of her eye and saw shock written plain across his face. Had he not known?

"You're working for Ganondorf?" It was less of a question and more of a fearful demand; if he had struck a deal with Ganondorf, then he had to be working on the same side, right? He had to be the enemy… right?

But no, this was Colin! Colin, Aryll’s soft-spoken little boyfriend. Colin, the guy who held doors open and turned in lost cash to the lost-and-found. Colin, who sang along to Disney music in his car with his girlfriend on the way to school. There was no way. It was even less believable than the revelation that Sheik had been on Ganondorf’s side.

Colin flinched away from the accusation and fear in Midna’s words but didn't answer. His face had somehow grown even paler in the intervening seconds, if that were at all possible. He looked like he was about a half-second away from vomiting all over the floor.

Still, unbelievable or not, he had just admitted to having struck a deal with Ganondorf, and after everything she’d been through today, after seeing how many other students had joined his side, even her own best friend… She found herself taking a step away from him.

A look of hurt and desperation flashed across Colin's face. "No, wait, you don't understand! H-He was going to kill me-!"

"So what, you decided to become his flunky instead?" Midna asked, revolted.

Aryll hid her face in her hands as though withdrawing into her own little world, unable to bear the conversation they were having, but Sheik remained oddly silent, staring at Colin with an unusually grave look on his face. Come to think of it, if Colin had been on Ganondorf's side, how would Sheik not have known? That didn’t make any sense.

"No!" Colin cried, his voice cracking slightly as Midna quickly walked over to Aryll and enveloped the girl in a tight embrace, if for no other reason than because she needed something to do with her hands to distract her from the most recent unpleasant revelation. Aryll resisted at first but quickly gave in, clinging to Midna's neck as she sobbed quietly into her shoulder.

"Guys, please, you have to believe me…” Colin's voice had taken on an agonized, pleading note. Midna took a deep breath and tried to rationalize her thoughts. Sheik had been with Ganondorf at
first, but he’d switched back to the good side for her and Link… Maybe something similar was going on with Colin. Somehow, though, it felt harder to forgive him than it had to forgive Sheik; if she were being honest, she knew her feelings for the taller Sheikah male had her biased unfairly in his favor, but she decided not to think about that for now.

"What did you agree to do for Ganon in exchange for your safety?" Midna asked instead, trying to focus on the issue at hand.

Colin recoiled as if slapped, then shook his head slowly, muttering something under his breath. Finally, he said, "It wasn't for me… Not that it really makes a difference. He could have killed me then and there and it wouldn't have changed anything that happened today. I did what I did for Aryll…"

Confused, Midna opened her mouth to respond but was cut off as the blonde girl in her arms suddenly whirled around to face her boyfriend.

"Stop it!" she wailed, sounding broken, "Just stop it! You can't justify what you did, Colin! It doesn't matter if it was for you or me or anybody! You… You betrayed me! My brother, the only family I have left in the world, is going to die! And it's your fault! Yours, Colin!"

The words seemed to echo throughout Midna’s head tauntingly. Link was going to die? And it was somehow Colin's fault?

"What do you mean? Is Link in trouble?"

Sheik's panicky voice startled Midna. From the feverish panic in his voice, you’d have thought it was his life in danger, not Link’s.

Colin turned his head as though to acknowledge Sheik but he kept his desolate gaze locked on Aryll.

"We're all in trouble..." he mutteredpathetically, avoiding the question.

"He means more so than the rest of us," Midna snapped, starting to lose her patience.

Colin swallowed thickly but said nothing.

All at once, Sheik lost it. Striding forward, he seized the boy by the front of his shirt, jerked him viciously to the side, and slammed him against the lockers.

"What's going on?! What did you do?!"

Aryll squeaked in surprise, looking conflicted about her boyfriend being man-handled, and Midna let out a frantic, “Sheik! Keep it down!”, absolutely convinced that they were going to bring Ganondorf and the rest of his flunkies bearing down on them at any minute. "

When the younger male didn’t answer, Sheik gave Colin another violent shake as though trying to jiggle the answer out of him; Colin, for his part, was wide-eyed and slack-jawed, clearly seconds away from pissing himself.

A tiny moan wormed its way out of Midna’s throat. Oh, Goddesses, he was being so loud…! Had he lost his mind?! He just saw those sentries down the hall a second ago!

She stepped forward, seizing his shoulder and pulling him partially away from Colin; true, she was more concerned about being caught and pumped full of bullet holes at that moment, but there wasn’t
any sense in letting him beat the snot out of their terrified underclassman. Or at least, she didn’t think there was; he hadn’t exactly said what it was he’d done yet. No, not now, there was time for that later.

"What?" Sheik snarled at Midna, clearly annoyed that she was getting in the way.

"Sheik, seriously, chill out," she hissed hurriedly, “you’re being too loud! Other people can probably hear us."

She jerked her head toward the corner they’d just been spying around in a meaningful way.

Sheik cast her an unreadable look as though considering the merits of just flat-out ignoring her before the undeniable logic of her words seemed to finally sink in.

Taking hold of Colin's shirt once more, he dragged him across the hall to the nearest classroom. Flinging the door open, he gave the room a quick once-over before nodding to Midna and Aryll and chucking the blond in ahead of him unceremoniously.

Midna groaned before darting in after him; Sheik became completely unreasonable when he lost his temper. At least he’d decided to move his impromptu questionnaire to somewhere a bit more private. Pausing momentarily to make sure Aryll made it inside, Midna shut the door with a brief snap and turned to survey the room.

She recognized it immediately as Professor Elzo's classroom. It was strange to think that less than twenty-four hours ago, she had been sitting in here with Link, wondering where Sheik was and listening to a boring lecture on the historical significance of the Book of Mudora. The classroom itself was barren and looked virtually unchanged other than a couple of desks that were a tad bit askew.

Aryll made a beeline to the farthest desk from the door and sat on it, looking shaky and ill. Sheik had dragged Colin to the back corner where he had him pressed up against the wall again just as he had with the lockers moments earlier in the hall. Twisting her lips wryly, she paused to make sure the little posters stuck to the door completely covered the small rectangular window before hastening past the multitude of empty desks to Sheik’s side.

"Well? Answer my question!" Sheik snarled, not even missing a beat after their change of venue, slamming the boy against the brick wall with a bit more force than was strictly necessary, making his head bounce. "What did Ganondorf have you do? What's going to happen to Link? Talk!"

“Sheik! Seriously, put Colin down! We can talk about this rationally!”

Her attempt to rescue Colin from Sheik’s rage went unheeded by both boys.

"I-I…" Colin stammered, his wide-eyes fixated on Sheik’s blood-red gaze with fear and panic. He cut off to cough gruffly before continuing, a pained wince twisting the expressions on his face. "Ganondorf, he...! He asked me to… t-to find certain people and report where they were so that he didn't have to waste too much time looking for them!"

Sheik and Midna frowned in tandem. He asked Colin to… find people? Who? And why? Couldn’t he have literally anyone do that for him? That didn’t even make any sense.

“What else?” Sheik asked, clearly dissatisfied by Colin’s answer. “Did he ask you to do anything else?”

Colin shook his head, his lips trembling, and to Midna's shock, she saw tears welling up in his eyes.
"Y-You don’t understand, even if he’d killed me, his plans would have gone through anyway-!"

"What did you do??" Goddesses, this was becoming Sheik’s mantra or something...

"I-I-I gave him the police scanner that I keep in my car! My dad’s the Chief of Police, remember? I spend a lot of time with him and the other officers – they let me participate in training and stuff, that’s why I have one! H-He's been using it to eavesdrop on the police outside so he can prevent them from coming in and stopping his plan…!"

Dull shock seemed to reverberate around the room, momentarily eclipsing questions like ‘Why was a teenage boy given a police-issue scanner with access to their private channels even if he was the son of the Chief of Police’? Even for a small town like Ordon, that seemed a little strange. But then, Colin had always been a kind, respectable boy; surely nobody had ever thought that anything bad would ever come of it. That had blown up in their faces spectacularly. He’d just traded away the only hope that countless trapped students and teachers had for survival… And for what? All to protect one girl?

Aryll was hugging her arms and sobbing, muttering softly to herself "I wasn't worth it… I wasn't worth it… Oh, Goddesses, why…?"

The rational side of her brain had come to the same conclusion that apparently Aryll and Sheik had. Colin’s betrayal was unspeakable, and the fact that he may have cost the lives of every student still trapped in this building was a horror so profound that it defied words, and yet… the part of her that still remembered the way her stomach had seemed to drop out and the whole world disappear when Onox or Zant had pointed their guns at her head made it difficult for the hatred she thought she should be feeling to stick.

She knew what it was like to let the fear of imminent death sweep away all rational thought, and it helped that she knew Colin before. The Colin she knew before would never have helped Ganondorf, would never have placed his safety above that of another… but nobody knows how they would really react in a situation like this until they’re in one.

She never would have thought that she’d be where she was now, before today. That she’d race headlong into this building in the hopes of being able to stop the shooting from happening even though there was a significant risk that she’d be caught in the middle of it all; that she’d have the guts to roam the school unarmed on the vague hope that the might be able to save the students in the gym; that she’d pass up the chance to escape this death trap with Linebeck and the others and instead choose to brave the school again for her friends. In retrospect, she’d been phenomenally stupid today, but also maybe a little brave. And she never would have known that about herself until today.

She also wouldn’t have known that she had it in her to forgive Sheik for helping to set something like this up; and honestly, maybe she shouldn’t. Maybe she shouldn’t be willing to forgive either of them for what was happening. But at the same time, she knew it wasn’t either of their faults; Ganondorf would have had this set up with or without them. People would have died either way. And for the two boys before her, extenuating circumstances had been at play, twisting the decisions they made. Colin clearly regretted what he’d done, and he’d only done it out of fear and a desire to save the girl he loved. And Sheik was actively risking his life in this death-trap to try to set things to rights.

If she were put into Colin’s shoes, could she honestly say she wouldn’t have done the same? And better yet, would she have had the presence of mind to have bartered for Sheik’s life as he had for Aryll’s? There was no way he could have stopped the shooting; defying Ganondorf would have just resulted in his immediate death, and had he known about his police radio beforehand, he would have just taken it himself – which prompted the question of ‘why did he even ask?’ but there would be
time for those questions later. Colin had clearly believed he’d been given the chance to save both himself and his girlfriend, and yeah, maybe the more ‘noble’ thing would have been to have died without playing along with Ganondorf’s schemes, but…

Grudges could be held, she decided, and blame could be placed; anyone who might want to certainly had the right. But to her, it seemed that if the blame served no purpose, then… why hold onto it?

Sheik's breathing was rough and unsteady, his face inches away from Colin's. Midna could tell from his expression that his mind was whirling. If Ganondorf had had access to any and all messages that the police were using to communicate, then it certainly made sense why there hadn't been an attempt at a rescue; Ganondorf had known about them all beforehand and had been able to thwart any that had been attempted.

But something in his words was nagging at her… Sure, getting access to a police scanner made sense, but why had Ganondorf asked Colin to go look for people? He could have asked anybody to do that, so why Colin? Why not just kill him and be done with it after he got what he wanted? And what 'plan'? Wasn't Ganondorf's goal today just to kill everyone and everything?

"Who…" Sheik began, then paused, licking his lips as he considered his word choice carefully. "What… What is Ganondorf's plan, Colin?"

"You mean you don't know?"

There was no accusation in his words, but Sheik flinched back as though he'd sprayed lemon juice in an open wound. He knew Sheik was, or had been, one of Ganondorf’s accomplices – so then why hadn’t Sheik known about him?

"Ganondorf is… was… secretive. He didn't trust me, or anybody, with the full extent of his plans. But if you know something…" There was a definite threat in his tone as if saying that if Colin knew something and held it back, the repercussions would be severe.

"I don't know anything…" he grunted, sounding a little strained, which made sense since he was still pinned against a brick wall. "All I know is he wanted those people found."

"Right, the ones he had you look for. Who were they?"

Colin blinked, glancing around between them hesitantly. "Um… Well, it's just…"

"Dude, come one!" Sheik exclaimed.

"Fine!" He said hastily, trying in vain to wave his arms out in front of him despite Sheik's vice grip on his shoulders. "Fine, I'll tell you! But… it’s just…"

Sheik fixed him with his most penetrating glare.

Colin sighed, then turned his dead grey eyes onto Midna.

"…You." He said simply, and Midna blinked.

"M-Me? Why does Ganondorf want me?"

"It was probably for me," Sheik said slowly, though the confusion was evident on his face, too. "So I could find you and keep you safe."

Colin nodded as though conceding that might have been why, though he was studiously avoiding
eye contact. For some reason, Midna didn't feel any better.

"Who else?"

"Aryll," Colin muttered. At the sound of her name, Aryll twitched but didn't move any closer, keeping her eyes pinned to the floor.

Midna frowned. Wait, he wanted Aryll? But why? Hadn't Colin just said that he'd bartered for her life? Why would he then ask him to locate her? Was it to put her somewhere safe, like the deal Sheik had struck for her?

"Ok. And?" She could tell Sheik was getting impatient. Any minute now, somebody could come walking by and hear them, or come walking in; she was surprised nobody had yet, seeing how loud Sheik had been what with him yelling and slamming people into lockers and walls. Had the sentries they’d seen outside left? If so, why? And where had they gone?

Colin was silent for a moment, then shook his head and said, "He… He wanted Link, ok?"

"Link," Sheik repeated, his tone flat.

"Yes…"

"Link Hero."

"Yes! How many times do I have to say it? I had to find Link Hero, Midna Twili, and Aryll Hero. Those are the only people I knew of."

"Wait, that you knew? There were others?" Midna cut in frantically, getting on her tiptoes so she could see Colin better over Sheik's arm.

"Er… Well, not exactly…" he said slowly. Sheik and Midna wore identical scowls.

"I swear, Colin, if you don’t spit it out…" Sheik growled, letting his grip on the smaller boy tighten, his fingers digging into his shoulders painfully.

"I-ah! Ow! Stop, I’m telling you! He- He asked me who Link's closest friends were and told me to find them! Ah! Cut it out!"

"Why didn't you tell us this before?" Sheik snarled viciously, and Colin's face paled even further, something Midna didn't think was possible.

"B-Because! I only had to find you three! Ganondorf asked me, but I don't know any of Link's friends beside you two! I mean, I know he's my girlfriend’s older brother and he's a nice guy and everything so I'm sure he's got a lot of friends, but I don't really know him all that well so…"

"So?"

"S-So I told him Link's only friends were you two! And his little sister, who I told him he couldn't hurt if he wanted my h-help! That's it! He told me not to worry about finding you since you were with him, but that I needed to find Midna and Aryll so they could be put somewhere safe and then find Link for him! That's it, I swear!"

Sheik and Midna exchanged troubled looks.

So he’d asked Colin to find Link’s friends… the implications of that statement seemed ominous, considering Link’s history with the man as well as the fact that Ganondorf had apparently had some
sort of crazy plan going on the entire time, only… nothing outside of that made sense.

First of all, why ask Colin to find them? Most of the shooters she’d seen so far were students of this school. Link may not have been popular, but it wouldn’t be a stretch to assume that any one of them could have given Ganondorf that information on their own, even if they’d had to do a little asking around. Second, if Ganondorf had some kind of secret plan that involved Link’s friends, why wait until the morning of the shooting to figure out who they were? He’d clearly put a lot of thought and planning into this attack – not figuring out information this easily attained until the last minute made absolutely no sense.

Finally, why ask Colin when Sheik was right there on his team? Maybe he thought Sheik wouldn’t be ok with singling out his friends for death? But he had helped plan the shooting in the first place, so Ganondorf should have no reason to doubt him, and if he had known that Sheik would betray him, why keep him on the team at all?

Something wasn’t adding up, but for the life of her, she couldn’t figure out what it was. He wanted Link’s friends, but of the three he’d been able to find, he’d guaranteed all of their safety; Sheik was on his side, he’d promised Sheik to keep Midna safe, and he’d promised Colin to keep Aryll safe. What on earth was going on?

As for Ganondorf’s newly-revealed plans… He wanted Link’s friends? Who, outside of the people in this room, could he have possibly been talking about? Sure, Link had other friends… kinda. Well, they were more like super-congenial acquaintances than actual friends, so they didn't really count. He didn't hang out with anyone outside of school other than them, and occasionally their group would go to the movies with Aryll and her friends when they were bored. But other than that…

"Does Link even have any other friends?" Midna asked, scratching her head absently as she wracked her brain for anyone else who Ganondorf could be targeting.

Sheik shrugged. "Well… I mean, he gets along well with Kafei Dotour, and I know they work together on projects and stuff when they have the same classes, but they've never really hung out… and he used to be good friends with that red-headed Ralph kid until Link beat him in the spelling bee in middle school… Other than when he was dating Ilia forever ago, I don't think he's really spent much time with anyone but us."

"That's kinda pathetic," Midna said flatly, and Sheik nodded. They both exchanged identical grins before remembering that the friend they were picking on was currently in a life-or-death situation and this really wasn't the time for jokes.

"So…" Midna drawled, realizing that she really didn't know where to go from here.

"That's all I know," Colin panted softly, "I swear."

The classroom was quiet for a moment as Colin and Sheik regarded each other silently; Colin looking both weary and fearful, Sheik looking tense and pensive. Finally, after a long moment, he let out a sigh and said, "Alright. I believe you."

"So," Midna said again, this time more brisk as Sheik let go of Colin's shoulders, causing the younger boy to slump to the side before regaining his balance; Sheik offered up a belated apology, but Colin didn’t seem to have heard him. "Now what?"

"Well, if that's all there is to find out-" Sheik began, then cut off as Aryll suddenly hopped off her desk and strode forward. She was still trembling, but her expression was determined. Carefully not looking at Colin, she stared Sheik directly in the eye and said, "Something isn't right."
"What do you mean?" He asked, perplexed, raising a hand to tousle his hair absently.

"When C-Colin came to get me," She said, stumbling over the boy’s name, "Ganondorf told me the people he had... him... find were a part of his plan. He said he was going to kill them to prove his power or something. Link was the first person on his 'hit list'."

Sheik and Midna exchanged slow looks. 'Hit list'? Ganondorf had a hit list? From the expression on Sheik's face, this was the first he was hearing about it.

"What else did he tell you? Tell me everything he told you, Aryll. Anything at all about this 'hit list'." Sheik said sternly, wheeling himself around to face her.

Aryll grimaced. "He didn't say much... Just that the people he had Co-...he had him find were part of it, and he was going to kill them to prove his power... Oh, and that they were 'closest to the one he despises', or something."

Midna bit her lip, hard. He was going to sacrifice Link and some other people just to show how tough he was? What kind of sick, twisted, deranged maniac does that?!

"But... But I didn't find anyone else!" Colin spoke up, sounding frustrated. "I told you! He told me I only needed to find Aryll, Midna, Sheik, and Link. That's it."

Midna sent Aryll and Colin perplexed looks. Aryll looked resolute, though her eyes were still red and splotchy, and she was adamantly pretending that Colin wasn't there. Colin was clearly an emotional wreck; now that Aryll was ignoring him, he looked like he didn't know what to do with himself.

Sheik looked troubled. Digging the heels of his palms into his eyes, he let out an aggravated groan as he walked to the opposite wall and slumped against it, slowly sliding down until he was seated on the floor.

"We're missing something. It's right in front of my face, but I can't see it..." He muttered wearily, letting his head thunk back against the aged brick.

"What?" Midna asked softly, following him over and crouching down beside him.

"I don't know, obviously, else I'd tell you," He grumped. Midna scowled and flicked him on the forehead.

"Hey. Don't be taking your frustrations out on me. I'm on your side, remember?"

"I know, I know..." he muttered, letting his arms fall to his sides despondently.

"What's wrong?" She asked softly, sinking down so she was sitting sideways on her knees and leaning up against him. She felt him adjust himself so that they fit more comfortably together.

It was weird how easy they were together, even during a high-pressure situation like this. Sure, she was crazy about him, and he'd all but proven that he loved her back what with him saving her life and all, but they technically weren't together or anything. She hadn't even told him how she felt, but she could tell that he knew, and that was enough for her. For now, at least. They had more pressing matters to deal with at the moment then sappy teen romance.

Sheik drew his knee up to his chest and draped his free arm over it, looking troubled.

"And before you give me some sarcastic answer about being trapped in a school full of psychos,
that's not what I meant," She added as an afterthought, and was relieved to see a small smile creep on his face.

"No, it isn't... It's not that. I guess I'm just..."

"Worried about Link?" she supplied softly, remembering the way he'd exploded at Colin earlier. Sheik gave a small sigh, nodding curtly.

"I'm worried about him too, Sheik. But... You need to take a step back and clear your mind. You'll need a level head if we're gonna come up with a plan to save Link. You almost tore Colin's head off back there..."

"Yes, Link is in danger, but you can't save him on your own. I'm here, and I'm going to help you. Both of you. You two are my best friends and two of the most important people in my life, and I'm not about to lose either of you without a fight."

Midna didn't exactly know what she expected after that admittedly sappy little speech she just gave, but it certainly wasn't what she got.

"No."

Midna blinked. "Uh... what?"

"No," Sheik replied, this time a little more forceful. "You're not coming with me. You're taking Aryll and you're getting out of here. This is something I need to do on my own."

"I'm sorry?" She asked rather sharply, pulling away from him. "Are you out of your mind?! You can't go by yourself, Ganondorf-!"

"Yes, Ganondorf will probably kill me," Sheik replied, cutting her off forcefully and climbing to his feet. His eyes were blazing, but for the first time she noticed there was something vast and empty hiding behind his anger; despair. Harrowing, torturous, heart-wrenching despair.

Midna gaped and spluttered wordlessly for a moment before following his example and standing, barely managing to say, incredulously, "And you're ok with that?"

"Look, I know it sounds crazy, but it's just something that I have to do. It's my fault Link is up there in the first place, it's my fault that so many people have died today, and as such it's my responsibility to fix this!"

"Don't be stupid!" Midna snapped, smacking his arm for emphasis. "How could you have known Ganondorf wanted Link for some stupid revenge conquest or whatever it is he's doing? And whether you were part of Ganondorf's plan or not doesn't matter, because you not being here wouldn't have prevented today's events from happening."

"I left Link there!" Sheik cried out, cutting her off, and finally, the desperation and pain that she could see in his eyes were reflected in his voice. "I left him there to save you! That's why I had to turn back rather than leave with Nabooru and the janitor. I couldn't just abandon him to his death! Now do you understand? I'm the one Aryll should be angry at, not Colin - I left him behind to die!"

Midna's chest was heaving with emotion, but she didn't know what to say. He'd left Link with Ganondorf to save her...? Well, she could understand why he felt responsible for Link's safety, then; to be honest, she was suddenly overcome by a wave of guilt herself. Still, it's not like Ganondorf wouldn't have found Link in the school without Sheik's help. No one was blaming him for Link's situation; at least, no one but himself.
"Sheik…" She began, anguished, but he rode her over.

"And the shooting? It doesn't matter if it would have gone on without me here! I was complicit, Midna! The death of everyone who was killed today is partly on my hands! Byrne and Sahasrala and Viscen and the boy with the flute and-"

"Stop it!" Midna cried out, surprised to feel tears on her cheeks but pressing on anyway. "Just stop it! The only people responsible for their deaths are Ganondorf and whoever it was who killed them! Byrne didn't blame you, Sheik, he looked up to you! He trusted you! You were his friend! Nobody's death is on your hands because you didn't kill anyone!"

"I killed Zant!" He bellowed, and suddenly the flood gate opened. Sheik sunk to his knees and hid his face in his hands, weeping bitterly in front of her like a lost child. "I killed him! Me! Not Ganondorf… Not anyone else… Just me. His death is on my hands, Midna! Mine! I killed him…"

"Zant was a monster," she said stiffly, sniffling slightly herself as she hesitantly approached him. From the corner of her eyes, she could see Aryll looking distraught, unsure if she should interrupt; Colin was looking away, looking ill.

"It doesn't matter," Sheik mumbled, wiping at his eyes with his sleeves.

"Yes, it does!" Midna cried, seizing fistfuls of his hair in either hand and forcing him to look at her. "You didn't kill him out of spite, or anger, or vengeance, or cruelty! You killed him to save me, to save Mido and Linebeck and everyone in that gym! It was in defense of the people you cared about, and that's what makes you different than the others, Sheik! You realized what you were doing was wrong and you came back! You're a hero!"

At her last word, his face contorted in anguish and he yelled, "No!"

Tearing away from her violently, he stumbled to his feet and hurriedly wadded away from her through the sea of desks. "You don't understand! For what I've done today… There is no forgiveness. Not from me, not from anyone. Not unless I can stop this. I have to do this, Midna. I have to right the wrongs I helped to make if I'm ever going to forgive myself… and if I happen to die in the process, then so be it."

As Midna stood there and watched the boy she'd loved for so long running from her, something inside of her finally broke. It was as if the emptiness she'd seen in Sheik's eyes had migrated into her chest and had taken the place where her heart used to be, bringing with it a torrent of anguish and despair that threatened to overwhelm her.

With a fresh wave of tears stinging at her eyes, and with her throat hoarse from all the yelling and raw emotion (she'd forgotten all about the need to keep quiet, what with everything going on), she felt the word escape her lips as though whispered of its own volition.

"Coward."

Against all probability, Sheik heard her, and he froze in place, his hand wavering centimeters away from the doorknob.

"What?" He asked, not turning to face her.

"You're a coward," she replied softly. Even as she said it, she felt an inexplicable chill come over the room and she hugged her arms to her chest. "You're taking the easy way out because you're afraid."

"Afraid of what?" He snapped, turning back to glare at her. He looked positively livid, his eyes
blazing, breath heaving through his nostrils.

"Afraid of owning up to what you've done," she replied, and Sheik scoffed, throwing his hands up in frustration.

"That's what I'm trying to do!" he exclaimed, but Midna shook her head slowly.

"No, you're not. You're running away again, just like you did when your mother died. You don't realize that you can't escape the pain you feel inside, Sheik. You have to confront it head-on."

"What do you want from me?" he cried out angrily, kicking the filing cabinet, the crash reverberating around the room. "That's why I'm going to Ganondorf, to confront what I've done!"

"Not it's not!" she said in frustration. "You don't understand!"

"Understand what, Midna? What do I not understand?"

"That dying isn't going to redeem you!" she fired back, advancing forward a step. "You think that going off and getting yourself killed is going to somehow absolve you of the guilt you feel, but it's not! Think about Byrne, Sheik!"

"Byrne is dead!" He hissed vehemently, placing his hands on a desk and scowling at Midna through his bangs. "He died to do what's right, and in the end, he was a hero! He was forgiven! Once this day ends, he going to be mourned along with all the other innocent victims because he managed to redeem himself! Why won't you give me that chance?!"

"Because death isn't what redeemed Byrne!" Midna cried, desperation lacing through her words. "You…! Ugh! Is that all you can think about?! Dying?! Why don't you understand?! Byrne redeemed himself the second he decided to forsake Ganondorf and Zant and chose to make the right decision-!"

"By giving his life!" Sheik cut in angrily.

"No! By choosing to save Mido! Don't you get it? It wasn't his death that made us all forgive him, it was saving Mido! It was the choice! The second he decided to do the right thing, he was forgiven! He made the difficult decision, he used himself as a shield to protect a helpless boy, and that is what made him a hero! Not death! Not dying!"

"How would you know?!" Sheik snarled, rapidly changing the topic. "You don't understand what I'm going through at all! You think you know me so well, but you have no idea! I don't deserve to live anymore, not after what I've done today. Do you honestly think life can ever go back to normal for me? I'm a monster, just like Ganondorf, or Vaati, or Sakon, or Zant. My life is over after today; whether I'm killed or locked up for life, I don't have a future. The only chance I have to do anything right to balance out all the evil I've done is if I stop Ganondorf! There's nothing left for me to live for!"

"So what, you're just going to abandon all the people who love you? What about your friends, your family?"

"My mother is dead!" He roared, slamming his fist on the desk. "I don't have anyone else!"

"You have me!" She said, desperation coating her words, and for the first time, she noticed she was sobbing. "I love you, Sheik. I need you. And if you're not here, I…"

There was a sudden hush as Midna's words seemed to reverberate profoundly around the classroom,
during which Sheik stared at Midna in astonishment and Midna tried to quietly mop up the tears on her face with her sleeves. There wasn't a sound other than Midna's sniffling and Sheik's heavy breathing.

Finally, after an eternity of strained silence, Sheik managed to stammer out an awkward, "Y-you… W-what…?"

"I love you," she said simply, painfully aware that her mascara had probably smeared all over her cheeks. "I really do. Please… Please, don't do this. Don't throw your life away. Don't make me go through the pain of losing you. I… I need you…"

She wiped at her cheeks again, knowing full well that she was fighting a losing battle. She couldn't bring herself to stop crying no matter how pathetic she knew she must look. She also couldn't bring herself to look at Sheik, afraid that she'd been wrong, that he hadn't felt the same. Or worse, that he'd ignore her words and leave, heading off on his stupid quest to die in the name of honor or nobility like some stupid hero from a story. Really, who does that anyway? It's like he lives in the middle ages or something-

The only warning she had was the sound of rapid footsteps before she found herself suddenly engulfed in crushing warmth. It took her a second to realize that he was hugging her, tightly.

"I'm sorry…" He whispered softly into her ear. "I'm so sorry…"

"You should be…" She mumbled thickly, slightly shocked, before wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him closer, burying her face in his chest. They stood like that for a moment, taking comfort in each other's presence until Midna's tears subsided and her trembling stopped.

"Are you still going to run off like an idiot to kill yourself?" Midna asked softly, and Sheik sighed heavily.

"No… I've caused you enough pain as it is. Although I'm still going to try and save Link."

"Good. And I'm coming with you."

She felt Sheik stiffen underneath her, but she didn't give him the opportunity to argue. "Listen. Link is my friend too, and I'm not about to abandon him to Ganondorf's sick, twisted clutches. I'm coming with you whether you like it or not so I can keep an eye on you, so you might as well get used to it. I'm not letting you leave my sight again."

Sheik chuckled lightly. "Never again, huh? So what if I, like, have to use the bathroom or something?"

Ugh, he and Link had the worst sense of humor. "Tough."

"You realize that you can't be with me every moment for the rest of my life, right? Eventually, assuming we both survive today, they're going to arrest me."

Midna scowled but kept her face hidden in his chest. "Says who?"

"Says… common sense? Like it or not, I did at least help plan today's events. I'm still guilty of numerous other crimes alongside accessory to murder. I won't be getting out of this scot-free." There was a forced casualness about his tone, but Midna decided to let it slide for the time being. It was probably going to take some time for him to forgive himself for killing Zant and for everything else, but she was willing to be there for him every step of the way.
"Well… We'll just have to make sure we get you a good lawyer, and even if you do go to jail, it probably won't be for long since you changed sides and saved so many people."

"Yeah, maybe…" He murmured softly, sounding thoroughly unconvinced.

They stood like that for a moment, smiling softly at each other until Sheik raised his hand to cup her cheek, slowly tracing her jawline with his fingertips, making her pulse spike. Then, slowly, he tilted her chin up and leaned forward. She quickly stretched up on her tip-toes to meet him, her eyes sliding closed.

His lips were rough and chapped but she didn't care; in fact, she doubted she had ever felt so warm or light in her life. Tangling one of her hands in his hair, she pressed herself closer against him, trusting him to support her weight as she lost herself in the moment.

After an indefinable amount of time, they finally broke apart, Midna resting her head on his chest again, grinning like an idiot.

"For what it's worth," he whispered softly, "I love you too."

"Yeah, you’d better," she said simply, and he snorted.

It wasn't until Aryll gave a polite cough that she remembered they weren't alone in the classroom. Springing apart awkwardly, the two teens sent Aryll twin grins of embarrassment. She responded with a rueful shake of the head and a satisfied smirk.

"Well, that was certainly interesting."

"Er… Sorry…" Sheik muttered, rubbing the back of his head. Midna sent the blonde girl a cheeky wink, eliciting a scandalized giggle. Well, it looks like her and Sheik’s little sideshow might have helped pull her out of her pit of despair. She supposed that made the embarrassment worth it.

"Well!" Midna said bracingly, looping her arm through Sheiks, "I think it's about time we set off, don't you?"

"Right," he said, suddenly all business. "Link still needs our help. Let's go."

They turned as one, heading toward the door of the classroom.

"Wait!" Aryll cried, darting toward them.

"What?" Midna asked curiously, tilting her head to the side.

"Let me come with you," she asked quickly. "Please. He's stuck up there because he was trying to help me. I can't just leave him…"

"Aryll…" Sheik said slowly, looking uneasy, but then another voice spoke up.

"No! You can't go with them! You have to get out!" Colin said desperately, stepping forward.

At the sound of his voice, Aryll suddenly grew tense, her fists clenching.

"Midna," Colin said, turning to her, pleadingly, "Sheik, please… Don't let her do this. She needs to get out. It's dangerous, and Ganondorf-"

"No!"
Aryll spun around, her shoulders set firmly, her face a mask of disgust. "Don't you dare, Colin. You don't have any right to worry about me. Not anymore. You've betrayed my brother, you've betrayed each and every person at this school, and you've betrayed me. We're through. Just… Go. Leave. Get as far away from me as you can and stay there. I never want to see your face again."

Aryll turned stiffly on the spot, taking a couple of steps toward Midna and Sheik. In desperation, Colin strode forward and caught her arm, murmuring, "Aryll, please-"

Pivoting on the ball of her foot, Aryll brought her free hand around and delivered a solid punch directly into Colin's eye. He let out a startled yelp of pain as he let her go, tripping over his foot and falling to the floor.

Aryll seized the opportunity and ran for Midna and Sheik. Taking Midna's hand in her own, the muttered, "C'mon guys…"

Exchanging shocked glances with Sheik, he shrugged, though still looking somewhat troubled, and started forward. Giving the blonde girl's hand a comforting squeeze, she turned and lead her out the door, following behind their red-eyed companion, pretending not to notice the tears in her cerulean eyes.

She was the only one to look back at Colin, and as she did she felt her heartstrings pluck at the look of loss on his face moments before the door swung closed behind him. Did she blame him for what he’d done? Could she honestly say she wouldn’t have done the same to save Sheik? She didn’t know… But she didn’t have time to worry about that now. All that mattered was saving Link and getting out of the school. Once they did, they could tell the police what Colin had done and maybe then the students could actually be saved.

As for whether Colin would be held accountable… Well, that wasn’t up to her. Or Aryll.

Only time would tell.
Sitting and Waiting

Shad let out a heavy, painful sigh as he eased himself onto the snack counter, leaning his back against the wall and letting his feet stretch out in front of him. Try as he might, he couldn't stop the slight whistling sound that was coming from his windpipe, though he struggled to make sure it wasn't loud enough for Ashei to hear.

"Hey," Ashei spoke up quietly from her position to his left, "you feeling ok?"

"I'm fine," he replied, trying to sound light and nonchalant. She sent him a skeptical look but didn't comment again as she closed her eyes and leaned back as well. Shad couldn't afford to have her worrying about his health when she was in such bad condition herself. She'd lost a lot of blood already, and if she didn't get medical attention soon…

Ashei was laid out flat on the same counter he was, though with some minor changes. He'd removed his jacket and given it to her to use as a pillow for her head and he'd found some boxes of bottled water to prop her leg up on. It was a testament to how poorly she felt that she hadn't argued with him while he'd taken care of her. He'd also given her one of the bottles from the box, but she hadn't had more than a couple sips.

"You really need to drink that," he replied softly, adjusting his broken glasses for the umpteenth time that day. "You need to replenish the fluids you lost so your body can replace the blood."

"Yeah," she mumbled petulantly, "and you need to drink something so your throat doesn't dry out any more than it already has."

He grimaced. She was probably right… but swallowing anything right now was excruciatingly painful, and he wasn't really looking forward to drinking anything at the moment.

Letting the rare moment of silence pass over them, Shad turned his thoughts to the third companion of theirs who had just left. Zelda… she had seemed so nice, so normal… so why had she snapped like that? It had to be the stress. That was the only logical explanation for her erratic behavior. After all, he would be startled if any student made it through today without at least a few emotional scars, and some students were simply more susceptible than others.

Still… She had somehow known about the trap in the kitchen… If they had just walked in, what would have happened to them? Would they be prisoners like everyone else in the school, or…?

Shad frowned at the opposite wall. It just didn't make any sense. How had she known? She can't have heard them; he and Ashei hadn't heard a thing, and they'd been right next to her. And what was all that about the police storming in and Ganondorf somehow knowing beforehand and staging a massacre? That was simply ridiculous. Ganondorf would have no way of knowing about any police attempt to storm the school until literally moments before it occurred, therefore eliminating any possibility of him laying any form of effective trap. Furthermore, the police had training and superior equipment. It was nonsense, utter nonsense. But if it really was nonsense… then why did he feel so uneasy?

"What's with the face?" Ashei asked, drawing Shad out of his muddled reverie.
"Zelda," he muttered, still looking pensive.

"Uh oh. Someone's got a crush." Ashei chuckled, her pallid face making her smirk somehow all the more pronounced.

"Hardly," Shad replied, his tone flat. "I'm merely concerned for her wellbeing. She's clearly undergoing severe psychological repercussions from today's events and now she's wandering the school alone and unaided. She could get herself seriously injured. I guess I'm just frustrated that she took off on her own, that's all."

"Well, look at it this way," Ashei said, adjusting her position slightly so she could see him better. "Neither of us can continue to run around this school like we've been doing. I can barely move without passing out, and no matter how much you deny it, I know it's hard for you to breath. You can't run, let alone fight. And let's just face it, you weren't much of a fighter to begin with."

Shad scowled but nodded just the same.

"I know it's not exactly the ideal situation, but what choice do we really have? We can't chase after her."

"I know, I know! It's just-"

Shad cut himself off abruptly, going very still, his eyes widening as his ears detected a sound from out in the hallway.

Ashei sent him a concerned look. "What? What is it?"

"Shh!" He said frantically, hopping off of the counter and darting to the door as quickly as he could move. His throat burned with the minor exertion and his chest was in agony, but he pressed his ear up to the crack anyway.

"What is it?" she asked again, this time in a whisper.

"Footsteps," he mouthed back, and she looked stricken.

There weren't near as many as there were before; maybe two or so people, possibly three. As they steadily drew nearer, he began to make out the words they were saying.

"…here, I guess. He wants us on both sides, so we can catch them in a vice grip and destroy them from multiple directions at once."

"What about the cafeteria?" Asked a second voice, and the first speaker snorted.

"He's gonna be up top on the balcony with a bunch of other guys, raining death on them from above. I gotta say, this plan is actually pretty good. Those officers don't stand a chance."

Shad felt his breathing stop, and not because of the gas he'd inhaled. Zelda was right… She was right! The police actually were coming and Ganondorf really did have a plan to trap them! But how had she known?!

"Wow. Ganondorf really is amazing! At first, I thought he was just all talk, but now… Maybe we really will be able to change things… He's unstoppable!"

"Yeah, well… Let's just get into position. They should be here soon, and we need to be ready."

"Ok! Hey, what do you think will happen after…?"
When they had walked off out of earshot, Shad frantically leaped to his feet and hurried to Ashei.

"Holy Nayru! She was right! She was right!"

"Whoa, hold on there, four-eyes," Ashei said, looking both confused and worried. "Who was right? What are you talking about?"

"I just heard some of the attackers outside! Zelda was right! The police are going to come storming in to retake the school and Ganondorf's staging a trap to catch them off guard and kill them all! We've got to do something! We've got to-"

Before he could finish his sentence, he broke off in a frenetic series of hacking coughs and wheezing breaths. It was a full minute before he was able to stop, but his face was red and his head was spinning.

"We aren't going to do anything," Ashei grunted, weakly tugging at his sleeve to pull him back to the counter.

"B-but-" he began, still gasping for breath.

"No buts, Shad," she said firmly. "I can't walk and you can't breathe. We wouldn't last two seconds out there. Plus, if they're laying a trap for them in the cafeteria, then us walking out of this room would just get us caught in it ourselves. All we can do is sit here and hope for the best."

"Are you mad?!" Shad managed to choke out, staring at Ashei incredulously.

"We don't have a choice. We'll just have to hope Zelda can save the day."

Biting back his angry retort, he hefted himself up onto the counter beside Ashei and scowled. Curse her cool use of logic… but she was right, unfortunately. There was literally nothing they could do. Their usefulness in today’s tragedy had come to an end.

_Come on, Zelda_, he thought urgently, staring up at the ceiling as though he could see her through it. _Come on... You're all we've got now..._

When Link heard the doorknob rattle he quickly stuffed his arms behind his back and leaned against the wall, hoping nobody would notice the strange marking on his hand or that he'd been freed from his bindings. Granted, the room was pretty dark, but the marking seemed to be glowing now, and it tended to draw attention to itself.

With a slight creak, the door swung open, and a person was shoved roughly into the room.

"Now stay here and keep quiet, Dotour," came a voice from beyond the door; Link couldn't see who was talking from the position he was sitting in, but he could tell it was a male. "We wouldn't want any others dying because of you, now would we?"

As the door began swinging shut, Link seized his chance and blurted out, "Hey! Hey, door guy! Where's my sister? What did you do with her?"

The only response he got was a brief cackle before the door slammed shut, and Link was trapped once more.

Cursing under his breath, Link turned his attention to the figure sprawled out on the floor, their hands bound behind their back just as Link's had been. At first glance, he thought it was a girl, what with
the long purplish hair that obscured their face. It wasn't until the boy groaned that Link recognized who it was.

"Kafei?" He asked in amazement, scrambling on his hands and knees over to his… friend? Acquaintance? He wasn't really sure what they were, but they got along well, so that had to count for something.

"Link?" Kafei asked, turning his head to shoot him a quizzical look. "What in the name of Farore are you doing here?"

"I botched a rescue attempt," he replied, chuckling lightly as he helped the boy to his feet. "You?"

"I got captured wandering the halls on the second floor," he muttered, a definite note of bitterness tainting his voice as he strained against his bindings fitfully.

"Hold up, I can cut you free, I just need to find that screw…"

As Link began shuffling around the floor in the general area Aryll had chucked the screw earlier, he tossed a casual question over his shoulder. "So what were you doing wandering the halls? You could get killed that way. Besides, all the exits are on the ground floor."

Kafei let out a sour grunt. "I was looking for Sakon."

"Sakon?" Link asked, grinning to himself in silent victory as he found the elusive screw and turned to hack at the duct tape surrounding Kafei's wrists. The name sounded familiar though, like he'd heard it somewhere before… and recently, too. He just didn't know where.

"The guy who brought me in," he clarified.

"Well… You apparently found him."

Kafei let out a derisive snort. "Oh yeah, I found him… ‘Course, the gun I’d stolen was out of bullets by that point and he managed to capture me…"

Link's eyebrows drew together in a puzzled expression. Kafei had stolen a gun? And shot all of its bullets? And he was looking for this Sakon fellow? He couldn't help but feel like he was overlooking some incredibly important facet of the story but for the life of him he couldn't figure out what it was.

With a final tug, Link's screw severed the bindings and Kafei was able to pull free. He made sure not to rip the tape off like a certain demented little sister of his.

"Thanks," Kafei muttered, stretching his arms over his head with a grunt.

"No problem," Link replied lightly, taking a step back and pocketing the screw. It might come in handy in the future.

Now that Kafei was free, there was an awkward pause as the two guys regarded each other blankly, unsure of what to say next.

"So…" Kafei said, scratching the back of his head as his gaze wandered the small, narrow closet.

"Yeah," Link said, nodding vaguely.

"What's the story with them?" he asked, gesturing to the two women in the back corner.

"Ignore them," Link replied, shrugging offhandedly. "I think they're paralyzed with fear or
something. They haven't said a word since I've been in here."

"How long have you been in here, anyway?" He asked, sitting down on a beaten up cardboard box labeled 'referrals'.

"Um… I'm not sure. It's hard to keep track of time. I don't even know what time it is now, but I'd guess around… twenty minutes? Approximately?"

Kafei nodded slowly, lightly tapping his fingers on his knees. "So… who were you trying to rescue when you got captured?"

"My sister," Link said, sighing as he leaned back against the wall, folding his arms over his chest.

Kafei blinked.

"Aryll?"

"Er… yeah. How do you know my sister?" Link asked slowly, looking tense. He liked Kafei and all, but if he had some secret past with his baby sister…

"Because we were trapped in the same room together," he explained, a faraway look in his eyes. "We… We managed to subdue or captor and escape into the hallway, but… We were overtaken by Sakon… Sakon, he… he…"

"Ah…" Link said, sudden understanding blooming in his mind, "So that's where you got the gun…"

And then it hit him. Kafei had been with his sister. His sister had been with Zelda. Zelda had been with Saria and Malon and…

"Anju!" Link suddenly blurted out.

Kafei's head jerked back up from where it had sunken down to stare at his stylish sneakers, surprise and confusion evident on his face. Link was startled to see tears in his usually cool and composed red eyes.

"W-What?" He asked, and Link realized he didn't know. Zelda had told him that Anju's boyfriend had run off after Sakon (which is where he must have heard the name) after Anju had been shot, but he hadn't made the connection that it was Kafei until now. Of course he'd chased after him; he thought Anju was dead and he was seeking revenge.

"Anju, your girlfriend. She was with you. And so was Zelda, and Saria, and Malon, right?"

"How did you know…" he asked, his voice trailing off as he stared at Link, looking at once confused over Link's insight as well as lost and pained over his girlfriend's supposed demise.

"Because we met up with the group right after you ran off and Aryll was taken!" Link said, suddenly excited. "We being me and Sheik, that is. You know him, right? Yeah, so we rescued them from the bad guys and told them about the exit in the kitchens and helped stem the blood flow and then they told me about Aryll, so me and Sheik decided to go our own way and… Well, the point is, I'm pretty sure Anju's ok!"

It wasn't until Link finished that he realized that he'd said that entire miniature speech in one breath. Panting slightly, he waited patiently for some sign of understanding or relief from the purple-haired boy, but Kafei's face remained completely blank.
Blinking awkwardly and feeling a little let down that his pronouncement wasn't met with a little more
gusto, Link coughed and tried again. "Um… Kafei? Did you hear me? Anju's fine. Well, not fine,
but alive at least. Or, well, I think she is. Zelda and the others carried her to safety. She's probably at
the hospital by now. Kafei? Are you ok?"

To his surprise, Link realized that Kafei's hands were trembling. Slowly, he looked down, turning his
hands upward so he could look at his palms, and for the first time, Link realized they were covered in
dried blood. Presumably Anju's.

"She's alive…?" he whispered softly, staring intently at the stains as if he could see her in them.

"Yeah. Or, I'm pretty sure. I think Ganondorf would have mentioned to me if-"

Without warning, Kafei launched himself from his seated position towards Link. He barely had time
to put his arms up in defense before realizing that Kafei was hugging him, tightly.

"Thank you…" He whispered, silently crying onto Link's shoulder. "Thank you…"

"N-No problem," Link stammered awkwardly, gently patting the boy on the back. "It's nothing,
really. I'm sure you would have done the same for me."

Right after he said it, he felt stupid. He didn't have a girlfriend so Kafei couldn't have done the same
for him, even if he tried. Sure, it was the principle of the thing that mattered, but still…

For a moment, Link imagined himself as Kafei and Zelda as Anju before hurriedly shaking his head
to clear his thoughts. Now was not the time to fantasize about the cute new girl.

Taking Link's shoulders in either hand, Kafei held him out at arm’s length and looked him straight in
the eye. "No. It's not nothing. Anju means the world to me, and you saved her life. I don't know how
I can even begin to repay you…"

"Look man, don't sweat it," Link said, suddenly feeling embarrassed. "It was a group effort. Besides,
Zelda and the other girls did most of the work. And you don't need to repay me, or anybody. Friends
help each other out, that's all."

Kafei gave him a watery grin before letting him go. "Right. Friends help each other out… So let me
help you out."

"Um…” Link said slowly, scratching his head as he looked around the room. "If you know a way
out of here, then sure, but…"

"That's not what I meant," Kafei said, chuckling. "Let me help you save your sister. She's become
my friend now too, and I can't just leave her here. Besides," he added as Link opened his mouth to
argue, "I still need to repay Sakon for what he did to Anju."

Link stared at Kafei for a moment, mulling it over. He certainly would need help if he was going to
find Aryll and get out of here… He didn't even know where she was. For that matter, he didn't know
where Sheik or Midna were either. And if Kafei was going to be here anyway…

"Alright.” Link said, nodding curtly and holding out a hand, "Let's do this. Escape the closet, find
my sister, and get out of here alive. I think we can handle it."

"Definitely!" Kafei agreed, clapping his hand to Link's and shaking it emphatically. "Operation bust
outta Ordon High is a go!"
Daughter of Wisdom

It occurred to Zelda that wandering the halls of a high school that you were not yet familiar with was a lot like being lost in a labyrinth. Every turn was suspenseful, she didn't know which hallway led to which room, and all she had to guide her was the vague knowledge that the office was in one direction and the stairs in another. This information was not enough to prevent her from getting turned around several times, unfortunately, and after a short while, she had no idea where she was.

At any moment, she was prepared for David Bowie to pop out and begin serenading her in his skin-tight leather pants. Curse her father's abhorrent fascination with 80s movies…

She'd been doing fairly well avoiding the gunmen at the beginning, up until she heard the sound of approaching footsteps behind her and she'd been forced to duck into an adjacent hallway. She'd all but ran the length of it, careful to make her footsteps as quiet as humanly possible, ducking into the girls’ restroom for a while until she was certain the coast was clear.

When she'd finally come back out she realized she had no idea where she was, and the feeling of claustrophobia settled upon her shoulders like a wet quilt, heavy and unsettling, weighing her down and making her steps drag.

And now she was lost. Hopelessly, desperately lost, with no idea where to go or what to do. Worst of all, she was no closer to finding a way to save the police officers whom her vision had showed her were going to die.

As Zelda rounded the nearest corner, she felt her heart lurch painfully as she found herself at the foot of the staircase that led to the main office. Hesitating, she staved off the overwhelming feeling of dread that seemed to flow into her at the sight of the stairwell and pushed on, desperate to leave the area as soon as possible.

Passing an alcove with two large double-doors, she decided to sneak a peek inside through one of the tiny rectangular windows to check for more shooters.

To her surprise, she'd arrived at the library, the door to which couldn't have been more than twenty feet from the stairs. From what she could see it was abandoned; not an attacker or hostage in sight. Oddly, one of the panes of glass was shattered in the window that led to the computer lab she knew lay in the back of the library, an ancient clunky monitor laying amongst the shards on the faded carpet. Even more strange, a large chunk of what looked like a section of an air vent lay amidst bits of plaster and broken ceiling tiles in the center of the library.

Apparently, something big had gone down in here. She was glad she had missed it.

Mildly curious, Zelda turned to continue on when suddenly a voice, clear and pure as the chime of a bell, rang out in her head.

Get in the library.

Zelda paused, unsure if she was hearing the mysterious voice that had been hounding her steps ever since her botched escape attempt at the kitchen or if she was merely hallucinating. To be fair, she wasn't sure if her all of her 'visions' weren't just hallucinations as well, caused by the stress of today's events and the terror she’d been plagued with since early that morning. She’d never been given cause to doubt her sanity as much as she had that day.
Once again, the voice spoke to her, soft yet firm.

_Danger approaches, my daughter. Get in the library._

Deciding on the spot to trust the voice seeing as it hadn't _yet_ led her astray, she quickly yanked one of the doors open and slid quietly inside, careful not to make a sound as she let it close slowly behind her, crouched down on her knees to avoid being spotted through the window.

She waited for a moment, absentmindedly scratching the back of her hand and feeling a little foolish about hiding behind a door for no apparent reason until she heard it: the dull thunk of swiftly approaching footsteps.

Trying desperately to quell the rising panic, she took several slow, calming breaths and instead chose to focus her attention to the sounds from the hallway beyond.

After a moment of intense listening, she realized that the sounds she was hearing belonged to not one, but a handful of people, though it was impossible to say how many there were through the door. Not only that, they weren't coming from either end of the hallway but rather from the stairs she had just passed; in other words, they were coming from the main office.

Shuffling forward, she pressed her ear against the crack between the double doors and strained to pick up any sound other than the relentless stomping.

The footsteps drew closer and closer until she was almost certain whoever was coming was planning on entering the library. Panicking slightly, she prepared herself to crawl away and hide behind the librarian’s check-out counter when all at once the relentless stomping came to an abrupt halt.

Silence reigned in the hallway for a moment before it was shattered by a deep, ominous voice that echoed sonorously in the quiet hall. The voice was firm and authoritive and unbearably cruel… and for some odd reason, horribly familiar. She felt her skin prickle and her mouth go dry as she recognized the voice from the cemetery that morning.

_Ganondorf._

"You have your orders," he intoned darkly. "You are to gather up the rest of our number on this floor and proceed down to the cafeteria where I will station you. Don't dawdle; the police will arrive in only a matter of minutes, and if you wish to live, you need to be in your places."

Another voice spoke up, sounding both hesitant and awed. "S-Sir, what about the s-students? Do you want us to leave them unguarded?"

Ganondorf snorted contemptuously. "Of course not. Leave one guard for each room that houses our hostages. Seeing as there are only six or so rooms left with prisoners, we should have more than enough forces to overwhelm the police."

There was a slight pause, then another voice spoke up, this one sounding almost reverent. "Master Ganondorf, if I may… How much longer do you think we can hold out? Eventually, the police will overwhelm us and take back the hostages."

Silence again claimed the hallway. From her position, Zelda couldn't see what was happening in the hall outside, though she didn't want to risk taking a peek through the window in case she was seen. After a moment, the heavy thud of footsteps could be heard again and she could only assume that Ganondorf was approaching the speaker.

"Do you truly doubt your lord and master so?" he asked softly, like the rasp of a blade being drawn
from a sheath.

"N-No, of course not, I just-"

"Do you perhaps presume that you know more than I?"

The boy sounded truly frightened now. "P-please, forgive me, Ganondorf. I-I didn't mean-"

There was a sudden shuffling sound, then before Zelda could begin to fathom what was happening the silence was broken by the sharp blast of gunfire suddenly reverberated throughout the hall, followed by a loud thud.

Zelda bit her cheek to keep from crying out in horror.

"Now," Ganondorf continued nonchalantly as though he hadn't just murdered one of his subordinates, "does anyone else have any questions? No? Good. Now get to work. And hurry, we haven't much time."

As one, the figures in the hall snapped into motion, spreading out in every direction. Zelda was forced to remain where she knelt, her knees aching on the scratchy, aged carpeting as she hugged her arms to herself, fighting the revulsion that wracked her body with shuddering spasms.

When the sound of the last pair of footsteps faded into the distance, Zelda took a deep, steadying breath and rose shakily to her feet, brushing her knees off in distaste. Setting her face in what she hoped was a determined expression, she slowly pushed the door open and exited the room.

The hallway was quiet, almost painfully so. It was unnerving how closely the silence in a high school could mirror that of a crypt. Try as she might, she couldn't stop herself from looking at the body on the floor, as though her eyes were drawn to it by magnetic force.

It was a boy, about her age, with short curly hair and a pallid complexion. His eyes were green and wide with surprise, though they gazed without seeing, and his body was in a strange, half-twisted position from where he fell. The bullet hole in his chest was large, and from it came an ever-widening pool of blood.

Zelda squeezed her eyes shut and swallowed back the bile that rose in her throat.

Hurry

Releasing a breath she hadn't known she was holding, she tore her gaze away from the boy and darted off down a random hallway, fighting back the tears that were welling up in her eyes.

To her immense surprise, Zelda didn't run into a single person as she strode down the endless hallway that she assumed made up the backbone of the school. The hall contained no rooms; only a vast stretch of lockers that periodically changed colors from dull brown to mottled green and back again.

Forcing herself to stop thinking about the dead boy, she tried her best to remember what Ganondorf had said… He was marshaling his forces for the invasion; that was proof enough that her vision had been accurate. And if they were already getting in place then there wasn't much time left. But what could she do?

The exits were blocked so she couldn't get outside to warn them, and her phone had been taken, so she had no communication with the outside world. She could try signaling out a window, but all the windows were barred and there was little hope that any of the police officers would be able to see
her let alone understand what she was trying to tell them.

As she rounded yet another corner, her shoulders tense and her ankles sore, she felt her heart jump with pure, unadulterated joy when she recognized the dingy, dimly lit stairwell at the end. There was a way out! She wasn't lost in this veritable death trap!

She felt her giddiness die within her as she realized that an exit wasn't going to help her solve her problem. If anything, she was safer on the second floor at the moment anyway, since Ganondorf had just ordered all the assailants downstairs to deal with the police.

Still… maybe she could find a way to… to what? To walk through walls? To fly? To magically teleport herself to the roof and-

The roof!

Zelda nearly let out a triumphant cry of victory before remembering where she was. If her guide yesterday was any indication, the entrance to the roof was up on the third floor, opposite the entrance to the main office! And since Ganondorf was downstairs, the office was likely empty! It was her only chance!

Turning promptly on the spot, Zelda hurried back the way she came, her heart light with relief, a definite spring in her step and a triumphant grin on her face. Finally, things were going right…

"…have long, so we need to hurry up."

Zelda froze, her grin melting off her face, replaced with a grimace. That voice… where had it come from?

"Yeah. I reckon' I don't wanna be on Ganondorf's bad side when he finally reveals his 'big surprise' or whatever the heck he's been talkin' 'bout."

They were coming down the hall she had come from! Fear quickening her movements, Zelda whirled around and bolted for the other hallway, opposite the staircase she had seen. However, as she drew near, the sound of multiple footsteps could be heard echoing off the walls and lockers.

Biting her lip anxiously, Zelda mentally berated herself for forgetting that Ganondorf had sent his henchmen to fetch his other henchmen, so obviously they would be heading towards the nearest staircase to get down to the first floor. Casting her eyes about wildly for some form of escape, her eyes alighted upon a door midway between both halls.

Darting forward she seized the handle, twisted it, and hurriedly scrambled inside, letting the door close as quietly as possible behind her before sinking to the ground with her back against the cool wood, her heart beating wildly in her chest and her breathing erratic.

After a moment, she heard the footsteps outside pass by and she breathed a sigh of relief. She hadn't been noticed… She was safe… No one had found her…

"…Are you ok?"

To give her credit, her shriek could have outclassed every actress in any horror movie she'd ever seen.

The boy standing in front of her leaped back with a startled expression before relaxing and letting out a light chuckle.
"Calm down, I'm not going to hurt you," he said softly, leaning over and extending a hand to help her up.

Zelda regarded him apprehensively as she struggled to catch her breath and regain her composure.

The boy was a year or two younger than her; a little on the short side, though to be fair, she was a little taller than average. His hair was dirty blond and in wild disarray; she was certain hers couldn't have looked much better. His jeans looked dusty, probably from sitting on the floor, and his pale-white button up shirt was wrinkled. He'd rolled up the sleeves, revealing lightly tanned forearms though he wasn't particularly muscular, and the first three buttons of his shirt were undone, revealing a white undershirt.

The most noticeable part of his person was his eyes- slate grey like storm clouds, they were sunken into his face as though he'd been forced to endure a string of sleepless nights, and they were completely bloodshot. That, coupled with the streaks on his cheeks, led her to deduce that he'd been crying.

Glancing over the room briefly to assure herself that there were no other surprise people waiting to pop out and terrify her, Zelda swallowed roughly past the lump in her throat and managed to stammer, "Y-You startled me…"

"I can see that," he replied. His tone suggested he was trying very hard to appear light and carefree, but the hollow expanse she could see in his eyes belied his true feelings. He was masking something… a pain of some sort. Well, he was hardly the only teenager in this school who would be hiding some emotional trauma by the end of the day, and Zelda would most certainly be one of them.

Finally deigning to accept his assistance, she grasped his hand in her own and allowed him to haul her to her feet. Just as she had guessed, he was about an inch shorter than her.

Walking forward to sit on a desk, she gratefully took a seat and let out a frustrated sigh.

"So were you being chased?" he asked softly, sitting in the teacher's chair. Behind him, on the blackboard, she could see the name 'Professor Ezlo' written in neat calligraphy, right above a list of reading assignments.

"No… But I could hear people coming from both hallways, so I ran to the nearest available hiding spot," she answered, and the boy nodded in an understanding way.

They were quiet for a moment, both of them awkwardly examining the room around them and not saying anything. Unable to handle the uncomfortable silence, Zelda cleared her throat uncomfortably and said, "So… What about you? What are you doing in here?"

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "What? You think I should be randomly wandering the halls? I don't know about you, but I don't really feel like getting shot."

"Point taken," she conceded, laughing sheepishly. Though, truth be told, there really wasn't anything in his statement worth laughing about.

"What's your name?" he asked, leaning back in the office chair. She could tell he was trying to be nonchalant again. What was he hiding? Why did he look so devastated? Did he have to watch someone he knows die? She shuddered slightly at the thought, her heart going out to the strange boy.

"Zelda," she said, then after a moment, "Zelda Nohansen. You?"

"Colin Smith," he replied.
Zelda nodded, then bit her lip as she looked away to examine the room, wondering if it was safe to venture back into the halls yet. Casting her eyes about randomly, she found herself staring at a phone on Professor Ezlo's desk.

_Hurry._

Suddenly ecstatic, Zelda launched herself off the desk towards the telephone. Clutching the receiver in her hand, she hurriedly pressed it up to her ear, struggling to dial 9-1-1 upside-down.

"What are you doing?" Colin asked curiously as Zelda gave a groan of frustration and slammed the receiver back in place.

"The phones aren't working!" She exclaimed crossly, slumping back down on the desk she'd been sitting on and folding her arms over her chest with a 'humph!'

"Well, of course not," he said, rolling his eyes as if it was the most obvious thing in the world... Which, she just realized, it kinda was. "Ganondorf cut them as soon as the attack began. He wanted to delay the police arriving as much as possible."

Zelda sighed despondently, looking defeated.

"Who were you going to call anyway? Your parents?"

"No," she grumbled, folding her legs beneath her and unfolding her arms so she could rest her chin on her hands. "I was gonna call the cops."

Colin gave her a strange look. "What for? They're already outside."

"I know. And they're about to stage an invasion of the school through the entrance in the cafeteria's kitchen. Only Ganondorf knows somehow and he's got a trap laid for them. All of the police officers are going to die if I don't find a way to warn them in time."

It was only after she'd explained her intentions to Colin that she realized how completely insane she must sound. There was no logical way of explaining how she'd come across this knowledge, and if Shad and Ashei's reactions had been any indicator, Colin was only going to think she was crazy.

Casting a quick glance at the boy to gauge his reaction, she was surprised to see him staring at her in shock, his face drained of any and all color and his eyes stretched wide open.

"How... How do you know?" he asked, looking stricken.

"I..." She started, then paused, biting her lip. What was she supposed to say? A mysterious disembodied voice pulled my mind from my body and showed me a vision in a world of foggy nothingness? Right... That would go over well...

"I... I overheard Ganondorf telling his cronies," she said quickly, remembering only now the incident at the library only a few minutes earlier. Technically, she could easily claim that that was how she'd found out about the police and Ganondorf's trap. Why did she have to make things so complicated for herself?

Regardless, Colin didn't question her about that any further. "Do you know when the S.W.A.T. team is supposed to infiltrate the school? How long do we have to warn them? Do you have a plan?"

"I'm not sure exactly when it's supposed to happen," Zelda replied slowly, taken aback by the desperate tone of his voice, "but I think we have only a matter of minutes. Ganondorf is probably
setting up the trap right now, which means the officers could be here at any moment. As for a plan… I don't know. The only thing I can think of is maybe going to the roof and trying to warn them:"

"No good," Colin cut in, shaking his head quickly. He was leaning forward intently now, an unreadable look in his eye. "The door to the roof is locked at all times and I have no idea where the keys might be."

Zelda sighed, defeated. "Well, then what can we do? The doors are locked, the only exits guarded, the windows are barred, and the phones are dead! There's nothing else!"

Colin drew his eyebrows together, looking troubled.

Inside her head, the voice whispered again, this time more urgent. 

"The phone lines have been cut…” Colin muttered slowly, staring at the desk with a pensive expression, "But… But what if we use a phone that doesn't use a landline?"

"What, you mean like a cell phone?" Zelda asked.

"Yeah. Cell phones would still work," he said, sounding emboldened by his words.

It was Zelda's turn to roll her eyes. "Well, that's just fantastic. Unfortunately, Ganondorf's underlings stole everyone's phones, remember? So unless for some reason you still have yours…"

Colin shook his head. "No, mine was taken too."

Zelda groaned and hid her face in her hands. "Then there's nothing we can do…"

"Where did they put your phone when they took it?" Colin asked after a moment.

Zelda shrugged. "I don't know. Into a bag or something. Why?"

"Because. If we can find one of the stashes of phones, then we can call the Chief of Police and tell him before they attempt to infiltrate the school!"

"Find one of the… What are you, insane? The phones are probably being kept by the guards who are watching the rooms! We'd have to overpower a guy with a gun to get at them!"

Colin appeared briefly stymied, then shook his head and said, excitement lacing his words, "But haven't some of the students escaped? At least one of the rooms has to be empty, and I doubt they thought to take the phone stashes with them!"

Zelda opened her mouth to argue back when suddenly she remembered that she had been in one of those groups that had made an escape attempt. They'd left their guard tied up but had forgotten the phones that he'd taken from them. They were likely still in the desk…

She gasped, her eyes widening. "Colin, you're a genius!"

He offered a small smile but once again it didn't reach his eyes.

"Now all we need to is find a room that's been abandoned, and-"

"Miss Marie's geometry class," Zelda said firmly, and Colin blinked.

"Er… are you sure?"
"Positive. Can you get us there?"

"Well… sure, but-"

"Then let's go!" With a sudden surge of energy, Zelda leaped to her feet, surprising even herself. Colin followed suit, though with a bit more reservation, and together they hastened towards the door.

"Um, Colin?" Zelda asked, a sudden thought occurring to her, "How are we going to get a hold of the Chief of Police before he gives the order and they make it in? I mean I guess we could just call the police directly, but it may not get to him fast enough..."

"Forget that, we'll just call his personal cell number," the boy muttered offhandedly, casting his gaze down both sides of the hallway through the door's window before opening it and ushering Zelda onward.

She stared at him, nonplussed. "...How do you know the Chief of Police's personal cell number?"

"Easy," Colin answered, turning to meet her gaze, and once again Zelda was subjected to the hollow chasm of grief hidden within his cloudy eyes. "He's my father."

Zelda gaped but Colin didn't wait for a response. Darting ahead of her, the boy crept silently down the hall, leaving her standing stunned in the doorway.

Gathering her wits, she hurried after him, careful to listen for the telltale sound of approaching madmen. Her mind was spinning from this new revelation; there she was, trapped in a high school full of emotionally disturbed teens who were out for blood, guided by a mysterious voice from nowhere on an impossible mission to save the lives of the doomed policemen, and just as she was about to give up hope, she just happens to stumble across the son of the police chief?

Sure, Zelda believed in coincidences, but this was pushing it a little far. Had she been guided here by the mysterious voice? Or was some greater power at play? She had the sudden mental image of vast, omnipotent deities watching her creep through the high school on a high def television. She shuddered involuntarily; she didn't like being watched. It made her skin prickle.

As she and Colin paused at the intersection that led to the staircase on her right and another random hallway on her left, she took a moment to ask, in a rather breathless voice, "You sure this is the right way?"

"Well, considering as I have her every Tuesday and Thursday during third period..." He muttered, and Zelda blushed, feeling stupid.

"Er, right. Sorry. Lead on."

Their journey through the halls was mostly uneventful, for which Zelda was immensely grateful. Though their steps echoed off the cold metal of the lockers that lined the walls and though her own breathing sounded unbearably loud and ragged in her ears, the school remained eerily quiet. She supposed this was because Ganondorf had pulled most of his men downstairs where they were silently awaiting the police to fall for their trap. Silver linings and all that.

Hurry.

Zelda licked her lips and once again found herself scratching at the back of her hand. Glancing down quickly, she let out an internal groan when she noticed the large, triangular patch of blotchy, red skin that adorned the back of her hand. It was spreading. She must have gotten some kind of chemical spilled on her like Shad said. That or the stress was giving her a rash.
Great, just what she needed on top of everything else. An embarrassing skin rash. Today was seriously not her day.

Clenching her fists to stop herself from scratching, she turned her attention back to the hallway and grunted as she plowed right into Colin’s back. Staggering, she clutched a locker for support and sent the boy an irritated look.

"What are you doing?" she hissed, only to be met with a placating hand motion and a soft 'shh!' Gesturing to a door Zelda hadn't realized was in front of them, she was surprised to hear the sounds of some sort of commotion coming out muffled through the crack between the door and the floor.

There was a loud bang like a desk had just been turned over followed by twin shouts of anger and pain. Zelda exchanged baffled looks with Colin, then together the duo crept closer, eager to find out exactly what was going on in the mysterious room.

Careful to keep herself as low as possible, she peeked one eye into the room through the window, trusting the commotion within to draw the full attention of anyone who was in the room and prevent her from being noticed.

At first glance, the room didn't look any different than any other classroom she had yet been in. The desks were in sloppy rows facing a blackboard that was obscured from her limited vision on the wall that separated the class from the hall. There was a globe perched precariously on a filing cabinet in the corner, and next to the window at the back of the room sat an antique brass telescope. The walls were covered in pictures of geographical locations around Hyrule, as well as a large poster of the ancient castle once owned by the Royal Family; clearly, this was a history class of some sort. A relatively small gaggle of students, maybe ten or so, stood huddled in the corner, looking fearful and distressed; several of the younger students were in tears, others were hiding their faces from the spectacle that taking place at the front of the room, directly in front of Zelda.

A red-haired boy lay with his legs sprawled on the ground, propped up on an elbow, his wavy hair still somehow perfectly coifed and styled. He was clutching his side fitfully with one hand, blood slowly dripping through the odd blue jacket he wore, staining his fingers and the tiled floor a sinister red. He was breathing heavily, though it seemed mostly from exertion, as he snarled viciously up at a person Zelda couldn't see; the wound must have just grazed his side, not punctured anything vital or else he'd be more like Anju had been, pale and unresponsive.

Scooting carefully to the side so she could see more of the room, Zelda felt surprise overtake her as her eyes fell upon the captor.

It was a girl.

She didn't know why this fact startled her so much. There was no reason why Ganondorf couldn't have brought in a female to help him dominate the school; she had just never considered the possibility since all the other shooters seemed to be male. Sure, she'd heard a female voice when she was hiding downstairs in the snack bar, but that was different from actually seeing one.

The girl, whoever she was, was beautiful. Her skin was pale and flawless, her jet-black hair undulating down her back, sparkling in the garish lighting of the classroom. Her lips were luscious and painted red and her eyes were dark and sparkling with intelligence. The only thing that ruined her appearance was the sneer on her face and the gun in her grip, held firmly in a hand that sported long, sharp black nails, the nose of which pointed directly towards the boy on the floor.

Though the voices were muffled through the door, Zelda could just barely make out what was being said.
"So…" the girl drawled, panting slightly as she advanced towards the boy, "That was it, then? Your big escape attempt? Pity. I expected more from you, Ralphy."

Her voice was smooth and alluring, the kind you would expect an award-winning movie star to have. Zelda was baffled; why would a girl as pretty as her choose to work for Ganondorf? Weren’t people who shot up schools usually, like… social outcasts?

The boy on the floor, Ralph she assumed, scowled back contemptuously.

"You were merely lucky," he panted, shifting backward slightly in a vain attempt to distance himself from her.

She let out a condescending snort. "You call what you did, hollering like an idiot and blindly charging forward then accidentally tripping over a desk and falling on your face me being lucky?"

Ralph's face flushed darkly, but his bravado only seemed to swell under her scrutiny. "Yes, lucky! If that desk hadn't been there-"

"You mean if you weren't such a spaz," she cut in, and he spluttered in furious incoherence.

The girl let out a blood-chilling cackle that made Zelda's hair stand on end. Despite the girl's obvious physical beauty, her laugh was not attractive at all.

"Oh, Ralphy, Ralphy, what am I going to do with you?" she tittered, enjoyment apparent on her face as she stared down at him like a hawk examining a fat rat.

"Do whatever you want, Veran," Ralph spat, his ego recovering faster than Zelda could blink. "It matters not. You shall never win. Even if I die here this day, someone is going to beat you and Ganondorf. Your machinations are doomed to failure. Even should you kill us all in cold blood, your only future is death or prison. Nobody wins."

"Doomed to failure, you say…” Veran repeated softly, so softly that Zelda almost missed it, a slow smile slowly splitting across her face; though her teeth were pearly white and perfect, her smile made her skin stretch in a very unpleasant way, making her face look sallow and ghastly.

Ralph drew back, suddenly uncertain, and Zelda was surprised to find she'd done the same behind the window. Something was wrong with this girl… Very wrong. The back of Zelda's hand gave an annoying twinge.

"It seems, Ralph, that I must make an example of you to the other prisoners," Veran stated simply, as though discussing the weather, her face suddenly snapping back to her previous look of imperious beauty. Ralph's face paled.

A sudden tap at her shoulder made Zelda jump.

"What?" she mouthed at furiously Colin, heart thundering painfully in her throat, trying hard to juggle her attention between the blond-haired boy and the couple in the classroom.

"We need to move on," he replied, whispering as he glanced nervously down the hall behind them. "We don't have much time, and the police could barge in any moment. We need to get to Miss Marie's and find a phone, quick."

Zelda gaped at him, astonished. "But… What about the people in the classroom? What about Ralph? She's going to kill him!"
Colin fixed her with a flat look. "We don't have time to waste here, Zelda. And besides, there's nothing we can do. Veran has a gun, we don't. We'd be killed along with him. We need to focus on trying to warn the police, which is something we know we can do, as opposed to trying to save Ralph, which is something we almost definitely can't do."

Zelda groaned, feelings of hopelessness threatening to overwhelm her. Colin certainly had a point, but… could she really just abandon this boy to his fate?

Raising a hand to wipe some of the weariness from her eyes, she was startled to notice the rash on her hand had changed; it was definitely triangular in shape, but now she could see it wasn't one, but three triangles placed together in such a way that it formed one large triangle. Even more shocking than that, it was no longer a blotchy red, but a pale yellow.

She stared at the shape in consternation. Could the marking on her hand not be a rash at all? Could it instead have something to do with the mysterious voice she'd been hearing all day?

Colin cleared his throat impatiently, urging her to get a move on down the hall. From within the class, she heard Veran announce in a loud, clear voice, "I'll give you twenty seconds to pray to the Goddesses, Ralph, and when they don't help you, you'll get to see just who's 'won' today."

Running her thumb over the mark and closing her eyes, Zelda quickly called out in her mind to the voice.

"Please, whoever you are, whether spirit or goddess… Let me know what to do."

In her mind, she heard the voice again, though this time it seemed to echo throughout her whole body, making her tingle from head to toes, suffusing her entire being with warmth.

"Hurry, my daughter."

And in that instant, she knew what to do.

Turning to grasp the handle, she heard Colin exclaim in a hiss, "What are you doing?"

"What needs to be done," she replied. "Maybe I don't know if I can help him, but I know that I have to try. I wouldn't be able to live with myself otherwise. Besides," she added when he opened his mouth to argue, "you don't need me anymore. You know what you need to do to make things right, and after all, he's your father. You're the one who needs to make the call. I was just the messenger."

She didn't know what possessed her to say that, but she didn't pause to think about it. Leaving behind a lost and bewildered Colin, Zelda turned the handle and, without preamble, burst into the room.

As one, every head turned to look at her, surprise evident on their faces; the students looked frightened, Ralph confused, Veran utterly baffled.

As Zelda stood there, panting slightly while the door slowly swung shut behind her, she realized that she probably should have thought of a plan before bursting in here. How was she supposed to save Ralph, anyway? The only thing she could think of was when she'd kicked the legs out under the attacker who'd held her hostage and Kafei had pinned him to the desk, and that didn't seem like a likely possibility in this scenario.

Unbidden, the image of her tacking Vaati to buy time for Anju and the girls rose to her mind.

"What-" Veran began blankly, but before she could finish Zelda let out a strangled war cry and charged the girl, crashing into her and sending them both careening wildly into the desks.
It didn't occur to her until halfway through her charge that this was exactly what Veran had said Ralph had attempted and that it hadn't worked out very well for him. Thankfully, Zelda was (apparently) more coordinated than the red-headed boy and didn't have any furniture impeding her way.

As the two crashed to the floor, bringing a couple desks down with them, Zelda struggled in vain to grab hold of the girl's gun, knowing it was her only chance to save herself.

Unfortunately, she hadn't expected Veran to possess such incredible strength. Seizing Zelda by her hair with her free hand, she pulled the defenseless girl's head back and bashed her across the temple with the butt of her gun.

Spots exploded across Zelda's vision, blinding and disorienting her. Grabbing each of Veran's wrists to prevent any more attacks like the last one, Zelda struggled to heave herself upward and, with all her might, drove her knee into Veran's stomach, expelling the air from her lungs with a pained grunt.

Not giving up, Veran gave a ferocious snarl and twisted around, struggling to break free of Zelda's hold. Gathering her legs in front of her, she shoved Zelda off with an almighty kick, slamming the blonde girl into one of the nearby fallen desks.

Wincing as the hard metal struck her side where she sported the bruise from Vaati's earlier wrath, Zelda tried in vain to stand but before she could, Veran let out a screech like a wet cat and smacked Zelda in the face with her open hand, her nails leaving bloody furrows in her cheek. Before she could react, Veran kicked out again, catching Zelda in the stomach and sending her sliding across the tiled floor where she came to rest directly beneath the teacher's desk, one of her legs upsetting a nearby wastebasket, strewing the contents all over the floor.

Zelda lay there in agony, gasping for breath as she gingerly palpated the wound on her side; it felt like she'd broken something. Moreover, her cheek was stinging something fierce and she could feel the blood dripping freely down her cheek.

Still a little disoriented from the blow to the head, Zelda struggled to sit up but to no avail. Lifting her right hand, she examined the symbol adorned on her skin. It had grown darker, more pronounced. The yellow now almost looked gold, and the sight of it emboldened her. For a wild moment, she wondered if Colin had made it to the geometry class yet…

Veran had taken the time to climb to her feet, and with a very un-feminine roar of rage, she seized the edge of the desk with both hands and turned it over, sending papers and other random odds and ends flying across the room.

Gazing up at the enraged girl, Zelda felt the first true pangs of fear begin coursing through her. She really should have thought this through first…

"You…" Veran seethed, breathing heavily through her nose, her shoulders trembling with rage. "Who in Din's name are you supposed to be?!!"

Zelda couldn't tell if this was an actual query she wanted answered or the start of a rant. In either case, the question was soon forgotten as Veran, with a look of growing horror, noticed the state of her appearance.

"My hair!" she screeched, scandalized, running her fingers through her tousled ebony locks. "Look what you did to my hair! It's all tangled and ruined and…!!"

Veran froze, staring at her fingertips; the nail on her left index finger had snapped off. "I broke a
"nail!" She wailed, tears welling up in her eyes. "Look what you did, you little witch! I'm hideous!"

In spite of the obvious severity of the situation, Zelda couldn't help herself; with an incredibly undignified snort, she erupted in peals of laughter, punctuated only occasionally by stabs of pain from her side and her head. She couldn't help herself; there she was, laying on the ground after losing an impromptu wrestling match with a would-be homicidal teenage girl in a high school full of gunmen, and all Veran could think about was her appearance. Well… girls will be girls… though she was grateful that she wasn't that self-absorbed.

If Veran was upset before, she was furious now. If you squinted hard enough, Zelda almost thought you could see steam rising off her body as her face turned bright red with both rage and embarrassment.

"Oh, you think it's funny, do you?" she hissed ominously. Lifting her gun and pointing it at Zelda, she sneered, "How funny is it now?"

Maybe it was because she'd been in this scenario more times than she could remember today, but she felt completely desensitized to the terror that her logical mind was telling her she was supposed to be feeling. Instead of quieting, Zelda merely let loose another giggle and said, "Nope. Still funny."

From over behind Veran's legs, Zelda could see Ralph's flabbergasted face. He was casting frantic glances between both girls as he slowly shuffled backward, away from the two and closer to the window.

Feeling the need to imitate his movements, and since the ground was so unbearably uncomfortable, Zelda let her eyes slide closed as she sat up with a painful groan and slid slowly backward until she could lean her head against the cool brick wall. With a relieved sigh, she rested her back against the wall and let her eyes flutter back open, lamenting the headache she now had and trying to focus on the gun-toting girl before her.

Veran looked completely stunned that her threat had no effect.

"What, you don't think I'll do it?" she asked, exasperated.

Zelda shrugged, feeling incredibly apathetic about the whole situation. Maybe she'd been hit harder than she thought…

Veran bared her teeth, which gave her a slightly demented appearance.

"Fine!" she spat hysterically. "Fine! You want me to prove it, then I'll prove it! I'll blow your Din blasted head off, you b-!"

"Stop."

Veran and Zelda both whipped their heads towards the new voice with surprise, a poor decision on Zelda's part. Her vision swam, but after a moment she was able to determine the face of the speaker, and she felt her stomach drop.

Colin.

"What are you doing here?" both girls exclaimed, then cast each other surprised looks. The boy stood still, his shoulders set, his face determined. Zelda was surprised to see the hollow look that had dominated his eyes was gone, replaced by a fire that smoldered within. He looked like an entirely different person.
"Listen, you little weasel," Veran snarled, turning her attention to Colin but keeping her gun trained on Zelda. "This isn't any of your business. I don't care what kind of leeway Ganon's given you in exchange for your cooperation. This is my room, and your precious little girlfriend isn't here, so get out!"

Zelda blinked in confusion. Ganon? Cooperation? Girlfriend? What was Veran talking about?

Colin flinched but otherwise remained impassive. Advancing towards them with slow, deliberate steps, he whispered, "You can't kill her, Veran."

Veran sneered. "Oh well, excuse me. I forgot I was speaking to the great Colin. You don't give the orders here, weasel. In fact… Explain to me again why I shouldn't just shoot you both and be on my merry little way?"

"I thought Ganondorf ordered that none of the remaining students were to be killed," he replied softly, casting a brief worried look toward Zelda. She tried to give him a reassuring smile to let him know she was ok, but the motion made her cheek sting and she ended up giving more of a pained grimace instead.

Colin frowned, then turned his attention back to Veran. "You don't have a lot of prisoners left. I don't think he'd be too pleased to learn that you killed a couple because you lost your temper."

"What Ganondorf doesn't know won't hurt him," she replied simply. In a flash, her grin turned feral. "Besides, we're nearly done here anyway. Pretty soon we're not going to need any more hostages, and then what will we do with all of these students?"

Zelda felt something painful well up inside of her.

"Well then what was the point?" she blurted out angrily. "Why? Why gather all the students together and hold out this long? Why not just end it all as soon as you started? That doesn't make any sense!"

Veran shrugged. "Ganon's plans aren't for us to understand. We agree to follow him, and in exchange we receive certain… perks…"

"Like the ability to kill whoever annoys you?" Zelda snarled, and Veran let out a throaty chuckle. "Yeah. Pretty much. And right now…" she gave Zelda a sweet smile. "…this little tramp is going to pay for what she did to my hair."

Without a word, Colin stepped in front of Zelda.

Veran gave an annoyed sigh.

"What are you doing?" she asked disdainfully.

"Yeah, Colin, what are you doing?" Zelda hissed from her place on the ground. "There's something very important that you're supposed to be doing right now."

"Sorry Zelda," he said softly over his shoulder, "but you were right. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I allowed an innocent person to die knowing that there might have been something I could have done to stop it. I know that probably better than anyone…"

"Oh, come on!" Veran groaned, rolling her eyes overdramatically. "That has got to be the sappiest thing I've ever heard! And don't you already have a girlfriend, Mr. Hero? I don't think she's going to be very pleased to hear you're stooping with another girl."
Colin fixed her with a flat look. "Not that it's any of your business, but no. I no longer have a girlfriend."

Veran snorted with laughter, but Colin pressed on. "Though you should try a little harder to hide your jealousy, Veran."

If anything, her laughter increased ten-fold.

"What are you talking about?" she gasped between laughs. "As if I'd ever want a pathetic worm like you!"

Colin smiled mirthlessly. "Oh Goddesses, no. But you do want what I had. A normal, healthy relationship. One where your feelings are returned. Tell me, has Ganondorf ever responded to your advances?"

Veran's smile grew twisted and slid off her face, her eyes growing cold.

"What do you know?" she growled petulantly, and it was Colin's turn to chuckle.

"A lot, apparently."

"Shut up!" Veran screeched, her emotions going haywire, jerking the gun up so it was level with Colin's chest. Zelda felt her breath catch, but Colin remained impassive. "Just shut up! Just for that, you get to die first!"

Zelda opened her mouth to cry out, to draw her attention, to do something, but before she could so much as make a sound she heard a grunt, saw a flash of reflected light behind Veran's head, and then with a hollow clunk the girl toppled forward, her eyes rolling into the back of her head.

Zelda stared dumbstruck at the girl's inert form, then slowly raised her eyes to gaze at the figure standing behind her. There, panting slightly, wincing as he gingerly set down the aged brass telescope that he'd retrieved from the corner, stood Ralph in all his odd blue-jacketed glory.

"Cutting it a little close there," Colin said sarcastically, kneeling down to check Veran's pulse.

Ralph flashed them a broad grin. "I had it all under control. I simply didn't expect this beauty to be quite so heavy."

His bravado was undiminished despite having to be rescued, though she could see the wound on his side was hindering him. Colin gave a grunt and got back to his feet, wiping his hands off on his jeans. "She's unconscious. The injury isn't that serious, but she should be out for a while. Still, we should probably tie her up or something."

"With what?" Ralph asked, leaning against the dented telescope at complete ease, as though he hadn't just narrowly avoided death. "I don't suppose you happen to carry a rope on your person."

"No," Colin said slowly, giving the redhead an odd look. "But we can use tape or shoelaces or… Zelda? Are you ok?"

At the sound of her name, Zelda gave a start, jerking out of her dazed stupor.

"Huh? What?"

"I asked if you were ok…" Colin said slowly, giving her a worried look. "It looks like you got the crap kicked out of you."
"Ah, yes," Ralph chimed in, nodding sagely. "It was a noble effort, truly, but she really isn't cut out for physical combat. Really, with a face like hers, she should try to stick to more supportive roles, and let the men handle the dirty work, eh? It'd be a shame to see a beauty like hers marred because she insists on sticking her nose into dangerous situations where she doesn't belong."

"Excuse me?" she screeched, infuriated. She had just busted in there, recklessly endangering herself to save his life, a complete stranger, and he had the nerve, the audacity, to criticize her methods?!

Clambering to her feet using the wall for support, she moved to confront him, but with a wobble, she felt her legs give out and she fell over sideways. If Colin hadn't been there to catch her, she would have hit the ground.

"In case you hadn't noticed," Zelda growled viciously, struggling in vain to support her own weight on legs that wouldn't obey her, "I got pistol whipped in the head, so forgive me for being too disoriented to focus on the fighting!"

"Now now, my dear, no need to apologize for the fallibilities of the weaker sex!" Ralph chuckled amiably, and Colin had to physically restrain Zelda before she could tackle him.

"Considering how she just saved your sorry life," Colin grunted, "maybe you should consider being a bit more grateful…"

"Of course, of course!" the boy exclaimed, and with a rather bizarre flourish, he seized the corner of his jacket with one hand and gave what was an unmistakable bow. "You have my sincerest gratitude for providing the distraction I needed to apprehend the villain!"

Slapping his hand over Zelda's mouth to prevent the stream of curses she had been about to shoot at him, Colin quickly explained, "She's not feeling too well at the moment. Why don't you go check on the other students and I'll make sure she's ok."

"A splendid idea!" Ralph exclaimed, and, whirling about on the spot, he promptly marched over to the gaggle of students in the corner, holding the telescope aloft like a scepter and flicking his hair in an overly arrogant manner.

With a snarl, Zelda bit down on Colin's hand, making him yelp.

"What was that for?" she exclaimed as Colin glowered at her, massaging his wounded appendages.

"We can't afford to start fighting amongst each other, even if he is an arrogant, egotistical douche bag," Colin muttered, slowly navigating around the overturned desk and Veran's body and easing Zelda down in the teacher's chair. "Besides," He added when she opened her mouth to argue, "I don't think you're in any fit state to get in another fight. I wasn't kidding when I said you got the crap kicked out of you."

"She got a lucky shot…" Zelda muttered, diligently defending her wounded pride. "It was that first blow to the head. I wasn't able to think straight afterward…"

"Mmm," Colin grunted, moving her hair to examine her head. "Well, you've got a fantastic goose egg, but I think you'll be ok… Here, look me in the eyes."

"Wha- Why?" She asked, baffled, as he seized her chin and forced her to face him. She was quiet for a moment under his intense scrutiny, his brows furrowed in determination, his eyes the color of a thunderstorm. Finally, he sighed and said, "You have a slight concussion. I guess that explains why you can't stand on your own."
"How do you know that?" she asked, genuinely surprised, and he shrugged, looking slightly embarrassed.

"Your pupils are different sizes. It's basic medical stuff. How's your cheek?"

Remembering the gash on her face, she felt it give a particularly nasty twinge and she inwardly groaned.

"How do you think?" she asked sarcastically, and he chuckled.

The two were silent for a moment, then Zelda asked quietly, "...Why did you come back?"

Colin sighed, leaning back against the blackboard, smudging the name that had been written there so it read 'Mr. Aur', rather than whatever it had read before. "It was what you said to me in the hallway... I... I've made some pretty bad decisions today. I thought at the time that they were the right decisions, but I realize now that they weren't right, they were cowardly. So... I considered this the chance to start... repenting, I guess. To start fixing all the bad I've done today."

"Does this bad stuff have anything to do with Ganondorf?" she asked softly, remembering Veran's words, and he sighed.

"Yeah... I struck a deal to save my girlfriend. Only, to do so, I had to betray a lot of people... I never meant to hurt anyone, I just wanted to make sure she was safe..."

Zelda was startled when he cut off at the end, his voice choked up with emotion. Tears flooded his eyes, as though the storm clouds were raining, and she felt her heart reach out to him.

"Hey... It's ok. I understand. I'm sure everyone else will too, and so will she, just wait-"

Colin snorted, looking away as he surreptitiously wiped at his eyes. "Hardly. She broke up with me, remember? She told me she never wanted to speak to me again, and I can't exactly blame her..."

Putting a comforting hand on his arm, Zelda tried to summon up her most sympathetic smile. "Don't give up. She'll forgive you. After all, how could anyone stay mad at such a brave guy?"

Colin shot her a quizzical look. "Brave? What's brave about me? You're the brave one. Charging into a classroom unarmed and tackling a girl with a gun? That's brave."

Zelda grinned up at him. "No, that's stupid. What you did was brave. You were ready to take a bullet for me... And you don't even know me! I don't know if I'd be able to do that for a complete stranger. I admire that about you, that and the fact that you want to make things right again. I mean, it's proof that you're a good guy. She'll take you back, just wait and see."

Blushing slightly, he sent her a watery smile which she returned wholeheartedly. Nayru, she was just making friends everywhere today, wasn't she? She needed to write a book about this: How to make friends in life or death scenarios.

_Hurry, daughter._

Hearing the voice again after such a long pause had Zelda jumping in fear before remembering what it was. Colin sent her a concerned look.

"Zelda? Are you ok, what-"

"Nothing, nothing!" She said hurriedly, making placating gestures quickly with her hands. "But we
"Right!" Colin said, replacing his sorrowful expression with one of determination in the blink of an eye.

"Ralph!" Colin called across the room.

"What?"

"Come over here, I have a question!"

"Just a moment!"

Zelda moaned, letting her head slump back against the chair's headrest. "Why did you call him back here…?"

"Because he'll know where Veran hid the phones. It'll save time if we don't have to search for them."

"Ok, but if that Labrynnian loser makes one more sexist comment…!" she said ominously, trailing off as she noticed Ralph picking his way towards them through the myriad desks.

"How might I be of assistance?" he asked, twirling the telescope around for no apparent reason before leaning on it once more. Zelda rolled her eyes and took a deep, calming breath.

"We need to know where Veran took your cell phones," Colin said matter-of-factly.

Ralph flashed him a cheeky grin. "Ah, is this a personal call? Got a pretty little lady you want to get a hold of? Or you want to inform dearest Mumsikins that you're ok?"

She could tell by the set of Colin's jaw that he was quickly losing patience, but he kept himself in check. "No, this is a more serious matter, Ralph. And it's urgent. Do you know where they are?"

"Sadly, no," he replied, sighing wistfully. "Those thugs came in and carted them off over an hour ago. They're long since gone."

Zelda felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach, the last vestiges of hope draining out of her like water in a drain.

"Wait, what?" She exclaimed, exchanging fearful looks with Colin. "They took the phones away? Why would they do that? Where did they go?"

"The villains were not particularly forthright with their intentions," Ralph said amusedly, talking to Zelda in a tone that suggested she was a child with limited understanding. She had to bite her lip to stop herself from filleting him with her tongue.

"Then… it's over," Colin said, sounding empty as he slumped back against the chalkboard. "We're out of options…"

Zelda shook her head, lost for words. Truly, they were out of hope. She slumped forward, cradling her head in her hands. There was nothing else they could do…

From somewhere beside her, she heard Ralph ask in a chipper tone, "Now, if I may inquire as to the state of the outside world? I need to be fully informed if I plan to lead us all to safety."

Disgusted, Zelda pushed herself away from the boys, leaving Colin to deal with Ralph as she let the wheels on her chair carry her away.
Unfortunately, she only managed to get a few feet away before her chair caught on something. Grunting sourly, she turned to remove the obstruction and was surprised to see one of the drawers from the desk. It lay upside-down amidst a pile of scattered papers and lecture notes. Out of sheer curiosity, Zelda lifted a pile up and began to sort through them while she considered their predicament.

Was this really the end of the line? Had the voice in her head really led her on this long, ridiculous chase only to tell her that it was nothing more than a long waste of time? The task was useless? The Police were going to die anyway, no matter what she did? And what if Colin had abandoned her to die, would he have had success in Miss Marie's room, or had the phones been taken from there as well? It seemed likely; why would they only remove the phones from one room? They must have realized it was a necessary precaution with the high number of free students navigating the hallways…

But what was she supposed to do now? Where did they go from here? How were they going to escape?

Something registered in her mind, and she quickly flipped back a couple of pages until she found it. There, scrawled on a sheet of paper, was the symbol that adorned the back of her right hand.

Zelda gazed at the paper in shock, then held her hand up to compare. Yes… the two were certainly the same… Three smaller triangles that together formed one large triangle. Though on her hand, it seemed as though the bottom left triangle was a slightly different color than the others. It almost looked like it glowed… But what was it? Why was it there? And what did it mean?

Quickly drawing the page out, she began to scan the page, her eyes darting across it as quickly as she dared.

‘Of all the sacred, mythical objects of Hylian Lore, perhaps the best known and most sought after is the legendary Triforce. Composed of three separate triangles, each of which is said to represent one of the three Goddesses, the Triforce purportedly holds the power to grant the deepest desire of the heart of whomever touches it. For that reason, it was often sought by agents of evil and was the cause of much strife and contention in Hyrule's history.

In one legend, known as 'The Legend of the Hero of Time', it is stated that the wicked King of Thieves managed to seize the Triforce; however, since his heart was not balanced, the Triforce split into its three core pieces (Power, Wisdom, and Courage), and each one was sent to reside in the heart of whomever in Hyrule most embodied these qualities. The Evil King retained the Triforce of Power; the Triforce of Courage went to the mythical Hero of Time; and finally, the Triforce of Wisdom went to a young member of Hyrule's reigning family, later to be nicknamed the Princess of Destiny.

As the story goes, the Hero and the Princess banded together, combining the strength of their individual Triforce pieces to overthrow the Evil King and save Hyrule from his reign of tyranny. Since that time, it is said that the Triforce pieces were passed on, though the manner by which each new bearer of the Triforce received their piece was never confirmed.

Each Triforce piece is said to be a blessing from the Goddesses themselves, granting unique gifts and abilities upon those who bear them. Though not much is known about what abilities Power or Courage are said to grant, numerous old stories claim that the Princess of Destiny and other bearers of Wisdom were granted various gifts from the Goddess Nayru, such as precognition and telepathy, and an increased strength in Magic. This knowledge has survived the ravages of time mainly through the careful record keeping of the Royal Library, as every bearer of Wisdom was apparently of royal descent.
Though histories and various archeological expeditions have confirmed that the Hero, the Princess, and the Evil King all truly existed, the validity pertaining to the truth behind the Holy Triforce has never been confirmed, nor have the claims that the three each possessed a piece. Likewise, the popular belief that the three are forever reincarnated throughout times during times of strife has never been proven, and likely never will.

At the bottom of the paper was a beautifully rendered illustration of the Triforce, drawn with a practiced hand, each triangle labeled according to what it was; Power on top, Wisdom on the bottom left, and Courage on the bottom right. And behind each triangle was drawn a likeness of their respective goddess.

On the top was Din. Drawn in such a way to make her seem aflame, Zelda was entranced by her beauty; long red hair held back in a ponytail, with tanned skin and black eyes that held all the majesty of the earth itself. She was garbed in fine clothing of red, and in her hands, she clutched an odd looking rod. She seemed… Authoritative, but not cruelly so, as she leaned with one hand against the topmost triangle. Her bearing was regal, and everything about her countenance held Zelda in awe.

Turning to the next goddess, Zelda examined Farore with interest. As though to counteract Din’s serious expression, Farore seemed as though she was having fun. Her body was drawn as though she were dancing, her viridian hair twirling around her in carefree ribbons, her face the very picture of delight. Her smile was dimpled, an artistic addition that Zelda felt was peculiar, but she didn't linger over it. Her clothing was simple and green, in stark contrast to Din's formal attire, as though she hadn't given much thought to what she’d decided to wear. There was something in Farore’s freedom that elicited a bizarre sense of longing in Zelda, as though she were missing something… Something she had once had but had since lost…

Shaking her head ruefully, Zelda turned to the last face. Nayru.

Nayru was the very image of serenity. Her hair was a dark, alluring blue that hung down her back in waves, held back by a band of silver that seemed to be made from the very stars themselves. Her skin was pale, more so than Farore, like moonlight, and her dress was an elegant navy. Where Din was prominent and Farore was free, Nayru seemed to almost embody tranquility. In her hands, she cradled an ornate harp, and she stood leaning slightly against the image of the Triforce, her fingers frozen in a plucking motion. And her eyes… Dark sapphires that stared back at Zelda, full of knowing and an unsettling familiarity…

Slowly, Zelda raised her right hand and compared her mark to this detailed illustration. She could definitely tell now, the bottom left triangle was glowing… almost as if it was confirming to her what she had begun suspecting since reading the paper...

She looked back at the picture, towards the bottom left triangle. Wisdom, it was labeled in beautiful calligraphy. And there, leaning up against it, stood Nayru, gazing back at Zelda, a small smile on her face.

Bearers of Wisdom were granted various gifts from the Goddess Nayru, such as precognition…

Was that what this was then? The voice she’d been hearing in her head, the visions she’d received? Precognition? A gift from the Triforce of Wisdom… No, from Nayru. The Goddess.

Every facet of her being told herself to reject the idea; it was impossible, crazy even, to assume that the voice she’d been hearing was anything other than insanity. But then… The shape on her hand… and the visions…
Raising an unsteady hand, she gently caressed the mark with trembling fingers as she called out nervously in her mind, ...Nayru?

**Hurry, daughter.**

Zelda jumped about a foot in the air from sheer shock, her heart racing in fear. She had answered…? She had answered! Nayru was real! She wasn't crazy!

Excitement and nervousness coursing through her in equal parts, Zelda quickly formulated a plea in her mind. **Nayru, please, what do I do? I don't know how I'm supposed to save the policemen! Please, help me!**

**Be at peace, my daughter.** The voice said softly, though with enough energy to make Zelda's very frame shiver. **A way has been prepared for you...**

An inexplicable feeling of warmth washed over Zelda, washing away her weariness and pain like the soothing tide of the sea. Her head stopped throbbing. She felt her limbs cease shaking with fatigue. Her legs regained strength. And best of all, her side stopped aching. Taking a deep breath, she was amazed to realize that she no longer felt as though she'd broken something. Her cheek still stung, though not nearly as bad as before.

As if bidden, Zelda's eyes slowly moved until they landed on the overturned drawer. Slowly leaning down, Zelda extended a shaky hand and grasped the edge of the cool black metal, lifting it up. Beneath it sat a hodge-podge collection of papers, staples, pens, markers, a half-empty box of Tic-Tacs, and...

Zelda felt her breath catch. There, situated between an eraser and a bottle of white-out sat a shiny cell phone. Fingers trembling, she plucked it off the ground and held it up so she could see it more clearly. The entire back of the phone had been bedazzled with blue and silver plastic gemstones, with a pink heart adorning the center. Turning it over, she could see it was one of those sleek touch-screen phones; the kind she'd always wanted but had been given ancient clunky ones by her father instead.

Half in awe, half wondering what self-respecting teacher would carry around a bedazzled phone, Zelda slid her thumb across the bar that read 'unlock' and was met with the picture of a pretty cheerleader hugging who she could only assume was the girl's boyfriend, who was decked out in a football uniform. On the bottom of the screen, next to the clock, were the words 'Ruto and Darunia 4evr'.

Zelda felt herself breaking into an enormous grin. The phone belonged to a cheerleader, probably one of Mr. Aur-whoever's students. He must have confiscated it earlier in the day before the attacks began. It had been in that drawer this whole time.

**Hurry, daughter,** Nayru whispered again, though this time there was a definite note of amusement in her voice.

Electricity coursed through Zelda's veins and she launched herself from her seat towards Colin and Ralph, who were still talking in the corner.

As she neared them, she thought she heard Ralph say something like, "Once I give my speech to the news crew, I'll be sure to mention you and Zelda's contributions to my heroic effort-" before she 'accidentally' kicked the telescope he was leaning against, sending the boy tumbling to the floor.

"Oops," she said, smiling sweetly at the flustered redhead.

"Zelda?" Colin asked, quirking a worried eyebrow at her. "Are you sure you should be standing?
"Look!" She exclaimed, cutting him off and holding the phone up to his face.

She watched his expression jump between confusion to surprise to delight in the span of a second. Gaping at her in shock, he managed to stutter out a weak, "W-Where did you get this?"

"In Mr. Aur-whatevers desk!" she explained eagerly, deciding once again not to tell him about hearing Nayru's voice in her head.

"You mean Mr. Auru?" He asked, perplexed.

"Yeah, whatever," she repeated, waving it off with her free hand, noticing for the first time she was still holding the page of notes with the illustration.

"What's that?" he asked curiously, but Zelda quickly folded it up and shoved it in her back pocket.

"Nothing, nothing. Anyway, I found the phone in one of the drawers. He must have confiscated it earlier this morning before the attacks started, which is why nobody took it. You realize what this means, don't you?"

"No," Ralph grumbled, having finally gotten back to his feet and looking more than a little miffed. "Would someone kindly explain to me what's going on here?"

"No time, Ralphy," Colin replied, borrowing Veran's nickname. "I have a very important phone call to make."

"Well, what am I supposed to do then?" he exclaimed, visibly irate.

"How about… you and the others tie up Veran. That needs to be done before we leave or else she might wake up and warn Ganondorf that we broke free. Also, give me the gun."

"W-What? Why do you get to carry the gun?" Ralph spluttered incredulously. "As the leader of this group, I think I-"

"I'm the only one with training in firearms," Colin cut in flatly, giving Ralph a no-nonsense look. "My father is the Chief of Police. Now, get the gun, and get the others to help you tie up Veran."

When Ralph continued to sulk, Zelda added an extra "Hurry!" to Colin's words, and he stomped off, looking bitter.

Colin flashed her a brief smile. "We did it!"

"Not yet," Zelda said, folding her arms. "Not until you make the call."

"Dialing now," he replied. A second later he held the phone up to his ear, biting his lip.

"Nervous?" Zelda asked, and he gave a half-hearted chuckle.

"A bit… This conversation is going to be painful. I just hope we're not too late."

"We're not," Zelda replied confidently, certain that Nayru would have informed her otherwise, or at the very least, they would have heard the gunfire.

"How can you be so sure?"
"Because," she replied softly, feeling the anxiety she still retained under her newfound confidence leaking through, "we just can't be."
"I don't think this is a good idea, Chief…"

"Your concern is touching, Officer Error, but my decision is final."

"But sir… We haven't explored all our options yet. We still have the snipers-"

"And what would you have me tell them?" Rusl snapped, losing his patience as he rounded on the portly, bearded man.

To his side, Rosso let out a sour grunt as the strap he'd been attempting to tighten on Rusl's bulletproof vest was tugged out of his hands.

"Would you have me order them to take out any student who looks like a bad guy? Or did you think Ganondorf had his posse dress up in matching uniforms? There is virtually no way for our snipers to differentiate between the attackers and the hostages, not when all of the students are bunched up together like animals in cages, and the last thing we need is for an officer to accidentally kill an innocent victim."

Error stiffened but held his ground. Softly, he said, "I just don't understand why it needs to be you leading the charge, sir."

Rusl kept his face impassive without any effort. "Now is not a time for you to be questioning my orders, officer."

Nodding curtly, Error turned and strode away, looking furious. Behind him, Rosso sighed.

"He's got a point, Rusl."

"Not you, too," Rusl groaned, stepping away and examining his gear. The vest was tight and surprisingly heavy, but despite its girth, he didn't feel any more protected than if he went without it. He had solid Kevlar greaves secured around the front of his legs, secured with Velcro straps, and on his hands and feet he had thick black leather gloves and boots on. Taking the black helmet from off of the van they were standing beside, he quickly placed it on his head, securing the heavy straps under his chin. For a moment, he felt rather like a horse jockey.

"All I'm saying is, there are other people who could be leading the mission," Rosso muttered, handing Rusl a rifle. Unlike everything else he had on, this piece of police issue outfitting didn't come with the word S.W.A.T. stamped across its face.

"You know why I have to do this," Rusl stated simply, and Rosso sighed.
"You mean the reason you're telling people or the actual reason?"

Rusl gave him a flat look. "What makes you think the reason I'm telling people isn't the real reason?"

"Because claiming that if you don't personally oversee the search and rescue mission, the media will have a hay-day, people will lose confidence in you, and we'll lose all of our federal funding isn't a reason at all, and it's completely untrue anyway."

Rusl frowned, his mustache tickling his bottom lip. "Oh really? So then what is my reasoning, officer Rosso? Please, fill me in."

The slightly taller man fixed Rusl with a stern look. "You're going in to find your son."

Rusl opened his mouth to argue, but Rosso overrode him. "Look, I know what you're going to say; as the Chief of Police, you can't afford to show favoritism and all that jazz, but nobody here is buying it. Honestly, Chief, we don't expect differently from you. In fact, if you did act that way, the men would all likely lose faith in you as a leader."

He blinked in surprise, unsure of what to say. Rosso pressed on. "And as for the media, it's because your son is in there too that they, and all the other families who are worried for their children and are watching the situation from home, can trust that you're doing all you can to rescue them. They're sympathetic, Rusl, and so are we. Don't be afraid to put your trust in us. We won't let you down."

Swallowing back an unexpected lump in his throat, Rusl nodded and took a deep steadying breath.

"I know I can trust you men, Rosso. I've never doubted that for a second. However… I can't make myself allow another man to take charge of this mission. That's my son in there. I can't leave him behind, and if I'm fired for it, then so be it."

Turning around stiffly, Rusl ignored the fact that he'd just proven Rosso right and took a few steps toward the clearing near the baseball diamond that he'd asked the other S.W.A.T. team members to meet him in.

"Chief!" Rosso called quickly from behind him.

Turning quickly, annoyed and half expecting another lecture, he was surprised when he saw the glint of gold flickering through the air towards him. Reaching out and catching it deftly in his free hand, Rusl examined it with surprise. It was his badge. He had left it on his jacket when he changed.

Giving a thankful nod to Rosso who returned it with a reassuring grin, Rusl set off once again, crossing through clusters of vehicles and police tape without really seeing them.

After meeting his son's friends and the teachers escaping from the gym in the runaway school bus, and after seeing the two boys who'd lost their lives in the attack, Rusl had come to a conclusion, one he should have made hours ago. It was time to go in. It was time to save the hostages… to save Colin.

Curse him for listening to protocol and trying to negotiate with Ganondorf… Madmen can't be reasoned with. The longer they waited to finally take him out, the higher the body count would rise. The number of casualties they'd received thus far was highly subject to change, but he could tell there would be at least twenty or thirty names on that list. Today had been a disaster of epic proportions, a massacre unlike any he'd ever experienced in all his years of service… and it had happened to their children.

He'd spoken to Uli no more than twenty minutes ago just before giving the order to get ready to
breach the school and hunt down the shooters. She had sounded better than the last time he'd spoken to her; Granny Hero was there to comfort her, and for that, he would be forever thankful.

It had been painful to tell her that there was still no news on Colin, but nothing could compare to the pain of passing on the news about Aryll. Uli had burst into tears again upon hearing that Ganondorf had abducted her for reasons unknown, and she was forced to hand the phone over to Granny Hero who demanded numerous explanations that Rusl simply didn't have.

Hanging up had been torturous, and he'd assured them numerous times that he'd call as soon as he received any new information. He'd neglected to mention that he was leading an assault of the building. He didn't want to get their hopes up that the situation would be ended any time soon, and he didn't want Uli to know he was putting himself in danger. They were out of decisions, however, and the time for decisive action had come. He wasn't about to back out.

These kids were his responsibility. He was going to save them. Save them, or die trying.

The sudden vibration in his pants pocket startled him. Ripping off a glove, he hurriedly fished the small electronic device out of his pocket, examining the caller ID critically, half expecting it to be Uli or Granny Hero or some other concerned parent.

He didn't recognize the number… Ignoring it, he shoved it back into his pocket and trudged on.

Arriving at the baseball diamond, Rusl examined the men assigned to this mission critically.

They were all garbed as he was, though they each wore dark S.W.A.T. jackets under their vests, whereas he had on a simple light blue button-down shirt. At least he'd removed his tie. A number of them also carried riot shields with bullet-proof plastic, nightsticks and tear gas strapped to their belts.

As he stepped on to home plate, the men immediately snapped to attention, forming four neat rows of five. Twenty men… twenty-one, including him, to take on an unknown amount of foes… True, his unit had the advantage of training and superior equipment, but Ganondorf and his allies were students. Children. It would be difficult to fight back if it turned into a shoot-out, knowing this. Plus, he had hostages. No, this would not be easy…

"Men," Rusl began, then halted as his phone started vibrating again. Deciding to ignore it, he pressed on. "Men, we are about to embark on what might be the deadliest mission you'll ever face."

Many of the men gave him disbelieving looks, but Rusl shook his head. "Don't underestimate them. We have superior training, but they have something over us; they have no conscience. Have any of you ever had to stare down the barrel of your gun, aim it at a kid, and pull the trigger? Have any of you ever been expected to take the life of a minor? It is not easy, men. They do not have to operate under this same compunction. They will kill you without hesitation."

The men looked suitably chastised. He could see on their faces that they were second-guessing the mission as numerous emotions flickered across their faces.

"Do not forget, however, that there are innocent students in there. Innocent minors who are being slaughtered without mercy. Our very own sons and daughters lives are at stake here," his voice faltered for a moment over the word son, but he pressed on. "So don't hold back. Wait, watch, pay close attention to the situation at hand and do not shoot if they are not shooting back or if a hostage could be harmed, but do not be afraid to do what needs to be done either. We aim to apprehend and detain if we can, but kill if we must. Nothing is more important today than the lives of those students.

"We enter through the kitchens. We will spread out, securing the bottom floor before moving up to
the second then third floors. We have no way of knowing where Ganondorf or the hostages are being held. Keep your eyes peeled and don't venture off alone. And remember, be prepared for anything. That is all. Move out."

As one, the men replied with a "Sir!" before turning and heading off toward the kitchen. Pulling the walkie off his belt, Rusl held it up and said, in a commanding voice, "Smith team is a go. I repeat, Smith team is a go. Make sure we have a stable perimeter on all sides of the school and watch all the exits for any escaping students, be they hostages or assailants."

With a crackle of static, he heard a voice answer his message, and as one he and his men moved out.

With a loud beep, the phone in his pocket announced it had a text message. Grumbling, Rusl pulled it out, determined to silence it so it didn't give him away when they infiltrated the kitchen.

Flipping the phone open to hit the off button, he froze in shock as his eyes landed on the first word of the message: Dad.

Quickly opening it, his heart thudding painfully in his chest, he scanned the message frantically. 'Dad, answer the phone, it's an emergency'

Almost as though it had been waiting for him to read the message, the phone went off again, buzzing silently in his hand as the unknown caller message appeared again on the screen.

"Sir?"

Rusl glanced up, stupefied, at the face of one of the S.W.A.T. men who was staring at him in confusion.

"Sir, we're ready to move in. We're just waiting for you."

Rusl blinked, drinking in his words, then turned to look back at the phone. He wanted to speak to his son more than anything, but… there were more students than him whose life was at stake… The message replayed again in his head. An emergency...

Before he realized what he was doing, he pressed the send button, answering the phone.

"Hello…?" He said tentatively, hardly daring to believe that his son was actually on the other end of the line.

The S.W.A.T. man gave him a dumbfounded look. "Sir, we don't have time for-"

Rusl held up a hand, silencing him as another voice sounded out, loud and clear over the line: "Colin?"

"Colin!" Rusl gasped, clinging to the phone like a drowning man, turning away from the questioning look of the other man. "Colin! Where are you? Are you alright? Are you hurt? What's going on right now? Can you tell me-"

"Dad!" Colin called, cutting him off mid-sentence. "Dad, calm down and listen to me! This is very important: Don't go in through the kitchen."

"It's not important!" Colin said hurriedly, "Just don't do it! Ganondorf, he… he's been listening in on your police scanners, he knows everything that's going on and he knows you're going to infiltrate the
"How does Ganondorf know the frequency of our police scanners?" Rusl demanded as dread flowed through him. If he had that kind of access, then he knew everything the police was up to... He'd be able to counter every plan they made to liberate the captured students. He'd never be able to save Colin...

"I..." Colin said, then the line went fuzzy for a moment and he heard muffled voices on the other end of the line.

"Colin? Who's there with you?" He asked, wondering about the students he'd been hearing about all day; Link, Aryll, Kafei, and Sheik... Were they with Colin as well?

"Just... Just people, other students like me. Dad, listen, I'll explain about the scanners later. Right now, you need to call off the strike before your men are killed."

"Colin, I don't exactly have a choice here. The time for decisive action has come, and I need to get you and your friends out of there before any more of you are killed by that maniac!"

There was another pause followed by a muffled argument and suddenly a different voice came over the line. The voice belonged to a young girl, likely a classmate of Colin's. She sounded exhausted, but something in her voice suggested cool composure, the kind that Colin and Rusl clearly didn't possess in the heat of the moment, and he envied her for it.

"Mr. Smith, please, listen to us. You can't let those men go in through the kitchen. Ganondorf's henchmen have a trap set up for you in the cafeteria. If you go in there, you'll die."

Something in her tone suggested she was speaking about him specifically, not just his men... but that was ridiculous. How could she know that he was planning to lead the assault? He hadn't mentioned it. Not even Colin knew that. Still... her pronouncement made him uneasy.

"Well, young lady-"

"Zelda," she cut in, correcting him.

"Right, Zelda- I can't just not come in. I need to end this situation once and for all. I can't allow any more students to die."

There was a pause, during which he could have sworn she muttered something to Nayru about the pigheadedness of men before she asked, "Can't you just... come in another way?"

Rusl blinked as he considered her question. "Well... We could, but there are men positioned in the windows on the second floor who shoot at anyone who nears the building. We'd be shot to pieces before we arrived."

"No..." she said, sounding oddly distant, "Ganondorf has called most of his people downstairs to wait for you and your men. There aren't any more sentries upstairs other than one person in each of the five rooms still full of hostages. Your path would be clear."

Rusl was stunned. How had she gained such information? How did she know Ganondorf's plans, the very orders he'd given, the number of rooms containing hostages and how many guards they had? And how in the name of Farore did she know he was going to lead the charge?!!

"Mr. Smith?" Zelda asked, and he shook his head quickly in an attempt to clear his thoughts.
"Yes yes, I'm here," he sighed, reaching up to run a hand through his hair before remembering he was wearing a helmet. "Are you sure about this? All of your information is accurate?"

"Everything that I've told you is true," she said, sounding confident. "I don't know where the rooms are or where exactly Ganondorf is, but I know that much."

Rusl nodded, making a quick decision in his head. "Then I'll trust your word. You and Colin stay where you are; I'm going to lead the men in through the gym. The door there is still intact and it's the only entrance I know of other than the kitchen. Do I have your word that you two will stay put?"

"Yes, sir!" the girl replied, sounding relieved.

Rusl smiled. "Can you put my son back on?"

"Sure!"

There was a pause, during which a male voice whined "Do I not get a chance to speak with the man?!", then Colin's voice returned.

"Dad?"

"Colin, are you alright?"

"Yeah, dad, I'm fine," he said, sighing heavily.

"Good. And Aryll? Do you know where she is?"

There was a long pause, during which he heard Colin swallow several times and his breathing increase. "No," he finally croaked, sounding distraught.

Rusl felt his heart go out to his son. "Listen, don't worry. We're going to find her, and you, and get you all out of there safely. Just stay where you are, you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good," Rusl hesitated, then added, "I love you, Colin."

"I... I love you too, dad."

With a click, the line went dead, and Rusl let out a heavy sigh.

"...sir?"

With a jolt, Rusl remembered the other man. "Sir, I couldn't help but overhear. Are we changing plans?"

"Yes," Rusl said, slipping his phone into his pocket, suddenly all business. "Go on foot and tell the other men to rendezvous outside of the Gym, we'll be entering through there. And don't use your walkie; we've been compromised."

The man looked flabbergasted, then nodded, hurrying off towards the men. Rusl pulled his phone back out then stared at it, considering. Who to call... Uli and Granny would want to hear about Colin, but... He had a job to do. He would call them once Colin was safe.

Dialing Rosso's number to tell him to spread the word about the radio transmissions, he faced the school once again.
Soon, Colin. He thought, his face impassive. Soon...

Ganondorf stood, silent and brooding, on the second-floor balcony that overlooked the cafeteria. In front of him, across the empty expanse of air, he could see the windows that peered out onto the outside balcony; a feature that was once a senior privilege but that had long since been locked indefinitely.

These were the only windows in the fortress-like school that weren't barred, presumably because they were a good twenty feet off the ground. Outside, through the dusty glass, Ganondorf could see the clouds were breaking up, letting in pale beams of sunlight that illuminated the countless particles of dust that swirled in invisible eddies of air.

He smirked. Dust... forever floating in this vast nothingness. Unaware of the much larger world that lay around it. Much like the fools in this school...

Reaching out, he seized the metal railing in front of him in either hand, enjoying the cold sensation against his large, calloused palms. The Triforce piece on the back of his hand was nearly complete, and even now stood out in sharp relief against his dark skin. Just like humans compared to dust, as soon as he seized the Triforce of Power for his own, his own power would be countless multiplied... Then, there would only be him... all others would be as dust, swirling pointlessly before him, completely subjected to his will, unable to do anything to oppose him...

It was a masterstroke, deciding to attack a High School and not the state capital or a collection of government officials. After all, what was another terrorist attack to the mindless population of Hyrule? The war with Labrynna had certainly desensitized the populace to the horrors of war. Attacking their officials would certainly seize attention, but not the kind that he needed; they would be shocked, horrified, but not emotionally invested... They would see him as a threat, but they wouldn't fear his power, and it was that more than anything else that he needed.

No, if he wanted to seize the hearts of the Hyruilians, he needed to do something truly worthy of attention, and what better way existed than to aim his hatred and rage at their children? Therein lay the difference between assaulting a school and assaulting the capital; they would fear him and his strength because it was directed at them and their families, something they could tangibly grasp, not some faceless government official.

Of course, there was more to seizing power than just being recognized as being powerful... perhaps more important than anything else, he needed to destroy those who had ever harmed him, those who were his enemies, all those who had wronged him, all those who could threaten his position before he could seize it. He had already taken his first steps: his parents had been killed, of course, as they were the first ones to have ever done him any harm. Agahnim naturally had to be killed, and he had made certain to do it before today's events began. Foolish man... Mindlessly dreaming a power that he could not even begin to fathom...

Which only left one person. Link Hero.

He would meet his end soon, however. Him and everyone in this school who he cared about. And then, once Hero had finally been removed from the picture...

A slight disturbance behind him drew his attention. From the doorway that led to the second-floor hallway emerged a sour-faced girl. At the sight of Ganondorf standing before her, she quickly fell to one knee, keeping her face downcast. Her hair was a vivid shade of red, held back in a ponytail, and she wore baggy black clothing. For whatever reason, half of his underlings had decided to dress entirely in black for today's ventures, a fact that brought him no end of amusement.
"Ganondorf, Sir. You asked me to report in when we apprehended the mole and his girlfriend…"

"Ah, yes," Ganondorf replied, a cruel smile splitting his face. "You've apprehended them both, then? Bring them up to the principal's office to await my pleasure with the girl's brother."

With Link, Aryll, and Colin already detained, all he need do was find Sheik and Midna and he'd be ready to-

"Ah, w-well, th-there's been a slight problem…” the girl stammered, and Ganondorf stiffened almost imperceptibly.

"What sort of problem?” he demanded, his voice hard as steel.

The girl swallowed audibly, trembling in terror on the floor. "S-Sir, Colin and the girl… They… They never showed up…"

"I see…” Ganondorf replied quietly, taking his hands off the bar and folding them in front of him as he turned to face her. "Have you any news on the whereabouts of Sheik and Midna?"

If the girl was trembling before, she was quaking now. "S-Sheik and M-Midna are nowhere to b-be found, sir…”

Rage seared through him, boiling the blood in his veins, but he kept his outward composure. Sheik and Midna… And Colin and Aryll, for that matter… He had a large number of students walking free. They needed to be apprehended and detained as soon as possible. He would make that a priority once Smith and his men were put down. As for the girl…

"I see," Ganondorf said, his voice flat and emotionless. "What is your name, girl?"

"A-Aveil, sir," the girl replied quickly.

"Well, Aveil, you should consider yourself lucky. I'm about to give you a great honor."

"S-Sir?” She asked, disbelief evident in her tone as she finally turned her face up to meet his. She still looked frightened, but hopeful at the same time. Her eyes were a brilliant shade of green.

"Yes. You get to get killed by yours truly."

Before Aveil had time to react, he drew a knife from the inner folds of his overcoat and, with a precise flick of his wrist, sent it slicing into the girl's throat. Her cry of alarm quickly turned into a gurgle and she fell to the side, shock written clearly on her face as her viridian eyes clouded, blood pooling on the floor.

Kneeling grimly, he yanked the knife back out, wiping the blade clean on her shirt and concealing it back in his jacket. Perhaps wearing black was a good choice, he mused as he stood back up and turned once again to survey the cafeteria. It hid the blood well.

From somewhere below him he heard the distant sounds of gunfire startup and he smiled thinly. The invasion had finally begun. Soon, Rusl Smith would be dead; foolish man, leading the charge himself. His concern for his son was blinding him, clouding his judgment. Only imbeciles allowed their emotions to rule them. Yes, Smith would soon meet his demise, and before long, he'd be back upstairs, killing Link Hero and his friends… And the Triforce of Power would at long last be his…

A thought suddenly occurred to him. If he was hearing gunfire… why did it sound so far away? The doors to the kitchen were directly below him, just out of his line of sight. Surely the sounds should be
louder than that. By all rights, the police should have advanced into the Cafeteria by now… He’d only placed a few men in the kitchens so that the police would extend themselves into the surrounding halls and the center of the cafeteria before meeting their end; he had wanted to witness it personally.

However, the sounds were too far distant. And they were coming from… his right? And growing closer?

Before he had time to consider further, a swarm of his men burst into the cafeteria like water from a garden hose, fleeing in every direction.

With a roar of stampeding footsteps, bellows of fear and anger, and gunfire, his men fled as though the Goddesses themselves were after them; some yelling, some firing blindly behind them as they ran. Everywhere, his servants were dropping to the floor, screaming in agony, some clutching legs or arms, others not moving at all. As the survivors scattered in every direction, a handful attempted to run up the stairs that led to the balcony he was standing on. The sound of gunfire and shouts could be heard everywhere, echoing off the walls, the retreating footsteps of his men lost in the din.

From below, the police emerged, all garbed in black bullet-proof material, some sporting rifles, others using riot shields and handguns. As they spread out, seeking the boys who had run off down the halls, he heard the sounds of battle continue on down the halls. A handful of men stayed in the cafeteria and began returning fire upon the boys who were running up the stairs. They tried to fight back, but it was in vain. One by one they dropped, the last one's body flipping over the railing and plummeting ten feet to the tiled floor below.

Hatred coursed through Ganondorf, seeping through his veins and turning his vision red. He'd been betrayed. Someone had tipped off the police to their trap, and the police had used his plans against him. But who? None of his men would have…

Suddenly, he remembered what the girl, Aveil, had told him. Colin had never showed up in the kitchen. Snarling, he dug through his pockets furiously, searching for his gun. He knew he shouldn't have let him go! And now that wretched boy was going to be his undoing!

One of the men below finally noticed Ganondorf standing on the balcony. Before he could alert the others, Ganondorf deftly drew his gun and fired once, catching the man directly in the forehead. Even as he dropped, the other men turned as one and began firing in his direction, bullets pinging off the black metal, kicking up sparks. Gritting his teeth, Ganondorf turned and retreated down the hallway, mentally cursing his foolish pride. His plans were ruined… He was never going to seize Power if the police stopped him before…

But wait…

Ganondorf slowed his pace to a brisk walk, a slow smile growing on his face. So what if the police killed all of his men and saved the students? All he had left to do was kill his last enemy, Link Hero, and he was still in custody up on the third floor…

Grinning in triumph, Ganondorf turned and began striding down the hallway, his gun clutched tightly in his hand. He just needed to kill Hero, and then Power would be his, and he would personally make sure that not one single person in this school made it out alive.
"You got it yet?"

"Almost… there…"

"Well, hurry it up a little, we don't got all day! Ganondorf could be back here any second now! Man, are you even sure you’re doing that right-?"

"Link!" Kafei finally burst out, aggravated, and Link winced sheepishly.

"Er… sorry. Just… keep doing what you're doing."

Rolling his eyes half in amusement, half in frustration, Kafei stuck his tongue out of the corner of his mouth and returned his focus to the bent paperclip he'd inserted into the locking mechanism of the doorknob.

Link withheld an impatient sigh and resigned himself to fidgeting nervously, straining his ears to hear the sounds of anyone approaching their makeshift jail cell. That loud, obnoxious, paranoid voice in his head was telling him that something was going to go wrong, that they were going to be discovered, that as soon as they opened the door they'd be found and killed on the spot.

Still, Kafei had a point when he'd suggested it after a few fitful moments of brainstorming; they didn't really have a lot of options, and his little sister needed his help. He couldn't afford to denounce what could be the only chance they have simply because he was afraid… or because it seemed so obviously flawed… or because certain death seemed to be the only outcome… or because-

There was a soft click from within the doorknob.

"Got it!" Kafei declared triumphantly, turning the handle to demonstrate.

Link's eyebrows rose. "Wow," he said, chuckling slightly to hide his nerves, "Honestly, I didn't think you'd be able to do it. I'm both impressed… and concerned. What do you do with your free time, Kafei?"

The purple-haired boy smirked mischievously. "Wouldn't you like to know? Now, enough fooling around. Let's go find your sister."

Nodding tersely and attempting to swallow back the lump that had formed in his throat, Link hefted the only weapon he could find in the narrow closet - a stapler - and motioned for the older boy to proceed.

With his fingers, Kafei silently counted to three, then as quietly as possible, pulled the door open, peering out into the small hall through the crack.

After a moment, he nodded to Link then slipped out of the door on all-fours. Link followed him deftly. Creeping forward slowly, ignoring the prickly fibers of the cheap carpet that were poking into his palms, he followed closely behind Kafei, their breathing shallow yet raged as they silently prayed that their guards wouldn't hear them.

As they neared the front area of the main office, Kafei paused by the corner and signaled to Link that
he was going to attempt to survey the room. Link nodded, scooting backward slightly to give him room to back up if needed. The once-cold metal of the stapler was now warm in his sweaty grip, and he tried his best to fend off the image that kept popping up in his mind of him fighting a man armed with a gun using nothing but a stapler. He was so screwed…

Kafei slowly leaned forward, peering around the corner, and Link held his breath, waiting for the cry of alarm and the bang of gunfire. To his immense relief, he didn't hear a sound other than the soft hum of the air conditioner; immediately, his thoughts turned to Shad and Ashei. How were they? Had they gotten out safely when he'd turned back to find his sister? They were probably at home with their families, watching the news, waiting to hear the report that one Link Hero had been found dead in the main office because he'd tried to fight off the attackers with an office tool…

Without warning Kafei let out a loud snort that echoed throughout the silent room and abruptly got to his feet, walking right out into the middle of the office.

Link nearly had a conniption. He opened his mouth to scream "What are you doing?" at the boy before remembering that he was supposed to be silent. Instead, he resorted to a serious of furious hand gestures.

Kafei, noticing his antics, chuckled and said, "Dude, it's chill. There's no one here."

Halting his mimed tirade and blinking in surprise, Link slowly climbed to his feet and hesitantly strode forward to join Kafei.

He was right; the room was completely devoid of life besides him and Kafei. Raising an eyebrow, he sent Kafei a questioning look, but the boy merely shrugged awkwardly, a pensive frown on his face.

Pursing his lips in thought, Link paced the length of the room. He knew for a fact that there had been people in here earlier, and the signs of their existence were everywhere; empty chip bags, upset couch cushions, broken picture frames. The smashed vending machines he could see through the window in the break room were proof enough, but even that room was empty.

Something was wrong. Why would they leave them alone? That didn't make any sense… They wouldn't go through the trouble of capturing them only to leave them unguarded and practically allow them to waltz on out.

Opening his mouth to ask Kafei's opinion, he was abruptly cut off by the echoing sound of gunfire coming from somewhere down below. Meeting Kafei's surprised look, the two boys rushed to the door, cracking it open and peering down the short hallway to the stairwell.

The sound was clearer now that the door was open, and it registered in Link's mind that this wasn't one gun, but numerous guns all firing at once. It was like the Hyrule Civil War Reenactment Committee had decided to stage their fake-battle downstairs somewhere.

"What do you think that is?" Kafei whispered, looking worried.

"I don't know…" Link said slowly, mind whirling. "You… You don't think it could be the police, do you? Maybe they finally managed to break in and are fighting off Ganondorf and his cronies. That would explain why no one's up here."

"It's possible…" he replied, frowning, "But it's better to not get our hopes up. It's just as likely that Ganondorf has finally decided to kill off the rest of the students, and what we're hearing now is the sounds of mass slaughter."

Link grimaced, trying not to picture that all-too-likely reality. "There's no way to know for sure, but
I'd rather not be caught up here if anyone comes back. Especially not with only this for protection."

He held aloft his stapler, waving it dully in the air.

Kafei grinned. "Well, I for one think that's a mighty weapon-"

"Yeah, shut up. So what's our move?"

He shrugged, chuckling lightly. "Staying here isn't a good idea. I guess we could always try to sneak a peek at what the commotion is downstairs. If it's the police, then join them. If it's Ganondorf… Well, then we need to stop him somehow."

Link held up his stapler again. "With this? I don't know that that's such a good idea, man."

"Well… Maybe Grog and the others left some weapons up here. It's worth a shot. Here, I'll check out here, you go look in the other rooms."

Sighing anxiously and worrying whether his sister was caught up in the chaos downstairs, Link found himself agreeing.

Crossing the threshold, he ducked back into the short hallway they'd come from and opened the first door on the right. The break room. Smashed vending machines, off-white 80s fridge, fake plants, smallish counter with sink and circular table aside, there wasn't much in this room. Closing the door, he moved to the door across the hall.

The vice principal's office. A window on the wall opposite the door let in narrow shafts of light through the blinds, illuminating a smallish workroom, most of which was occupied by a heavy wooden desk upon which sat a small black laptop, numerous piles of paper, a phone, and a nameplate that read the vice principal's name, Mr. Salvatore, in golden lettering. The walls bore numerous scholastic accolades, but Link didn't pause to look them over.

Walking past another fake potted plant, Link scooted between a chair that sat facing the desk, presumably where students sat, and a large bookshelf that was covered in dust, suggesting it was merely for show. As he rounded the desk to begin rifling through the drawers, he froze as his eyes landed upon the figures that lay behind the desk, and his blood ran cold.

Hidden from view behind the stately office chair and desk lay three unmoving forms, piled haphazardly against the wall and forgotten. Bile rose in his throat as he recognized the bodies of Principal Sahasralah, Vice Principal Salvatore, and Officer Viscen, the school's resource officer.

Shaking his head and reminding himself he had a sister to save, Link carefully avoided looking at the bodies and began pulling open drawers, shifting aside papers and files as he searched for any stashed firearms. Groaning as he came up with nothing, Link quickly left the room, desperate to put as much distance between himself and the dead men as possible.

The short hallway only held two more doors. One which led to the closet they'd been held in, and the other leading to the Principal's Office; if guns were stashed anywhere, it'd be there.

Treading softly down the hall, hearing the sounds of Kafei's search in the other room and his frustrated sighs as he presumably met with failure, Link slowly extended his left hand, the three golden triangles almost seeming to glow in the dim hallway before he grasped the handle and, taking a deep breath, pushed it open.

The room was just as he remembered from his last visit; dark, silent, and foreboding. The large, circular bloodstain stood out in sharp relief against the lighter blue-green carpet. In the back of his
mind, he wondered which of the men in the other room had died there. Probably Sahasralah… This was his office, after all.

Ganondorf's desk and the laptop resting atop it, suddenly caught his attention. Ganondorf had security footage… If Link used it, he'd be able to see what was happening downstairs!

Rushing forward eagerly, Link didn't notice the door closing quietly behind him, or the figure that emerged from behind it.

"I'd stop moving if I were you."

Link froze on the spot, his right leg still hovering in the air, his eyes wide in shock.

"Turn around."

Gritting his teeth, Link slowly obeyed, his heart hammering in his chest, his grip on the stapler both sweaty and painful. There, standing in the corner, was… a boy he did not recognize. His hair was brown and unremarkable, his eyes likewise, his face very, very average. Everything about him screamed complete and utter normalcy, from his height to his clothes. In fact, Link thought that if he'd been asked to point the boy out in a crowd, he wouldn't be able to.

"Who… Who are you?" Link asked hoarsely, and the boy grinned.

"Yes, we haven't had the pleasure of meeting yet, have we Mr. Hero? My name is Sakon. I'm one of Lord Ganondorf's most trusted advisors."

Link scowled darkly; so this was Sakon… the boy who had nearly killed Anju, the one who had captured Kafei.

"What do you want?" Link growled roughly, and Sakon chuckled.

"Merely to stop you from escaping," he answered with an absent-minded shrug. "Did you honestly think Lord Ganondorf would just leave the two of you unattended?"

Ignoring his comment, to which he knew the obvious answer was 'no', Link scoffed.

"Oh yeah? You and what army?" As he spoke, he raised his stapler threateningly. Sakon eyed it with amusement, then pulled a gun from the front of his white sweater's pocket.

"Well… This one, I suppose."

Link blanched. A gun. Of course. And here he was, with only a stapler… He knew this was going to happen. Maybe if he chucked it at him…?

"Drop the stapler now, or I blow out your kneecap," Sakon said, apparently reading his mind, his tone suddenly serious. Link blinked in surprise. This guy meant business. Deciding it was better not to press his luck, he let the useless piece of metal drop to the floor where it landed with a loud thunk.

Sakon nodded approvingly before gesturing to the doorway. "Come. You go first, and remember I have this trained on you, so no funny business. Let's go collect your little friend and put you two back in your place, hmm?"

Funny, Link mused as he slowly obeyed him, his hands held aloft like he'd seen on TV. He never specified what 'in your place' meant, exactly.

Their trip down the short hallway seemed to last forever. Link's heart was pounding in his chest, his
breathing short and shallow. Silently praying to the Goddesses for his sister, he cast his eyes about for some way to escape this situation or to warn Kafei, but to no avail. There was nothing he could do without getting shot. They were trapped.

As Link slowly rounded the corner, Kafei looked up from his spot on the couch with a grin.
"Hey, looky what I-" he said, holding up a small pistol in his hand before cutting off with a strangled noise when he noticed Sakon.

"Hello again, Kafei," Sakon said pleasantly. "Be a good boy and put down the gun, hmm? We wouldn't want another death on your hands."

Link sent Kafei an apologetic look, but the boy didn't seem to notice. His face underwent a rapid change of colors, from green to white to red to purple like a sea-sick chameleon before letting out a roar of rage and jerking his pistol up, apparently forgetting all about his friend as he began firing wildly at Sakon.

To his credit, none of the bullets came near Link, but that didn't stop Link from crying out in alarm as the plaster on the wall exploded like confetti, showering him and Sakon in dust. Seizing Link by the back of his collar, Sakon quickly dragged him back into the hallway where they hid behind the wall.

Sakon quickly wrapped one arm around Link's throat, holding him in front of him like a human shield. Link, startled, let out a choking sound as Sakon's arm restricted his airway and began clawing desperately at the offending appendage, struggling until Sakon hissed venomously in his ear, "Stop moving or you die!" and Link felt the cold metal of the gun press against his temple.

"Come out!" Kafei roared, enraged. "Come out here and face me like a man! Coward! Or is it that you can only fight unarmed women?"

Link heard a crash, and could only assume that Kafei had kicked over a chair in his rage.

"Stop!" Sakon called, his elevated voice nearly deafening Link. "Drop the gun or your friend dies!"

Cursing his stupidity for walking into the principal's office without checking to see if the coast was clear, Link quickly called out, his voice strangled, "Forget me! Go save Aryll!"

Sakon cursed and tightened his hold around Link's throat, suffocating him.

"Shut up, Hero," he growled murderously in his ear, "or I really will shoot you."

"You're not… going to… kill me," Link gasped, fighting in vain against Sakon's hold.
"Ganondorf… needs me… He told me himself."

Snarling, Sakon pushed Link forward until they rounded the corner again. Hiding behind Link, Sakon addressed Kafei again.

"Drop your weapon. Now. Slide it across the floor to me like a good little boy and nobody has to get hurt."

Link shook his head frantically, and Sakon punched him in the face with the hand holding the gun. Luckily the angle was awkward, and he wasn't able to put much force behind it. Link barely felt it at all.

Looking torn, Kafei darted his gaze quickly between Link and Sakon.
"Link…” he said desperately, rational thought seemingly poking through the haze of rage that had gripped him upon seeing his girlfriend’s would-be killer, his gun lowering slightly, "I-I can’t…”

"No!" Link tried to yell, his voice coming out garbled as Sakon tightened his grip around his throat. His face was getting red, he could feel it, and his vision was starting to get spotty.

"Aryll…” he tried to gasp, but no sound was coming out. Placing both hands on Sakon's arm, he tried to pull his arm off, but his lack of oxygen had sapped his limbs of strength. In the haze that was clouding his mind, the odd mark on the back of his hand seemed to be glowing...

Across from him, he could see Kafei shake his head in defeat as he bent down, lowering his gun to the ground and moving as though to slide it across the carpet to Sakon. At the same time, he heard Sakon give a short, sinister chuckle. Pulling the gun away from Link's temple, Sakon turned it on Kafei.

Sudden desperation seized Link as he realized what was happening and he struggled with all of his being to cry out, to warn Kafei, but everything was happening too fast and his brain was too muddled to think clearly…

The bizarre symbol on his hand suddenly burned, surging through him like a wave of pure, golden energy, and without any logical explanation, he suddenly knew exactly what he had to do.

With the last of his fading strength, Link reached out with his right hand, seizing Sakon's in mid-motion; however, instead of trying to pull it back, which he never would have been able to do in his oxygen-deprived state, he instead twisted his wrist, turning the gun to the side, throwing off his aim. At the same time, he hooked his leg behind one of Sakon's and jerked it forward, knocking him off balance.

To him, everything seemed to happen in slow motion up until the gun went off. Then reality came crashing down as Sakon's bullet shot past Kafei, shattering a vase on a side table and embedding itself harmlessly in the wall. At the same time, Sakon tumbled backward with a grunt of surprise, dragging Link with him.

As the two teens hit the ground, Link's weight drove the air out of Sakon's lungs with a pained 'oof!', and his grip on Link's neck slackened. Taking in one large, grateful gulp of blessed air, Link tightened his grasp on Sakon's hand and, knowing it was their only shot at survival, began repeatedly bashing his wrist against the wall.

Growling, Sakon tried to grab Link by the head with his free appendage and pull him away but mistakenly put his hand over Link's face. With a feral snarl, Link bit down on Sakon's fingers as hard as he possibly could, making the boy cry out in pain. At the same time, he relinquished his grip on the gun, and with another slam, it was sent tumbling through the air where it landed with a thunk several feet away.

Quickly rolling off of his attacker, Link rose to a crouching position just in time to catch Sakon's leg as it moved to kick him, shocking both himself and Sakon. Before he could react, Link twisted his leg around, making the boy arch his back in pain as he struggled to reclaim his tortured appendage.

"Give up!" Link gasped, his breathing ragged from nearly being choked to death and resent exertion.

"Never!" Sakon snarled, and with an unexpected twirl, he rolled over, lessening the pressure on his leg as he lashed out with his other one.

Adeptly, Link rolled backward out of the way of his kick. Stumbling to his feet, he danced back a
few feet to give himself room before his back collided with a wall. Turning to the side, he was surprised to find himself in a corner opposite the hallway with nothing but a fake tree in a ceramic pot and a small chair next to a bin full of magazines and educational pamphlets.

To his right, he could see Kafei on all fours, crawling forward to retrieve his gun that he'd slid to Sakon; it had somehow ended up next to a recycling bin on his side of the desk. A few feet in front of Link, only a step away from Sakon, lay the gun Link had knocked out of his hand, a foot or so from the wall.

Sakon, who had been struggling to rise to his feet, his breathing torturous and his face livid, suddenly noticed his gun, and with a look of triumph dived towards it.

Link, knowing there was no way he could make it there in time to intercept him, did the only thing he could think of; seizing the fake tree by its narrow trunk, he took a step forward and swung the surprisingly heavy decoration over his head, dust raining on his face from the leaves, getting into his eyes.

Right as Sakon grabbed the gun with a loud "Ha!", Link brought the pot of the tree crashing down on his head with a tremendous crash and the jarring sound of shattering pottery.

The room was suddenly silent. Link stood still, panting heavily, not daring to take his hands off of the tree as he struggled to blink the dust out of his eyes so he could see. When his vision finally cleared, he was gifted with an odd sight; Sakon's body laid out face first on the ground, his limbs askew. But where his head should be was obscured by a large pile of dirt and fragments of the pot that had once held it. Sakon wasn't moving.

Something sick seemed to coil up from Link's stomach, and he dropped the faux-tree as though burned. Fighting back the urge to vomit, he stumbled forward, jerking the gun out of the boy's unresponsive hand. Walking around the desk to stand next to Kafei, he took several deep breaths and tried to calm himself. Sakon wasn't moving… Din, what if he was dead? What if he had just killed him? Did that make him a murderer? It was in self-defense and everything, but…

"Whoa…" Kafei said softly, his voice breaking the eerie silence that had gripped the room ever since the pot collided with Sakon's skull.

"I know," Link said tersely, swallowing down the lump that had formed in his throat.

"That was…"

"I know," he repeated, in a tone that said quite clearly he didn't want to talk about it. "Let's just go. We need to find my sister and get out of here."

"What if he's still alive?" Kafei asked as he rose to his feet. "We can't let him alert Ganondorf that we've escaped."

Link said nothing. Considering the weight of the pot, the force he'd used when he drove it into his head… well, it wasn’t impossible, but…

Kafei took a deep breath, then said quietly, "…It has to be done."

It took Link a moment to realize what Kafei was talking about, but when he did he felt revulsion rise inside of him. Kafei had a point, but… He didn't think he'd be able to do it. Glancing at Sakon, he stared at his chest, searching for motion. There was nothing… But still, they couldn't take any chances, not when their lives and the life of his sister was on the line.
Nodding, Link gestured blankly towards the boy's inert form. Striding forward, Kafei pointed his gun at the boy's back.

There was a long moment as Kafei stood stalk-still, his hand quivering slightly as he stared down at Sakon's body, a look of hatred burning in his eyes even as his lips trembled, fighting back a frown.

"...I don't pity you," he whispered savagely, his voice sounding hoarse. "I only regret that you didn't suffer more."

Link closed his eyes and looked away. Two sharp bangs pierced the air, then all was silent.

"...Let's go," they both said at the same time, then after giving each other odd looks, started towards the door.

The hall outside seemed oppressively quiet in spite of the distant sounds of gunfire that could still be heard echoing throughout the school. Darting forward, the two boys stopped at the staircase, peering down cautiously around the corner, their guns ready. No one was there. Turning past the door to the roof, they ran down the stairs, taking them three and four at a time.

The image of Sakon's body lying there motionless on the floor was haunting Link. Without pausing to check of the coast was clear, Link barreled down the last flight of stairs out into the hallway in front of the library as quickly as he could, ignoring Kafei's warning voice behind him as he focused on his feet and the stairs beneath him, unable to face the rest of the world.

As it turns out, he should have listened.

With a grunt, Link barreled into someone who had been standing at the foot of the stairs, and together they toppled to the floor. Groaning, Link struggled to push himself upward, his body aching. Today was really, really not his day.

"Link?" came a startled male voice. A very familiar startled male voice…

His eyes snapping open, Link found himself staring down at the uncomfortable face of his best friend.

"Sheik?" he exclaimed incredulously.

The boy blinked up at him owlishly. "Yeah. I'm happy to see you too, man, but… Could you get off of me? I can't breathe."

Laughing in spite of himself, Link climbed to his feet, pulling Sheik up with him. "What are you doing here!" he asked, exhilarated.

"We came to get you," he said, shrugging. "You didn't think I was gonna leave you in there, did you?"

"We?" Link asked, confused, and suddenly he realized Sheik wasn't alone. There were two other people with him, both short and female. One of them suddenly launched themselves at Link, throwing their arms around his neck with a squeal of delight.

"Link! Oh, goddesses, you're ok! After Colin took me away, I thought-"

"Aryll?" he gasped, startled, holding his little sister out at arm’s length so he could get a better look at her.
"Yes, me! Who else would it be?"

"But…" He stammered, baffled at her presence, "How… When… Colin…?"

"Awfully articulate today, aren't you?" came a voice from the side.

Tearing his gaze away from his little sister, he was met with a second surprise: Midna.

"Midna!" he exclaimed, pulling her into a bear hug. The impish girl giggled and hugged him back just as tightly.

"It's good to see you're not dead," she joked, and Link laughed, ignoring the images of the boy he'd left in a pile of dirt just upstairs that flickered through his mind.

"Well look, a welcoming committee," he heard Kafei joke from over his shoulder, and Aryll gave yet another excited squeal.

"Kafei! You're not dead!"

"You know, it's funny how many people have been saying that today…" Sheik mused, and Midna, pulling away from Link, swatted him on the arm.

"Don't say that! This isn't something to joke about!" she growled, and Sheik winced, looking suitably abashed. Link felt like pointing out that she was the first person there to make the joke, but decided against it.

"Right… so… Link, how'd you get out? Kafei help you?"

Sudden memories of Sakon floated up into Link's mind. Before he could answer, Kafei gave a snort and said, "Hardly. I picked the lock, but Link did all the work. After we came out of the closet—"

"Wait, you two came out of the closet? Together?" There was a sudden silence as everyone stared at Aryll. Midna let out a snort of laughter and Sheik was forced to hide his grin behind his hand.

"Nice," he said, and Aryll accepted his congratulatory fist-bump with a smirk of pride. Link reached over and flicked her on the forehead with a grumpy frown, and she swatted at his hand playfully.

"Anyway…" Kafei continued, looking slightly put-out. "You should have seen him take on Sakon, it was intense! I swear, this guy's like Jack Bauer or something!"

As one, Sheik, Midna, and Aryll turned and gave Link incredulous looks.

"Him?" Midna asked, turning back to Kafei. "That scrawny little—"

"Hey!"

"Well, it's true," Aryll said, shrugging. "There's no point in denying it. You are pretty pathetic."

"I didn't hear you complaining when I came in to save you earlier!"

"Yeah, because that went over well…"

"That's now what you would have said if you saw him bash Sakon's brains out with—"

"Hey, when'd you get a tattoo?" Sheik cut in, grabbing Link's arm and bringing it up for everyone to see. Link felt suddenly uncomfortable as he remembered the odd surge of energy it had given him
during his fight with Sakon. What was that thing? And where did it come from?

"Oh yeah! I noticed that earlier too!"

"Link got a tattoo? How did I not notice this the whole time we were locked up together?"

"Whoa whoa whoa! You went and got a tattoo without me? What the heck!"

"Guys, focus!" Link said irritably, tugging his hand away from the group's perplexed stares. "It's not a tattoo, but that's hardly what's important right now. We need to get out of here and quick. I don't know what's going on downstairs."

"Neither do we," Midna cut in, casting a nervous glance towards the adjoining halls as the sounds of gunfire and shouting echoed up from the floor below. "At first we thought it was Ganondorf up to something, but-

"There are no more students downstairs, yeah," Sheik said, and there was an awkward silence.

"Well… does anyone know of an exit?" Kafei asked, stuffing his gun into the pocket of his odd, large trench coat.

"Two," Sheik said, sighing. "Unfortunately, they're both downstairs. I don't think we can get to them with all of this commotion."

"So… What? Do we just sit here and wait for them to catch up to us?" Link asked, frustrated. Whatever was happening downstairs, he fervently hoped it was the police. Otherwise, he doubted they were ever getting out of here alive.

"No," Sheik replied, squaring his shoulders. "We need to find somewhere to hide until whatever's going on downstairs stops."

Sighing, Link looked at his friends' faces, one by one.

Sheik, his best friend and enemy-turned-good again. Oddly, he was holding Midna's hand. He decided not to question it right now, but he would definitely rag on him for it later. Then there was Midna herself, his other best friend. She looked worried, but also confident and fierce. He almost pitied any of Ganondorf's henchmen who got in her way. Kafei was the oddball in the group, but his presence felt oddly right now, as though what they'd gone through upstairs had made him a part of the group. And then there was Aryll. His baby sister. Protecting her was his number one goal today, even more important than getting out alive. He would save her. Granny wouldn't have to live out her life alone.

"Alright then," Link said, stuffing his gun into the waistband of his jeans, missing his trusty green hoodie. "I guess we go hold out in a classroom till the fighting dies down and we can make a break for the kitchen."

"Or gym," Midna cut in, and Link nodded.

"Or gym. All agreed?"

When everyone nodded, they set off down the hall behind the stairs, heading to the right, Link massaging the back of his left hand surreptitiously. What was happening to him? Could this really be a piece of the Triforce, like Ganondorf had claimed? And if so… why in the world did it pick him?
The Plan

Zelda sat in the corner of the room on Auru's comfy office chair, staring up in boredom at the Hyrulean flag that hung just over her head beside the chalkboard.

She'd drawn her knees up to her chin, pulling Link's soft green hoodie over them for warmth as she waited for the police to rescue them, anxiety eating away at her. As a nervous habit, she kept pushing the sleeve up to examine the marking on her hand before groaning in frustration and tugging the sleeve back down, completely hiding her hand… until she pushed it back up again a moment later.

Even the concept that one of the three Holy Goddesses had decided to impart part of her power to a teenage girl was completely insane to Zelda. But she couldn't deny the voice that she'd heard, nor the visions she'd received. For whatever reason, Nayru had chosen Zelda, and like it or not, she was just going to have to learn to deal with it.

But how was she supposed to hide the mark? Sure, most teenagers didn't know anything about the ancient religions of their country, but there were certainly people around who would (the Triforce was on their national flag, after all), and you could bet that they would recognize the symbol. She might be able to pass it off as a tattoo… though her father would likely kill her. Maybe she could just wear gloves for the rest of her life. Yeah, that wouldn't be weird at all…

"Whatcha lookin' at?"

Zelda jumped, letting out a terrified squeak as she hurriedly shoved her hand back in her sleeve. At her side, Colin chuckled.

"Relax, it's just me," he said bemusedly, and Zelda offered a weak smile.

"Ha, yeah, sorry… you just…" Her heart was pounding furiously in her chest as she struggled to catch her breath. Had he seen? Would he know what it was? Would he tell people?

"Took you by surprise?" he supplied helpfully.

"Yeah. That." Deciding on the spot that he hadn't noticed, Zelda quickly cleared her throat and regained her composure, trying not to look too relieved. "So… what's up? Did you need something?"

"Took you by surprise?" he supplied helpfully.

"Yeah. That." Deciding on the spot that he hadn't noticed, Zelda quickly cleared her throat and regained her composure, trying not to look too relieved. "So… what's up? Did you need something?"

"What's he doing now?"

"Trying to come up with a 'team name' for everybody in the room."

"Wow…"

"Yeah, that's one way to put it," Colin sighed, sitting down on the edge of one of the desks.

They were quiet for a moment as they both regarded Ralph from across the room. He was leaning up against the wall with his arms folded casually across his chest, his odd blue jacket flaring out on either side. For some reason, the girls among the group they'd rescued seemed to think that Ralph
had been their savior and were fawning over him as though he were some sort of hero. Had they not noticed her and Colin? Were they not even paying attention when she busted in and saved his life?

Deep down, Zelda knew that though she had saved Ralph, he'd saved her in return. He was a butt, but admittedly he was a heroic butt.

…But that didn't mean she had to like him.

Across the room, she could see Veran's inert form lying on the floor, partially obscured from view by a handful of desks. Ralph and the others had made short work of binding her using belts and shoelaces. It was actually quite impressive when you paused to think about it.

Liberating her legs from the inner folds of Link's sweater, she stood up and stretched her stiff and tired limbs; today had been one long stress-fest and she was feeling it in all sorts of places.

Colin shot her a look from the corner of his eye. "You going somewhere?"

She shrugged. "I just need to stretch my legs, maybe walk around the class a bit. All this sitting and waiting is driving me crazy."

"Ok, just… be careful. We don't need you keeling over on us," he replied, giving her a concerned look which she promptly ignored. He still thought she was suffering from the injuries she'd received fighting Veran and, to a lesser extent, Vaati. He had no way of knowing that Nayru had somehow managed to heal her, for the most part, and that she now felt good as new. Well… less hurt, at least. She was still sore.

"Yes, dad," she said teasingly, and he grinned.

"Whatever. See if I ever help you again."

"Like you could ever resist a damsel in distress," she scoffed, "I know your type."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He asked, sounding a little offended.

Zelda laughed. "Oh, you know, the whole 'knight in shining armor' deal. It's against your manly pride to not help out a girl in need."

Colin snorted. "You're not a girl, you're a masochist."

He dodged the playful swipe she took at his arm.

"Besides, I think you're getting me confused with Ralph. He's the one with archaic ideas about women."

Zelda opened her mouth to say something insulting about Ralph, then froze.

Taking a couple steps towards the door, she quickly turned to him and asked, "Can you hear that?"

Colin frowned, looking confused. "No? Hear what?"

"That! It sounds like…" She trailed off, her eyes going wide as she recognized the noise. Suddenly, she felt her adrenaline pumping, her heart rate quickening in anticipation. It felt like every muscle in her body had suddenly gone taut.

"Everyone!" Zelda called out desperately, turning to the gaggle of students that was hero-worshipping Ralph. "Everyone, quiet down! Quiet!"
After a moment, silence reigned in the classroom as the students stared peculiarly at Zelda. She, however, stood completely still, all of her attention focused on the sounds coming from outside.

Finally, one of the student's eyes widened in horror. "Is that…"

"Gunfire," Colin confirmed, striding forward to stand beside Zelda. "It must be the police."

True to his word, the vaguely distant sounds of gunfire could be heard echoing throughout the halls. The students exchanged fearful looks as they shifted around, looking for all the world like a herd of frightened cattle.

"Well, why so glum?" Ralph chimed in cheerfully. "This means our rescue is imminent. We ought to be rejoicing!"

"It means we need to get away from the doors," Colin interjected flatly. "We don't know if the shooters are going to fall back to the second floor and try to regroup, and we don't want to give them any reason to come in here and try to finish the job they started before the police can take them out."

Ralph didn't seem the least bit worried by Colin's words, but the other students did. They instantly bolted across the room, upsetting desks and chairs alike in their mad scramble to get away from the door and what they likely perceived as their impending doom.

Chortling, Ralph casually walked forward to join Colin and Zelda in the middle of the room beside Auru's overturned desk, idly twirling the brass telescope in his hands. "Well, you managed to give them quite a fright, didn't you?"

Zelda chose to ignore him. Biting her lip, she turned to Colin and asked softly, "How long do you think it'll take them to get here?"

Sighing, Colin took a seat on another desk, shaking his head. "It's impossible to say. It depends on how long it takes them to fight off Ganondorf's men, and also how long it takes them to find us. Even then, we won't be removed from the school until they secure passage between here and the exit. It could be another hour before we make it outside."

Feeling dread course through her at the thought of staying in this school for another minute, Zelda opened her mouth to complain, when suddenly the mark on her hand began to burn.

Caught off guard, she hastily yanked the sleeve down over the back of her right hand, though she was unable to help the sudden gasp that emitted from her mouth.

"Zelda? You ok?" Colin asked, giving her a concerned look.

"Y-yeah, I just…" To her horror, the now-familiar feeling of pressure began building up in her head. The mark on her hand was glowing; she could see it through the fabric of Link's sweater. She quickly clasped her hand over it, feeling sick.

Oh no…

"Zelda?"

She didn't have time to respond before all of her senses went dead, and she was once again floating in the endless swirling nothingness that she'd come to know and loathe.

Part of her felt like screaming in frustration. Why did Nayru keep doing this to her? Couldn't she just leave her alone for a while? Weren't there some other poor souls with Courage and Power the
Goddesses could pick on?

As though summoned by her internal dialogue, the swirling eddies of fog began to shift and melt, merging in a familiar manner until they coalesced into the image of a tall, broad-shouldered male, striding impassively down what she recognized as a hallway of Ordon High. Recognizing the man, Zelda felt her heart leap into her throat.

Ganondorf.

As she watched, he reached into the folds of his large overcoat, pulling out a walkie-talkie. Never breaking stride, he held the small plastic device up to his mouth and said, in a deep, cruel voice, "This is Ganondorf. Heed my words. The police have infiltrated the school. We have been compromised. Any moment now, they will be upon you, and will kill you without hesitation."

Zelda blinked, caught off guard. Was he giving up? Was that the point of this vision, Nayru telling Zelda she'd done a good job and that everything was going to be ok?

Ganondorf, however, didn't wait for a response from whomever he was talking to before pressing on. "Here are your final orders: kill everyone. Leave no survivors. Let Hyrule forever remember your deeds this day. That is all."

The fog suddenly began overtaking the image, obscuring everything in sight, signaling the end of her vision. Zelda, who had been struck speechless in horror by Ganondorf's words, suddenly began screaming.

"No! No, stop! Wait! Nayru, you can't do this! You can't just show me this and expect me to save everyone! Stop! Stop!" Nayru, however, apparently wasn't listening, and the image continued to fade despite Zelda's frantic pleas, Ganondorf's triumphant smirk the last thing she could see before it, too, was consumed in the white nothingness.

With a pop, she crashed back into reality with jarring suddenness. Stumbling awkwardly to the side, she clumsily tripped over the overturned desk and toppled to the floor.

"Zelda!"

In a flash, Colin was at her side, helping her up. Ralph was standing beside him, looking pale and worried, his eyes as wide as saucers.

"I'm fine..." She muttered weakly, fighting down the vomit that threatened to spew out at any moment. Ganondorf face seemed to be imprinted on the insides of her eyelids, mocking her whenever she blinked.

"What happened?" Colin asked, helping her back to the chair she'd been sitting in earlier. His eyes looked fearful and cautious. Ralph followed them, albeit more hesitantly.

"I..." Suddenly, she remembered the way her Triforce had been glowing. Quickly jerking her hand back over it, she was relieved to feel that it was no longer burning. Hesitantly, she removed her hand. No glowing. Good.

"What is it?" Colin asked, noting her movements. "Does your hand hurt?"

"What? No! No, it's fine. I'm fine. It's just-"
Zelda was truly beginning to hate that little voice in her head, Goddess or no.

"Zelda?" Colin repeated, his brows creased in concern, and Zelda gave a reluctant sigh.

There was no way she could save them all before Ganondorf gave the order. As she'd overheard him say in the hallway earlier, there were six rooms that still contained students; the one they were in now, and five others. There was no telling how long until Ganondorf issued the command, but judging by the commotion outside she had minutes at most, though even that was pushing luck to the extreme. She had no choice. She needed Colin's help.

But… How was she supposed to convince him?

She jerked her head backward as Colin began waving his hand in front of her eyes.

"What are you doing?" She asked, flabbergasted, and he sighed in relief.

"Oh good, I thought you blacked out again!"

"Blacked out?" She asked, puzzled, remembering a second too late that she must have looked odd while she was getting her glimpse into the future.

"Well, you were standing there all rigid-like," Ralph said helpfully, gesticulating with his hands, "and your eyes, they were as wide as saucers! Also, your mouth-"

"What he means to say," Colin cut in, a hard edge to his voice; he apparently thought Ralph was embarrassing her, "is that you had us worried. I think you must've hit your head harder than we initially thought. Maybe you should lie down, or-"

"No," Zelda said quickly, cutting him off.

"But…” he said hesitantly, and Zelda shook her head curtly.

"Colin…” she began, taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, "What I'm about to tell you probably won't make any sense. And I know you're going to say that I don't know what I'm talking about, or that I'm just confused because of the injury I took to my head, but I'm not. I need you to promise me that you'll listen to what I'm about to tell you without interrupting and that no matter what you decide, you won't try to stop me."

"Zelda, are you… feeling ok?" He asked, holding a hand up to her forehead.

"Yes! Colin, please… This is important."

The desperation lining her words surprised even her. Colin hesitated, staring deeply into her eyes. She could see worry and apprehension in his cloudy grey irises as clearly as if they'd been written there.

Finally, after a torturous pause, he gave a slow nod.

Swallowing hard, she gave him a brief smile while she carefully arranged the words in her mind.

"Ok… I know this is going to sound completely insane, but… I have reason to believe that Ganondorf is about to order the other guards who are watching the last of the students to go ahead and kill them before the police can make it in time to save them."

Ralph scoffed loudly, but Colin held up a hand to silence him.
Frowning, he asked quietly, "And why do you think this?"

Zelda hesitated. "I… I can't tell you. I'm sorry… But I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that it's going to happen. And soon."

Colin was silent for a moment, and she could see his eyes slowly move up to search for the goose egg she'd received from the butt of Veran's pistol colliding with her temple.

"Colin!" she exclaimed, seizing his chin in her fingers and forcing him to look her in the eyes. "I know you don't believe me, but think about this; I knew about Ganondorf's trap for the police!"

"You told me you overheard Ganondorf mention that aloud while hiding from him in the hallway," he replied, his tone unreadable.

She winced. "I lied… I'm sorry, but I had to get you to believe me."

To her horror, he looked unconvinced.

Ralph, however, was quite vocal in his opinion. "Oh please," he said, his tone laced with deprecation. "This is clearly a cry for attention. Or perhaps insanity. Or both. The blow to the head, combined with her need to make up for her miserable failure at defeated the villain Veran has created a crazy scenario in her mind. What else could possibly explain this madness?"

When Colin said nothing to defend her, she felt indignation and anger well up inside of her.

"Fine!" she spat, rolling her chair backward, away from Colin and Ralph, and getting angrily to her feet. "Stay here! Hide, for all I care! I, however, am going to try to save who knows how many innocent lives before Ganondorf murders them all!"

"You don't think we're about to allow an injured woman such as yourself roam the halls alone and unprotected do you?" Ralph asked, sounding horrified at the mere suggestion.

"You don't have a choice!" she snarled viciously. "Colin promised he wouldn't interfere."

Whirling around, she stormed furiously towards the door, mentally cursing the Goddesses for giving her this impossible task and then not providing any assistance. And it didn't help that everyone she tried to get to help all ended up thinking she was a mental patient. Seriously, how did the Princess of Destiny put up with this crap?

"Wait!" a voice called out as she reached the door, and she turned around in surprise to see Colin jogging towards her.

"You can't stop me," she said petulantly, turning away from him to face the door. The hallway outside was empty, but she could still hear the gunfire. It sounded closer now.

"I know," he said. "I'm coming with you."

Zelda turned back to him, shock evident on her face. "You… You believe me?" She asked, incredulously.

"I don't know…" he replied slowly, and she scowled, placing her hands on her hips. He spoke again before she could respond. "However, I do think it's likely that Ganondorf will try something like that, especially if the battle downstairs starts to go poorly for him. He won't want to give the police a victory over him, even if it means upsetting his plans."
Zelda caught the double-meaning. Did Colin know something about Ganondorf's plans…?

"Also," he added, giving her a weak smile. "I can't just let you wander the hallways alone."

She felt a smile slowly growing on her face. Rolling her eyes in an exaggerated fashion, she groaned loudly, "Geez, you definitely have white knight syndrome…"

He caught her joke and grinned. "Well, what can I say? Damsels in distress and all that."

Before she could respond, a voice drifted from over Colin's shoulder.

"So you're going along with her mad plan, eh?"

Ralph was standing behind Colin, an oddly amused expression on his face, the old brass telescope laying across his shoulders, both arms resting on it.

"Yes," Colin replied. "You stay here and watch the others, Ralph. Make sure nothing happens to them until the police arrive."

The red-head sighed despondently. "Well, I'm afraid I can't do that Colin."

Colin blinked, dumbfounded. "Er… Excuse me?"

"My dear boy," he said, clasping Colin's shoulders briskly, holding the telescope aloft in the other, "Did you truly think I'd allow you two to scurry off and steal all the glory? Goodness no! I shall be there beside you, leading the charge! Victory shall be ours, the captives will be saved, and Ganondorf's cruel plan shall be for naught!"

Zelda had to hand it to him. That was quite the pep talk.

Colin turned to Zelda, asking her opinion wordlessly with a glance. Zelda shrugged. They would need all the help they could get. Even if Ralph was obnoxious, he still brained Veran pretty well with that odd telescope he'd taken to carrying around. He could be useful.

"Welcome to the group?" Colin said, his statement sounding more like a question.

Ralph beamed, his pearly white teeth flashing brilliantly. "Perfect! Alright, what's the game plan?"

"Er…" Colin said, scratching the back of his head. "I'd actually like to know that too."

"Well..." Zelda said, wracking her brain. She hadn't actually thought about this either. "We know that there are five more rooms with students, right? So we just need to go and... save them..."

Ralph and Colin both gave her flat looks, and she blushed under their scrutiny.

"Well?" She burst out angrily, "Do you two have any better ideas?"

"We definitely need to split up if we're going to make it to all five rooms in time," Colin stated simply, ignoring Zelda's burning glare.

"Righto!" Ralph said brightly. "Er, I don't suppose you two know where the prisoners are being held?"

"No, actu-"

Without pausing to think, Zelda said, "Miss Tina's Algebra 2 classroom, Miss Dina's Government
and Econ. Classroom, Mrs. Ruul's Environmental Science classroom, Dr. Left's Current Affairs classroom, and Mr. Adler's Physical Science classroom.

Colin stared at her, baffled, and Zelda felt her own surprise evident on her face. Where had that come from? She didn't even know any of the names she just listed, but despite that, she could see clearly in her mind where they were located, as though she'd been to each location numerous times. Was this Nayru's doing?

"Well, Tina and Ruul's classes are down this way. The other three are in the opposite direction. I suggest that I take Tina; I know the layout of the room well." Ralph replied, not noticing anything odd with Zelda's knowledge. He tightened his grip on the telescope, posing dramatically.

Zelda nodded, really having no reason to object. It didn't matter to her who went where so long as they were all reached in time.

"I'll take Ruul then," Colin said, shaking his head to dispel his confusion. "I would have had her right now anyway."

From out of his button up shirt, he withdrew the gun he'd taken from Veran. The black metal seemed to gleam cruelly under the fluorescent lighting. Zelda turned her gaze away with a grimace.

"What about you, Zelda?" Colin asked, and she shrugged.

"I guess… I'll take one of the others. Adler is the closest."

To her surprise, Colin didn't question her. Hmm… Maybe he was starting to believe what she'd told him about knowing of Ganondorf's plans…

"Alright, let's hurry up. Get it done as quickly as possible, then move on to the closest room. But no matter what, don't take any unnecessary risks. You won't do anyone any favors if you get yourself killed."

Zelda nodded grimly, her face set with determination. Colin wasn't that bad at pep talks either. Maybe he and Ralph should both take coaching jobs…

"Ok. See you guys later. Hopefully."

Colin offered Zelda a weak smile, then darted off down the hallway to the right, back towards Ezlo's classroom, the way they had come from originally.

Ralph offered a short bow, flourishing the edge of his sweater like a cape. "Take care," he said formally, then turned and hurried off after Colin. After a moment, Zelda was alone.

_Hurry daughter…_

Swallowing back the rising sense of fear, Zelda steeled her nerves before turning and heading off down the hallway in the opposite direction of the boys as fast as her feet dared go. She hugged her arms to herself, taking comfort in Link's sweater as the sounds of the battle downstairs drew nearer.

For the first time all day, her thoughts turned to her father. How was he handling knowing that she was still trapped in this nightmare? Did he even know? He must. Surely the entire nation new by now. Had he called Tetra? Her older sister, she knew, would be terrified. The two of them had been incredibly close all throughout their childhood and she'd missed her terribly ever since she'd gone off to college a year ago. She was probably driving home as fast as she could. She wished there was some way she could let them know she was ok… But was she really? Was she going to survive
today? Or would she be just another name on the six o'clock news?

It wasn't until she was once again alone and lost within the labyrinthine passages of Ordon High that she really began to miss the presence of Colin. She was even starting to miss Ralph, obnoxious as he was. At least he was some company.

She was grateful for the comfort that knowing where she was going provided her. Sure, she still couldn't tell one hallway from another, but she felt like she was being pulled towards something, as though something was guiding her forward…

As she rounded the nearest corner, she abruptly came into contact with something that was very warm and solid.

With a cry of surprise and alarm, she felt a pair of strong arms wrap around her midsection, and together the two toppled to the ground.

Groaning, her sore muscles shrieked in protest, she groggily lifted her head, opening her eyes slightly as she attempted to understand what had happened…

As the figure below her let out an agonized cough, her eyes snapped open in horror. She was lying on top of someone!

Struggling to get off of whomever she was on top of (her mind suddenly began flashing to images of Ganondorf, or perhaps one of his numerous lackeys, or maybe a police officer), she became acutely aware of a very strange sensation within her. Almost like a humming, or a vibration. Whatever it was, it was strong, and it felt like it was originating from the back of her hand.

Completely unnerved, she managed to push herself up on her hands. Blowing the hair out of her eyes, her gaze fell upon the figure below her… and she froze.

She was staring into a pair of very familiar cobalt eyes… Eyes that were staring back at her with shock clearly written into them. His face, framed with his shaggy blonde hair, was the picture of disbelief.

"Link?" she whispered softly, stunned.

"Zelda?" he replied, his tone matching hers perfectly.

The hum had grown louder now, as though it were singing inside of her. For whatever reason, she couldn't bring herself to tear her eyes away from Link to check if her Triforce was glowing. It just didn't seem important at the moment.

Before she could say or do anything else, she heard a polite cough from somewhere above her.

"Um… Should we leave you two alone?"

Zelda blinked, then flushed violently. She had just plowed into Link, knocking him onto the ground, had fallen on top of him, and now here she was laying on him?

She quickly scrambled to her feet, hurriedly mumbling numerous apologies as she helped Link up. He looked too stunned to respond, however, and she quickly diverted her gaze out of sheer mortification.

"Oh look, Zelda. You swept Link off his feet… Again!" came an immensely amused voice to her left.
Letting her eyes snap back up, she was surprised to find Midna standing beside her, her hands on her hips, a suggestive grin on her face.

"I dunno..." muttered a guy standing behind her who Zelda recognized as Sheik, the boy who she'd seen in the graveyard with Ganondorf and yet had helped her and the others save Anju. "I'm pretty sure it's all Link's doing. It's like it's his life goal to crash into people."

"Midna!" Zelda exclaimed, rushing forward and enveloping the girl in a tight hug. "Oh Farore, I thought you were dead or... or something! I can't believe you're ok!"

The gothic girl giggled and hugged her back fiercely. "It's good to see you're ok too, Zelda. After we got separated..."

"I know..." she whispered, feeling the tears welling up in her eyes. Midna was ok... And if she was ok, maybe everyone else was too. Anything was possible. They just might make it out of here alive after all...

Pulling away from Midna with a watery chuckle, she turned to Sheik, unsure of what to say to him. "Um..." she started, and he laughed, waving his hands in front of him.

"Don't worry, you don't need to feel obligated to hug me," he chuckled. "Besides, I think Link might get jealous."

Midna punched him playfully on the arm. "Shut up, you."

Zelda couldn't help but laugh.

Before she could turn her attention back to Link, she felt something small collide with her with a surprising amount of force.

"Zelda!" the figure exclaimed gleefully.

"A-Aryll?" Zelda stammered, staring in surprise at the blonde pigtailed girl who was clinging to her midriff.

"The one and only!" she replied, beaming up at her. Now that they were so close, she could definitely see the family resemblance between her and Link. Though her hair was lighter and her eyes were brighter, they had the same facial shape and the exact same smile.

"You're ok!" Zelda exclaimed, hugging her back and laughing in joy. "I thought Sakon captured you!"

"Psh, like he could ever stop me!" the smaller girl giggled brightly and Zelda laughed.

From behind her, she heard the hesitant sound of a throat being nervously cleared. Releasing Aryll, the turned around and found herself being taken aback once more as her eyes landed on the final member of the group; the purple-headed Kafei Dotour.

"Zelda..." he said quietly, before cutting off with an 'oof!' as Zelda ran to hug him.

"Kafei!" she cried in relief, "You're ok! We all thought you were dead! Oh, Nayru..."

"Zelda," he said again, grabbing her shoulders and holding her out to arm's length. He looked nervous; scared even. "Listen, I'm really glad to see you're ok too. It's just... If you're still here, then... did Anju...?"
His voice choked off, unable to bring himself to finish his sentence. The air around the group was suddenly tense.

Zelda stared at him in confusion for a moment before suddenly realizing what he was trying to say.

"Oh! Oh, no, Kafei, she's fine! She made it out in time!"

"You're sure?"

"Completely," she said firmly, "I watched her leave with my own eyes."

All the tension left his body in a rush, and he visibly sagged with relief.

"Oh, Goddesses, thank you… When I saw you, I thought…"

"I know," she replied, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Zelda," Aryll asked curiously, "If you saw them leave, then… Why didn't you go with them?"

"I stayed behind to cause a distraction so the other girls could escape," she replied simply.

Aryll seemed stunned. "Really? That's amazing!"

"Not really," she chuckled, feeling a little embarrassed. "All it got me was a massive bruise from where Vaati kicked me and an elongated stay in this death trap."

Aryll looked like she wanted to ask another question, but Midna suddenly spoke up.

"Zel, why are you wearing Link's sweater?"

Sheik snorted obnoxiously, and Zelda felt her face once again turning cherry red.

Turning away from the now laughing Midna and Aryll, she sought out Link's face to see how he was handling the situation and if he wanted his sweater back. It wasn't until their eyes met that she realized he'd been silent nearly throughout the entire exchange.

Link was standing silently in a corner, a troubled look on his face. As they locked gazes, the humming inside her seemed to magnify in intensity, and the mark on the back of her hand began to tingle. Subconsciously, she moved her hand to massage the mark.

To her immense surprise, Link mirrored her movement, only with his other hand. Slowly, her eyes tore themselves from his own intense, piercing cobalt irises and traveled down, past his Skull Keeta T-shirt, to the hand he was massaging.

There, on the back of his left hand, was a trio of golden triangles.

Zelda felt like she'd been punched in the stomach.

Link? Link had a piece of the Triforce? Did that mean he could see the future like her, or… No, that was what Nayru's blessing from the Triforce of Wisdom did… So which piece did he have? Power? Courage?

She opened her mouth without thinking, ready to blurt out whatever question first came to mind when suddenly Nayru's voice rang out in her head in warning.

*Time grows short, daughter. Hurry.*
Suddenly, Zelda remembered why she'd been roaming the halls in the first place, and she felt dread wash over her like a tidal wave. How much time had she just wasted? Was she too late? How were Colin and Ralph faring on their end? Had Ganondorf already given the signal? Goddesses, help her!

She came back to reality just in time to hear Kafei ask curiously, "Zelda, do you know what that sound is downstairs? Who's fighting? Is it-

"It's the police," she said quickly, cutting him off. "They're fighting off Ganondorf's men. They're on their way to rescue us."

That seemed to surprise everyone in the group.

"That's fantastic!" Aryll exclaimed happily. "We're almost free! We can go home!"

Link, however, had noticed Zelda's expression. "What are you not telling us?" he asked softly, and once again all attention was on Zelda.

She swallowed nervously; would they believe her?

"Ganondorf is about to give the order for the remaining students being held captive to be executed. He doesn't want anyone to make it out of here alive."

There was a stunned pause following her words.

"How do you know?" Midna asked in a horrified whisper, her red eyes growing wide in shock.

"Look, I don't have time to explain!" she quickly, carefully skating over that touchy topic; she didn't have time to convince them to follow her, they needed to act now.

"There are only five more rooms containing prisoners, the rest have already managed to escape one way or another. Me and two other people set out to try and save the other students before Ganondorf killed them all, but I don't think we can do it alone… Please, will you help me?"

There was a definite note of pleading in her voice, and she gazed at them all imploringly, desperation in her eyes.

Kafei spoke up first. "You saved Anju's life, so I owe you mine. If you needed me to march with you against the Goddesses themselves, I would."

Zelda blinked with surprise at his conviction, but then smiled at him broadly. He returned it with a distractingly attractive wink.

Midna voiced her assent next. "Girl, do you even have to ask? Walking into dangerous situations is everyday stuff for you and me."

With an unexpected laugh, Zelda gave her another quick one-armed hug, grinning from ear to ear.

At her side, Sheik gave a nonchalant shrug and said, "Well, I guess that means I'm in too."

To Zelda's surprise, he reached down and caught Midna's hand in his own, entwining their fingers. She wanted to coo at the cuteness of it all, but then she remembered they were in a life-or-death situation and she quickly schooled her feelings.

Aryll casually linked her hands behind her head and stretched. "You know I'm in. I don't know how much help I'll be, but…"
When her eyes landed on Link, he nodded.

"I'm with you," he said softly.

Something inside of her soared. Inexplicably, she no longer felt as though the task before them was impossible; with Link on their side, they could do it, no problem.

But... that didn't make any sense. Why did she feel that way again? She didn't even know the guy.

"So, what's the game plan, captain?" Sheik asked, and Zelda started.

"Oh! Um... well, I guess we should divide ourselves and tackle different rooms..."

"Sounds good to me," Kafei said, clapping his hands together in eager anticipation. "Though we should probably make sure there's one gun per group."

"Gun?" Zelda asked, confused.

As one, Kafei, Sheik, and Link all withdrew guns from various places on their persons.

Midna whistled softly. "Dang. Our guys are packing heat!"

"I'll take Midna," Sheik replied tersely, and Midna flashed him a grin. "Where should we go?"

"Let's see..." Zelda said, wracking her brains for the names of the last three classes. "Do you know where Miss Dina's Government and Econ. classroom is?"

"Yup!" Midna said. "I had her last semester. It's not too far from here."

Without another word, the couple turned and jogged off down the hall.

"Ok, I think Link should stick with Aryll since she's his little sister," Kafei said, and Zelda felt inexplicably irritated. It was the logical decision, after all, but she couldn't help but wish Link would stay with her; she felt safer around him. She glanced surreptitiously at Link out of the corner of her eye. She could have sworn that his eyes had darted to her then away again.

"Ok, then how about you two take Dr. Left's room. It's a-"

"History class," Aryll chirped. "Gotcha. See you later!"

And with that, she snagged her brother's hand and dragged him down the hall after Sheik and Midna.

Zelda's eyes trailed him until he was out of her line of sight, sighing despondently.

As if on cue, as soon as he was gone, the humming inside her ceased. Her hand had even stopped tingling. Now that was odd... Could it have been because Link had the same markings she had? Which Triforce piece did he carry? And why him? For that matter, why her? What was going on?

"Ok!" Kafei exclaimed, stretching his arms over his head, cracking his back loudly. "Where to, General?"

In spite of their situation, Zelda couldn't help but chuckle. "Mr. Adler's. Physical Science."

"Ok. After you," he replied, bowing, and Zelda laughed, though it was more nerves than humor.

As one, they turned and jogged off the way she had come from, a smile on her face. Her, Link, Kafei, Midna, Sheik, Aryll, Colin, and Ralph. Between the eight of them, Ganondorf didn't stand a
chance.

Maybe this Triforce thing wasn't so bad after all.

From below, the sounds of the violence steadily grew nearer.
Sprinting forward, ducking his head to avoid the bits of brick and plaster that literally rained down from the bullets that ricocheted all around him, Rusl quickly turned down the first hallway and skidded to a halt. Taking a moment to rest with his back against the wall, he turned, panting heavily, and acknowledged the two men on his left; Shiro and Nyeve.

"Sir," Shiro gasped in an attempt at respect, though he was visibly winded. Nyeve said nothing, his head resting back against the wall, his eyes tight shut and a pained grimace on his face.

"Men," Rusl replied tersely, not in the mood for formalities, "What's wrong with Nyeve?"

"A bullet grazed his arm," Shiro answered breathlessly, shrugging. "It's a shallow gash; he'll be fine."

Rusl nodded, turning his attention back to the battle at hand. He was glad Nyeve was ok, though he was ashamed to admit it was mostly because he needed every man he had to help him rescue his son. Sure, the other student's were priorities as well, as was locating the mastermind behind all this, Ganondorf, but… He'd be lying if he said finding Colin wasn't his number one goal.

Sidling up against the wall, he slowly inched his way back to the corner, flinching as debris rained down on his helmet. He and his men had only been in the school a total of five minutes or so, but between all of the violence and death, it felt like an eternity.

They'd snuck around the perimeter of Ordon High, infiltrating the gymnasium without so much as a sneeze. The gym was empty, much to his surprise, save for the bodies of two young men that lay about twenty feet from the hallway door. He deduced from Linebeck and Nabooru's testimonies that these belonged to Zant, one of the main conspirators, and one of their lackeys whose name he could not recall.

If his men weren't aware of what awaited them in the school, they surely were then. He'd heard various moans and muttered oaths when they'd discovered the bodies, and he himself felt the bile rising in his throat. Despite the fact that they were technically the enemies, he couldn't bring himself to be pleased that two of his foes had been slain; children didn't belong on the battlefield, regardless of the side.

Emboldened by the sudden desire to put an end to the senseless bloodshed, he led his men onward, out into the hall beyond and their first real steps into the school.

The halls were eerily quiet; he'd almost expected to hear distant shrieks and see people being slaughtered everywhere he looked, but all was silent and empty.

Motioning for five men to turn left and search the remainder of the short hallway, he led the rest down towards the center of the school building. Every step seemed to echo in the crypt-like school, and every breath seemed unbearably loud in his ears. He felt the tension and dark anticipation for what awaited them pressing on him, weighing him down, filling his thoughts with sickening dread at the inevitable horrors until…

They found the first attackers.

At first, the two groups just stared at each other, stupefied. The boys, for boys they were, were clearly waiting in ambush as Colin had said on the phone. All had their guns trained in the direction of the cafeteria, which Rusl now realized they were near, and all were hiding behind open doors and
desks that they'd dragged out of classrooms and set up like barricades between them and whoever would be coming in from the kitchen.

Unfortunately for them, they were not defended from the rear at all.

With a sudden panicked cry, one of the boys, a pock-marked brunet with a red nose and a surly expression on his face, spun around and leveled his gun at Rusl.

Without thought, Rusl hefted his rifle and pulled the trigger, barely pausing to aim. With an angry blast, the rifle discharged, and the boy flew off of his feet, hitting the ground with a thud, never moving again.

Then everything went mad.

The shooters scrambled over their makeshift barrier, firing blindly behind them in panic and rage as they fled down the hall. Rusl and his men instantly pursued, returning fire as they ran. The air soon became congested with the sounds of gunfire, stampeding footsteps, and screams of anger and pain.

The police herded the shooters down to the cafeteria where Rusl had been certain they'd had them routed, but he'd underestimated the number of attackers and soon everything lost control. The boys fled in every direction like so many ants from a water hose, and Rusl had been forced to divide his men into smaller groups in order to pursue them before pressing on himself, harrying a group down the opposite hallway that led to the band room.

Which led him here; crouching behind a wall, ducking his head to ward off falling bits of brick and plaster as the gun-toting teens fired aimlessly in the direction he and his men were hiding. Their bullets ricocheted wildly off the walls, leaving holes in the ceiling tiles or gouges in the filthy floor, occasionally shattering one of the garish yellow light fixtures above.

Cursing under his breath, Rusl tried to find a way out of the situation. They were pinned down in this hallway; if they tried to move out to confront their attackers they'd be killed, but if they continued to hide here and attempt to outlast their ammunition, they might be too late to save the students upstairs…

"Sir," Shiro panted, tapping his shoulder.

"Hmm?" he replied, distracted, still thinking of a way to take out their attackers so they could press on.

"If I may…?"

Rusl glanced back and blinked. Shiro was holding a short, narrow black cylinder in his hand. He sent the man a questioning look.

"Flashbang," he replied, and recognition dawned in Rusl's eyes.

With a curt nod, he stepped out of the way, allowing Shiro to step towards the corner. Grunting, he jerked the pin out with a deft twist of his wrist, then quickly turned, hurling the weapon down the hall.

They heard it clink and rattle as it bounced off the walls and skittered across the floor. There was a slight pause, then a sudden cry of "Oh, Din!" before a tremendous explosion and a blinding burst of light drowned out all noise.

Rusl didn't wait to see if Shiro and Nyeve were following; as soon as the flash was gone, he took off
down the hall, his rifle raised defensively, broken bits of brick crunching under his feet. There were two boys on the ground, hands clasped over their eyes as they rolled around on the floor in agony, their guns forgotten on the floor beside them. The sound of retreating footsteps could be heard again; some of them had escaped.

Coming to a halt beside the remains of the grenade, Rusl examined the boys critically. Pausing beside him, Shiro gave out a hollow whistle. "Well. They don't look too fearsome up close, now do they?"

One of the boys nearly burst into tears at the sound of his voice. "Ah! P-Please, d-don't kill me! I-I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"Shut up!" The other one hissed vehemently as he tried to get to his feet, stumbling over his downed friend and collapsing back onto the ground with an 'oomph!"

"Orders?" Shiro asked, his brow raised. Nyeve, who had just arrived, sneered down at the two boys with no little derision; no doubt he was still upset about his arm.

Rusl sighed. They couldn't kill them even though only moments earlier they were trying to do the same to them. They were unarmed, and even worse they were minors. Regardless of their crimes, he would make sure they were handcuffed and taken from the school without any more harm than strictly necessary. Still… this was going to cost him time.

"Cuff 'em," he replied wearily, wiping his brow with the back of his gloved hand. Shiro nodded, looking relieved, but Nyeve looked less than enthused by the order.

Each man hauled a boy to his feet, secured the handcuffs to their wrists behind their backs and began guiding them back down the hall. Rusl, casting a reluctant look over his shoulder where the other attackers had fled, followed.

"You think it's over, but it's not," one of the boys grunted savagely, his accomplice sobbing pitifully beside him.

"Oh?" Rusl replied vaguely, not particularly interested in anything the boy had to say.

"Yeah," he spat, his eyes still clenched tightly shut to ward off the light that was no doubt stabbing at his eyes. "The Great Ganondorf can't be stopped. He's going to change the world. Just you wait."

"Mmm," Rusl grunted, and the group digressed into silence, other than one boy's angry mutters and the other's pitiful sobs.

Letting his mind wander to the battle sounds that still echoed all around them, Rusl tried to fight back the surge of impatience that threatened to overwhelm him. He didn't want to escort these killers back to the exit, but he knew he had no choice. He couldn't venture on alone; that would be suicide. And they couldn't just kill them, as much as they might deserve it. Curse Ganondorf for all he had done this day…

With a startled cry, Rusl unexpectedly stepped in a puddle and slipped, landing heavily on his back, his rifle clattering on the ground beside him. With a sudden blast it discharged, and with a scream of agony, Nyeve fell to his knees, clutching his now-bloody arm.

Shiro froze in place, stunned, and before he could react the boy he was guiding took advantage of the sudden confusion and rammed into him with his shoulder, knocking Shiro to the ground. With a cackle of glee, he took off running down the hall.
Struggling to his knees with a growl on the surprisingly slippery floor, Rusl jerkily pulled his handgun from his holster on his side and, aiming unsteadily, began firing at the boy.

The first shot missed. As did the second.

The third caught him in the back.

As the boy fell forward, Rusl quickly turned his gun towards the second boy, only to realize he hadn't moved; he was standing just off to the side, still sniveling, apparently not noticing anything that had just happened.

With a shaky breath, Rusl clambered to his feet, his entire backside wet and oddly sticky from the puddle. His heart was thudding from the sudden surge of adrenaline that had coursed through him when the boy had run. And now… Now he'd killed two children.

Shaking his head quickly to push the thought away, he returned to the matter at hand. Reclaiming his rifle first, he hastened to Nyeve's side.

"Nayru, that was bad luck," Shiro groaned, pushing himself to an upright position and rubbing the back of his head with a grimace. "What happened?"

"I slipped," Rusl muttered, turning Nyeve's tortured appendage to examine the wound. He'd taken the bullet straight through his elbow; it looked like the base of his humerus was busted. He wouldn't be fighting anymore today.

"On…?" Shiro started to ask, before noticing the puddle. "Oh Goddesses, what is this? Bleach?"

For the first time, Rusl noticed the strong, acrid scent in the air. It was bleach… or something like it. That explained why his clothing felt so sticky and why the ground was so slippery. Casting his eyes around the hall, he noticed the puddle covered half the flooring and seemed to have emanated from a nearby janitor's closet. It wasn't until then that he noticed the body of a purple-haired boy laying forgotten against the wall by the door.

His face was pallid and his eyes wide and vacant; he wasn't breathing. Another casualty, then. His long, oddly purple hair streamed out behind him like a fan, in dark clumps because of the sticky liquid on the ground.

Long purple hair… that was how Linebeck had described Vaati, another conspirator. Was this the one? Were two of Ganondorf's leaders dead already? Pushing these thoughts to the back of his mind, he turned his attention back to Nyeve.

"Shiro, help me," Rusl said, quickly strapping his rifle to his side to free his hands. Grasping Nyeve's uninjured arm, he quickly wrapped it around his shoulders and, with his other arm supporting his back, helped the officer to his feet.

Shiro looked uncertain. "Sir, we'll be sitting ducks. Surely you don't expect me to protect you, Nyeve and the boy?"

"He'll walk ahead of us. If he tries to run, we'll shoot," Rusl replied sternly. "Besides, we haven't gone far and the battle has moved on without us. And I still have one free arm." He motioned with his left hand, deftly drawing his pistol from its holster. "Our main priority right now is to make sure Nyeve gets out to receive medical attention."

"But… Your son…"
"That's an order, officer," Rusl said sternly, and Shiro flinched.

"Yes, sir!"

Nyeve was breathing heavily, his face pale and drawn, and he groaned with every step he took, but the quartet still made progress down the hall, albeit slowly. Their hostage led the way, his sniveling nearly drowned out by the sound of gunfire echoing through the halls, though none of it ever reached them. Shiro was next, with his rifle trained at the boy's back. Every few seconds he cast a glance backward to check on Rusl and Nyeve and to make sure no one was sneaking up on them.

As they continued on down the slowly curving hallway back towards the cafeteria, Rusl couldn't help but let his thoughts drift towards his son. Was he alright? Had any of his officers reached him yet? He'd given the express order not to advance to the second story until the bottom floor was secure unless a hostage's life was in jeopardy, but still…

As his troupe approached the cafeteria, Rusl became distinctly aware of a strange, rough, almost bark-like sound coming from somewhere nearby. Exchanging odd looks with Shiro, the group slowed to a stop just in front of the wide-open double doors that led into the cafeteria.

The cafeteria itself was completely empty save for a number of bodies that lay on the ground; four appeared to be students, one of which clearly fell from the staircase in the corner that led up to the balcony, and one was an officer. From what he could see of the opposite hallway, all was clear. Nobody was nearby, yet the sounds of gunfire emanated from nearly every direction.

They heard the sound again. This time it sounded closer and seemed disturbingly similar to a choking dog. Casting his eyes about randomly, his gaze landed on a doorway next to a large metal shutter that was clearly meant to serve snacks during games and other social events. The sound came again, and this time he was certain; it was coming from in there.

Motioning with his head towards the room, Shiro gave a curt nod and then stepped forward to help hold up Nyeve, all the while keeping his gun trained on their prisoner.

With his hands now free, Rusl worked his fingers in his gloves before raising his pistol slightly and stalking quietly towards the door. It was made of light brown wood, much like all the doors in the school, though this one lacked a window, likely because it wasn't a classroom.

Pressing himself against the wall, he slowly extended his free hand, gripping the handle lightly. Inwardly counting to three, he took a deep breath, reaffirmed his grip on his weapon, then with a roar of "Freeze!" he threw the door open.

What met his sight was not exactly what he'd been expecting.

As the door rebounded off the wall with a crash, slapping back against his palm, he stared in stupefaction at the two horrified teenagers who were sitting on the counter in the room.

The first one he noticed was a girl with short black hair, her eyes wide with shock, her mouth hanging open in dull surprise. She was sitting on the counter, back propped up against a wall, her legs splayed out before her. Oddly, one of her pantlegs was missing, and on her bare thigh, he could see a large makeshift bandage, most of which was now a dark, sickly red. She'd been injured.

The other was a red-headed boy, his glasses askew, his nose red and swollen, and his trembling hands held up in a defensive position. In a raspy voice, he exclaimed, "Wait, don't shoot us! We're not them!"

Swallowing roughly, he let his gun arm fall to his side. Shaking his head ruefully, he stepped
forward, placing his hands akimbo as he examined the two intimidated teens.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to harm you," he said, adopting a soothing tone. "My name is Rusl Smith, I'm the chief of police. What are your names?"

The two teens exchanged flat looks.

"I'm Shad," the boy spoke first, utilizing a tone that clearly said he didn't appreciate being spoken down to. His throat really sounded awful. He likely had laryngitis or something. Children were always coming to school sick nowadays…

"And I'm Ashei," answered the girl. Her tone was very direct, as though she expected his full attention and respect. She gave him a searching look, looking puzzled. "How are you all alive?"

"Pardon?" Shiro asked, entering the room. He gave Rusl a short nod as he eased Nyeve into a sitting position, directing their prisoner into a corner with his gun.

"The trap," she replied, not even blinking at the new arrivals, nor commenting when Rusl moved to shut the door. "Ganondorf laid a trap for you because he knew you'd be coming in. How did you escape?"

Rusl pursed his lips, his mustache tickling his nose. "How about we just focus on getting you kids out safely, hmm? We can fill you in on the details later."

"Don't patronize us," the boy, Shad, cut in. He pushed his broken glasses back up the slope of his busted nose primly, casting Rusl a cold stare. "We've been through enough today as it is. Ganondorf had a trap laid for you, but somehow you and your men evaded it. What we're asking is simple; did someone tip you off about Ganondorf's plan or not?"

Taken aback by his directness, Rusl answered slowly. "…Yes."

"Was it a girl named Zelda?" Ashei asked, leaning forward intently, her eyes sparkling eagerly despite her blood-drained visage.

"It was my son, Colin. Though there was a girl named Zelda with him, yes."

The two exchanged amazed looks, delight evident on their faces.

"So she's ok?"

"Do you know where she is?"

"Has she been hurt?"

"Is it over? Can we leave now?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Rusl exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air as if to ward off the sudden explosion of questions. "She should still be upstairs with my son, and the last I heard they were both ok. However, I don't know what's happened since then, and we can't progress to the upper levels until the bottom floor is clear, and that includes the wounded."

He sent them a meaningful look. The girl sighed, looking let down, but Shad nodded, pushing himself off the counter to stand on his own.

"Of course. Well, I'll help move Ashei; she's taken a gunshot wound to her lower thigh, and since then she's lost a great deal of blood. She should have received medical treatment hours ago, but-"
"Whoa now," the girl cut in, looking flustered. "Don't be giving me that crap! You need to see the doctor just as badly as I do, yeah?! Any minute now your lungs are going to shut down and you'll asphyxiate or something."

"That's preposterous," he replied, rolling his eyes. "You're in much worse condition than I am. You can't even move."

"Only because I can't support my weight! You can barely exert any energy without threatening to cough up a lung!"

Shad opened his mouth to argue back but suddenly succumbed into a vicious coughing fit. Rusl suddenly realized what the sound they'd been hearing was; not a choking dog, it was this boy's coughing.

Grimacing at the sound emitting from his tortured windpipe, Rusl exclaimed, "Good Farore, what happened to you, son?"

Seeing as he was otherwise engaged with his hacking fit, it was Ashei who answered his question.

"He made an impromptu chemical weapon out of cleaner in order to save me and Zelda from a thug named Vaati, only the idiot inhaled too much of it and he burned almost his entire airway. Any minute now his lungs could shut down and he'll suffocate."

If Rusl was the type to let surprise affect him, he was certain his jaw would have dropped. Behind him, Shiro let out an impressed grunt.

"Well..." Rusl replied, unsure whether to address why a teenage boy knew how to whip up a chemical weapon out of common supplies found in a school building, "I suppose this means we have three people to bring to the ambulances. Shad, you're in no condition to be supporting your friend."

He opened his mouth to protest, which was irrelevant since he was still coughing, but Rusl rode over him anyway. "You'll only end up hurting both of you. Shiro will continue to support Nyeve, and I'll carry Ashei. Shad, you'll need to carry my handgun."

At the look of surprise in his now watery eyes, he quickly continued. "I don't expect you'll have to use it; the battle seems to have progressed to different locales. Just carry it in self-defense, and to make sure our little guest doesn't try to make a break for it. We've only got to make it as far as the exit in the kitchen. Can you handle that?"

Clearing his throat roughly, the coughing fit subsiding, the boy nodded, a fierce light in his eyes.

"Alright then. Let's move out."

Getting ready took only a matter of moments. Handing the gun off to Shad, Rusl approached Ashei and carefully snaked one arm under her knees and the other just under her arms. Lifting her bridal-style, he was careful not to jostle her too much as to avoid causing her any more pain. Still, her face went a little green, and she had to clench her eyes shut and inhale deeply.

Shiro supporting the still silent Nyeve, the now expanded troupe headed for the door. Shad was there first. Slowly opening it, he peered cautiously down one end of the hallway before peeking his head around the wood to glance into the cafeteria. After a moment, turned back and whispered, "All's clear."

As they reemerged into the hall, the sound of gunfire seemed to get louder, though it still seemed distant. Were they upstairs already? Had they not waited for him? Refusing to think about it, he
hefted the girl in his arms and quickly scurried off towards the kitchen.

Thankfully, he was right; there wasn't much distance left that they needed to travel. The two doors were literally thirty feet apart. They crossed through the corner of the silent cafeteria without notice, and Shad quietly held the kitchen door open for them as they all piled inside.

The kitchen was a mess of upturned pans and raided refrigerators; Ganondorf had clearly had men stationed here at one point in time. Possibly when he learned Rusl and his men were planning on infiltrating the school. The loud droning of the fridges and ovens nearly drowned out the sound of gunfire.

Weaving between sinks and counters, a task made more difficult for Rusl with his burden, the group quickly approached the backdoor. Hesitating before grabbing the handle, Shad turned back to look at them, his gun trained on the hostage just like Shiro.

"You are certain the route is clear?"

"Beyond a shadow of a doubt," Rusl replied with a short nod.

Taking a deep breath, he pushed the handle, and the door swung open.

Sunlight seemed to blind them as the group stumbled outside. As they quickly crossed the cement of the back patio and headed towards the grass that separated the road that bore the police perimeter and the school, Rusl quickly became aware of an odd noise. It sounded like a dull roar at first, though as they neared the police barricade, all of them panting heavily from the exertion, realization dawned on him.

It was cheering.

The officers, EMT's, news reporters, and pretty much everyone else who happened to be in the area were applauding them as they made their mad dash to safety. Rusl half expected Shad to make a break for it and get there first, but he stayed by Rusl's side, casting worried glances at Ashei, his breath coming out in agonizing wheezes. The girl herself had her eyes squeezed tightly shut, her face going from white to green with every step Rusl took.

The prisoner was actually the first to cross the line, and he was immediately set upon by other officers as soon as they noticed his handcuffs. The reporters attempted to swarm the rest of them as soon as they crossed the line of yellow police tape, but a physical wall of cops blocked them from getting too close.

Ignoring the numerous questions being tossed his way, Rusl dove between cars and people alike as he dashed towards the nearest ambulance, Shad at his side the whole way, wheezing heavily, Shiro and Nyeve bringing up the rear.

As they neared the ambulance, a man leaped out of the back and rushed towards them, others emerging from the surrounding area. Rusl immediately recognized him as the man who took that Anju girl away earlier. There was no time to ask after her condition, however.

When he was within speaking distance, the man asked, "What do we have?"

"Bullet wound to the thigh for this one," he replied, his tone brisk and business-like, gesturing with his head to the girl in his arms. "I've been told she's lost a significant amount of blood. The man behind me, Officer Nyeve, has also received a bullet wound, though his was more recently. I believe it has shattered the distal head of his right humerus. And the boy apparently inhaled some sort of highly caustic chemical gas and has burned his entire respiratory system. They all require immediate
medical attention."

Nodding, the man turned back and began relaying orders to the various medical personnel who were scrambling behind him. While they dispersed, pulling gurneys and medical kits out of the insides of their vehicles, Rusl let out a weary sigh. He couldn't tell if he was happy they'd managed to save these two students, or if he was upset he wasn't in the building right now saving others.

Turning to Shad, he was surprised to see tears in his eyes.

"You alright, son?" he asked softly. Ashei opened her eyes, casting her friend a worried look.

"Yeah…" he replied quietly, barely more than a rasp, "It's just… we actually made it out. We're alive. I thought… I was so sure we weren't going to see the sunlight again…"

Rusl felt his throat constrict painfully. Was that what all the students in the school were experiencing right now? Had they all already given up on any hope of survival? And what of Colin? Or Aryll? Link, Sheik, Kafei, Zelda… Had they all already resigned themselves to death?

When the EMT returned with the gurney, Rusl gently laid the girl down on it and backed away, giving the men room to secure her. A couple feet to the side, he could see them doing the same to Nyeve. Shad shook his head, refusing his own gurney; "I can sit," he said lightly, "Save the gurneys for those who need them."

As they began carting the injured away, Ashei suddenly cried out, "Wait!"

The EMT's paused, looking troubled.

"Can… Can Shad ride with me?"

There was a surprised pause as Shad's jaw dropped, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"It's just… Well, if he's just gonna sit, there's no point in wasting another ambulance on him, right? So… Just let him ride with me. It'll save time."

"Well…" the EMT replied, looking troubled. "I suppose it's ok…"

There was an awkward moment where the EMT and Rusl glanced back and forth between the two injured teens, Shad with a strange expression on his face, Ashei keeping her gaze carefully averted in embarrassment, fiddling with one of the straps that secured her waist absently.

"Aw, Ashei, I'm touched," Shad suddenly replied, smirking sarcastically, and the poignancy of the moment was instantly defused.

"Shut up, dweeb!" she spat, temper suddenly flaring. "I'm just looking out for the other students who might be hurt, yeah? It's not like I want your company or anything!"

She looked away, scowling, muttering darkly to herself, but Shad had a small smile on his face as he waited patiently for them to load her into the ambulance so he could climb in after her.

Rusl didn't wait to hear any more. Turning to Shiro, he shrugged his shoulders and said, "Well? You ready for round two?"

Shiro sighed wearily, but unclasped the rifle from his side and hefted it in his hands. "Yes, Sir."

"Alright then. Let's move out."
Zelda had to admit; Kafei struck a rather impressive figure. Running through the halls with his long, flowing purple hair billowing out behind him, gun casually in hand, expression stoic, heavy trench coat flaring behind him like a cape. It gave him the appearance of an old-school detective or PI like you'd see in black and white movies. And of course, if Kafei was the dashing hero, that made her the beautiful female lead.

Except Kafei already had a girlfriend. And Zelda wasn't particularly interested in him anyway. He wasn't really her type; she preferred her guys with shorter hair. Preferably blonde. With a slightly more rugged appearance, and fierce, blue eyes…

Whoa. Probably not the best time to be fantasizing.

"Come on, Zel. Almost there." Kafei encouraged, panting slightly, jogging just ahead of her.

"Yeah yeah…" she muttered breathily, and the two turned a corner, heading down yet another indistinguishable hallway.

Zelda and Kafei had set out immediately towards Mr. Adler's Physical Science class, winding their way down the halls in the same general direction Sheik and Midna had vanished. In her head, she had the entire schematic mapped out for reference purposes: Ralph as the furthest away, nearly on the other side of the school in Miss Tina's room. The closest person to Ralph was Colin in Mrs. Ruul's room. She had no way of knowing if the two had managed to accomplish their tasks yet, or if something horrible had befallen them. Silently, she prayed to Nayru for their safety.

Next up was Zelda and Kafei, in the middle of the five; Mr. Adler's room was the closest to Colin, though still on the opposite half of the building, the library and staircase leading to the third floor separating the two. The next closest room to them would be Sheik and Midna's destination, Miss Dina's classroom. Link and Aryll were at the end of the building, more towards Professor Ezlo's class where she'd originally met Colin.

She supposed she should be grateful none of the classrooms were downstairs; whatever was going on down there did not sound pleasant. She highly doubted that any member of her group who ventured to the lower level would survive long, caught in the crossfire between the police and Ganondorf's flunkies.

Was it just her, or was the gunfire getting louder? Was the battle moving up to the second floor? And how long did they have before Ganondorf gave the signal?

"Here," Kafei said unexpectedly, and Zelda had to pull up short to stop herself from plowing into Kafei's back. Leaning against a locker to catch her breath, she whispered softly, "You're sure?"

"Positive," he replied, nodding curtly. "Now, do you have a plan, or do we just wing it?"

Sighing, she stepped towards the plain wooden door and peered in through the tiny window to get a feel for the situation, trying her best to ignore the anxiety gnawing at her insides.

The classroom was set up just like all the others she'd been in, only this one boasted several long black counters in the back, complete with sinks and outlets for gas. Clearly, this was a science classroom. The students sat huddled in the back, cowering in a tiny cluster of bodies. Though the counters obscured some, she estimated about twenty students in total.

Angling her head to get a better view of the room, she quickly spotted the attacker; he was perched on the teacher's desk like a gargoyle, idly playing with the gun in his hand and casting frequent nervous glances towards the walkie-talkie that sat ominously on the wooden table beside him.
Zelda felt ice settle in her abdomen. That was it... the cursed walkie-talkie. Any moment now, Ganondorf could give the signal. They needed to act, and fast.

Stepping back from the window, Zelda motioned Kafei closer so she could whisper instructions to him.

"Ok, listen, here's the plan: all of the hostages are in the back of the class, out of the way. The shooter is sitting on a desk. His back is to us. Just walk in and tell him to freeze or whatever, and I'll get the students to help me tie him up. But we need to hurry."

Kafei nodded, looking distracted. "And... if he attacks?"

Zelda gave him a meaningful look. "Then you'll need to be quicker."

"Gotcha," he said, giving her her best attempt at a reassuring grin. "This'll be a piece of cake."

"Nayru willing..." she mumbled under her breath as Kafei positioned himself in front of the door, gun in hand, his other on the door handle.

Holding up three fingers, Kafei began to count down.

One. Zelda swallowed gruffly, feeling her heart leap into her throat.

Two. Her pulse was quickening like mad. You know, maybe there was a better way to go about this...

"Three!" Kafei bellowed out the last number, throwing the door open with an almighty crash and leaping into the room, Zelda following, her blood pounding in her ears in terror.

"Don't move!" the purple-headed young man exclaimed, his gun pointed directly at the boy on the desk, his coat and hair billowing out behind him impressively.

The shooter turned to look at them, blinked in dull surprise, then without a word turned his pistol on them.

It was as if the world had gone to slow motion; she watched in horror as the boy's finger tightened, pulling the trigger with agonizing deliberation. Likewise, she saw a look of sudden surprise and panic take over Kafei's visage, and he tightened his finger as well. Zelda could see clearly, however. She knew, without knowing how, that the shooter's bullet would fire first. Even if Kafei still managed to pull the trigger, he was going to be hit. And the attacker's bullet would do so much more than cause pain...

Something akin to terror welled up inside of her. Every fiber of her being was crying out against her friend being killed. She felt the mark on her hand flare as though surging with energy. She needed to do something, to protect Kafei, to stop the attacker, but what? What?

Without warning, she felt an odd tugging sensation somewhere inside her navel, and a something pink seemed to flash on the shooter's gun.

The shooter pulled the trigger... and it clicked uselessly. Zelda only had a split-second to take in the look of horrified disbelief on his face before Kafei's weapon discharged with a bang.

The shooter jerked backward, clutching his chest with his free hand, crimson liquid blossoming between his fingers before, with a confused expression, he toppled off the desk and onto the floor.
The room was completely silent for a long moment. Then another. And another. Kafei was standing motionless, his face pale and sweaty, his eyes wide, his entire body trembling.

It took Zelda a moment to realize that she wasn't breathing at all. With a tortured gasp, she quickly inhaled and lowered the hands that she just now realized had been covering her mouth.

Turning to Kafei, she weakly mumbled "What…?"

Kafei shook his head numbly. "I don't know…"

The memory of the odd feeling in her gut and the strange flash weighed heavily on her mind. What had happened? She'd felt an odd surge of energy from the mark on her hand, then there'd been that strange tugging, and then…

A flash of pink on the shooter's gun. Then the gun hadn't worked.

Had… Had she done that? Somehow made the gun malfunction? No, no that was crazy! It's not like she was…

Hurriedly cramming her hand into her back pocket, she deftly drew out and unfolded the single sheet of paper she'd taken from Auru's room and quickly began scanning the neat lettering, her eyes darting from word to word with frantic haste, completely forgetting about Kafei, the now dead shooter, and the huddle of kids in the corner.

'Each Triforce piece is said to be a blessing from the Goddesses themselves, granting unique gifts and abilities upon those who bare them. Though not much is known about what abilities Power or Courage are said to grant, numerous old stories claim that the Princess of Destiny and other bearers of Wisdom were granted various gifts from the Goddess Nayru, such as precognition and telepathy, and an increased strength in Magic.'

'…An increased strength in Magic…'

Zelda felt her stomach drop out. Magic? Magic wasn't real! It was the stuff of stories and legends, it didn't exist anymore if it ever had at all! It was madness, sheer, utter madness! But then… hearing the Goddesses voice in your head and receiving visions of the future was supposedly madness as well…

"I think I'm going to be sick…" Zelda mumbled, refolding the paper and cramming it back into her pocket.

Hurry, Daughter.

Inwardly cursing their time constraints, she hurriedly turned her attention to the awaiting gaggle of students, most of whom were climbing hesitantly to their feet, their eyes glued to their now-deceased captor.

"Everyone, listen up!" Zelda called out, adopting her no-nonsense tone. "The sounds of gunfire you hear coming from downstairs is the police. They're fighting their way through Ganondorf's men to get to you."

All at once, an explosion of excited whispers broke out amongst the students, relief and joy evident on their faces. A handful of them even burst into tears.

"Listen!" she continued urgently, and they quickly quieted down, hanging on her every word. "Kafei and I came in here to save you. Ganondorf knows he's going to lose, and we overheard him say that he was going to order the rest of the students to be killed before the police could get to you."
Her pronouncement was met with a stunned pause. Taking advantage of their silence, Zelda quickly pressed on. "Now that your captor is… well, now that you're free, you need to stay in here. Going outside will only get you caught up in the fighting, and the police won't be able to protect you. Stay here, stay safe, and stay together. Someone will probably come to get you eventually."

Ignoring the sudden onslaught of questions, Zelda grabbed Kafei by the hand and dragged him toward the door, escaping from the room into the relative silence of the hallway. The distant sounds of fighting were not-so-distant anymore. They'd move the battle up to the second floor any minute now.

"Ok, which way do we go now?" Zelda asked anxiously, calculating her options in her head. The closest people were Colin… or Midna and Sheik. Both directions had the same number of classrooms… However, Colin and Ralph's half of the building had only them, whereas her half had six. At the same time, Midna and Sheik were closer, and she had no way of knowing how long until the battle really did reach the second floor, and she didn't want to be caught up in the confusion…

"Going after Midna and Sheik is probably the smarter decision…" She mused aloud, pacing back and forth, nervously wringing her hands, "But Colin and Ralph are probably in need of backup… What do you think? …Kafei?"

"Yeah…" Kafei replied softly, and Zelda stared at him oddly before realizing that he clearly wasn't paying attention. The purple haired boy stood against the wall, his eyes locked intently on the gun on his hand. Pity welled up inside of her and she bit her lip, struggling to think of something, anything to say.

"Kafei…?" Zelda said softly, hesitantly stepping closer. "Kafei, look at me…"

With obvious effort, Kafei tore his eyes away from the cold metal weapon in his hands, and Zelda felt her heart reach out to him. His eyes were hollow with grief and swimming with tears that he refused to shed. He was breaking down inside but refusing to show it for her sake, and for the sake of the mission. Why did guys always try to be so strong?

"Kafei," she whispered softly, gently taking hold of his forearms. "You didn't have a choice. Don't blame yourself for this, it's not your fault…"

"Not my…? Zelda, I just killed someone!" he exclaimed in disbelief, tearing his hands away from her and running them through his hair in frustration.

"If you hadn't, he would have killed the both of us! And then when Ganondorf gave the order, he would have killed everyone else in the room!"

"I know…" he groaned, massaging his eyes with the palms of his eyes. "I know, it's just…"

"Just… what? What is it, Kafei?"

"You don't know what it's like, do you?" he burst out angrily, gesticulating wildly with his arms. "You haven't been forced to take someone's life today, have you? Have you?"

Zelda blinked, unconsciously taking a step away from the enraged boy. "Er, n-no, but-"

"Then don't stand here and try to tell me it's all going to be ok!" He snarled savagely, and with a burst of senseless rage, he turned and rammed his fist into the brick wall behind him.

Zelda winced, not relishing the cuts and bruised knuckles he likely had now. With a groan, he slumped against the wall, pressing his forehead against the cool bricks and letting his eyes drift
"I'm... I'm a murderer..." He whispered, his voice sounding tortured. "A monster... What would Anju say?"

"Kafei Dotour," Zelda said sternly, trying hard to squash the slight emotional tremor in her voice, "Stop being an idiot. You're not a murderer, and you're definitely not a monster. Ganondorf is a monster. He and his little friends, they're the murderers. You're the exact opposite. You took his life because you had no choice, because it was the only way you could save yourself, and me, and those kids in there. You're a hero, and I know Anju would agree with me."

Kafei sighed and turned to face her, his eyes pools of sorrow and pain. "Maybe in there, Zelda. Maybe... But not earlier. Not with Sakon."

"Sakon?"

The purple-haired boy shook his head slowly, swallowing and clearing his throat gruffly before beginning. "Sakon... the one who shot Anju, remember? Earlier, me and Link were locked up in a closet in the Principal's office. We... We broke out and were going to make a run for it, but Sakon was there, hiding, waiting for us. He caught Link and threatened me that if I didn't surrender h-he was going to kill him."

His voice took on a raw, emotional quality, and Zelda felt her heart ache for him.

"At first, I was just... overcome... by this senseless rage. I took my gun and just started shooting... without any care for Link's safety. I just wanted Sakon to pay for what he did to her, you know? Thank Din I missed him... I missed them both, actually. And once I managed to get a hold of myself, I gave up. I put my gun down, and then... Well, I'm not really sure what happened next. Link somehow broke free and they started fighting. I scrambled for my gun, but by the time I got it, it was over. Link had done something, and Sakon was out. He wasn't moving. For all Link and I knew, he was dead. But I was just so angry, I... I told Link we had to make sure, so... So I shot him."

Kafei's voice broke at the end, and he turned away to hide the tears she knew were pouring down his cheeks. In her head, she could imagine the scene; Link and Kafei standing over Sakon's body... Kafei, his face a twisted mask of anger, telling Link they couldn't take any chances... Him slowly raising his gun...

"I still don't know who actually killed Sakon..." Kafei whispered hoarsely, still looking away. "If he was already dead before I pulled the trigger, or if I ended his life when he was already out of commission, but... Either way, what I did wasn't heroic. I let my hatred rule my actions. I'm no better than any of them... I'm a monster..."

Tears flooding her eyes, Zelda stepped forward and deftly wrapped her arms around Kafei's torso. He stiffened in surprise, but she held on all the tighter.

"You're not a monster, Kafei..." she mumbled into his chest, her tone pleading for him to listen. "Maybe what you did wasn't the most heroic action in the world, but... that doesn't make you a monster."

Kafei snorted. "Oh yeah? How do you figure that?"

"You feel remorse." She replied softly. "Something Ganondorf and his henchmen don't do. They don't care about the lives they take. But you... You participated in killing Sakon, a monster if I've
ever met one, the man responsible for nearly murdering your girlfriend, one of the key orchestrators of today's attack, and look at you. You feel guilty. Most people would say you had every right to take his life, and that we're all better off for it, yet you're still upset with yourself. You're a better person than you think you are. Anju and Link would agree. So please… stop beating yourself up… We've all had to make difficult decisions today, and I still need you if we're going to save these students…"

There was a quiet pause, in which nothing could be heard but the sounds of gunfire steadily drawing nearer and Zelda's sniffling as she struggled to fight back her tears.

Suddenly, Kafei lifted his arms and wrapped them around Zelda's shoulders, drawing her nearer.

"Thank you…" he whispered softly, burying his face into her hair.

With a watery chuckle, Zelda gave him a squeeze before pulling back and looking him in the eye. They were still pained, but not near as hollow as before, and the tears seemed to have receded.

"Ready to go?" she asked, wiping her eyes and trying to sound brave.

He nodded. "Where to?"

"I guess… Sheik and Midna are closest. Let's go there first."

"Alright. Let's go kick some butt!"

With twin grins, the two friends set off down the hall towards Midna and Sheik. As they ran, Kafei turned to Zelda and said, "You know, you're pretty wise for an underclassman."

"You have no idea…" Zelda muttered, and he laughed, not catching the joke.

Almost as though in response to his words, Nayru's voice rumbled in her head like thunder.

*Hurry, Daughter*…
At Long Last

Pausing only momentarily to take a deep breath and steel his nerves, Colin quickly turned the handle on the door in front of him, shouldered it open with a loud bang, and brought his stolen pistol up in the exact manner his father had taught him, yelling "Freeze!" in his most authoritative voice.

The shooter, leaning against the far wall, stared at Colin, dumbstruck, a half-eaten Twinkie falling out of his mouth.

The class was a mess of overturned desks and discarded papers; clearly, this shooter wasn't particularly concerned with order. The students, numbering roughly fourteen or so, all sat clumped in the corner. They looked afraid, but not terrified like the others. More nervous than anything else, like a group of skittish horses that had been startled by a snake.

And there, sitting against the wall, his hands bound behind his back with duct tape, sat Ralph.

Colin felt some of the tension in his chest ease; so that's where he went… Well, at least he was still alive.

The redhead had a sour expression on his face, clearly upset that his attempt at rescuing the class on his own had gone awry. He was captured, but he didn't seem to be injured in any way, other than the injury he'd sustained earlier fighting Veran. His trusty brass telescope was nowhere to be seen.

"Ah, Colin!" Ralph exclaimed, sounding delighted. "Excellent timing, good fellow! Er, you wouldn't mind lending me a hand, would you? I seem to be a little tied up at the moment…"

Colin ignored him, his maintaining his focus on the guard who only now started to move. Ignoring the bits of half-chewed snack cake that plastered the front of his now-filthy shirt, the boy moved as though to grab the gun he'd discarded on the filing cabinet beside him.

Inhaling sharply, his heart rate increasing drastically, Colin tilted his hand to the side and pulled the trigger. With a blast, the bullet punched through the filing cabinet, making the shooter jump back with a pig-like squeal.

"Hands in the air!" Colin barked, hoping the edge in his voice would be taken as anger and not terror, like he knew it truly was. It was a miracle that his arms weren't shaking, but his legs might as well have been jello for all the stability he was getting.

The boy obeyed immediately, biting his lower lip, his weasel-like eyes darting back and forth as he searched for any form of escape.

Colin advanced slowly, making sure not to trip over one of the overturned desks. With every step that Colin advanced forward, the would-be shooter took one backward, up until he'd managed to back himself into the corner, his entire body trembling.

Now that he wasn't in imminent danger, Colin allowed himself to be a bit more observant. The quivering boy (he didn't know his name, from school or from his brief stint as Ganondorf's informer) in the corner was rather heavy-set, which explained the three empty boxes of Twinkies on the teacher's desk. His black, extra-large t-shirt, stretched taut over his engorged belly, was plastered with bits of the spongy yellow treat, telling Colin that he was a slob. As if the state of the classroom hadn't informed him of that already.

Approaching the desk sideways, his pistol still trained on the boy, Colin licked his lips and slowly
extended his free hand toward the cabinet. His fingers scrambled across the cold metal for a moment before snatching up the gun. Quickly stuffing it barrel-first into the waistband of his jeans, Colin scuttled back towards the door that he'd left ajar and closed it with his foot, feeling relief flood through him as the door snapped shut.

He'd done it. He'd saved the class.

Now to get them settled and move on.

"Ralph," Colin said quickly over his shoulder, "Come here so I can cut you free."

Ralph clambered to his feet awkwardly, struggling to rise without the use of his hands. When he'd finally managed it, he strode towards Colin with a dignified expression, as though trying to regain the honor he lost by being captured.

Sending the boy in the corner a warning look, Colin snatched a pair of scissors out of a mug on the teacher's desk and began hacking through Ralph's bindings as quickly as he dared, careful not to cut him.

"Excellent work," Ralph said, sounding just as haughty as ever. "Truly, I am in your debt. Though I should say that I had everything under control, of course."

"Of course," Colin muttered absently, struggling to work the scissors with one hand and keep his gun trained on the attacker.

"Everything went well on your end?"

"Just peachy," he replied, sighing with relief as he finally managed to cut Ralph free. "There you are," he added, tossing the scissors back on the desk and returning his free hand to his arm to steady his aim.

"Ah, splendid!" Ralph replied, tearing off the last shreds of the silver tape as he stepped back, massaging his wrists. "Though to be fair, you did have a slight advantage over me. You had a proper weapon. Why, if I had-"

"Well, now you do," Colin cut in, annoyed, tugging the reclaimed pistol out of his waistband and slapping it into Ralph's open palm.

He was right, in a way. Ralph probably would have been able to handle the room no problem if he'd had a gun like Colin did (or maybe it would have gone worse, and he'd have just been shot), but he didn't need to be so defensive about it. This wasn't a contest.

Turning his attention back to the room, Colin began issuing orders while Ralph admired his newfound toy with disturbing glee.

"You," Colin ordered, gesturing to the fat boy with his weapon, "Over there. On your knees."

"P-P-Please," the boy stammered, his voice surprisingly high-pitched, "I-I w-wasn't-!"

"Shut up! Get over there, now!"

Sniveling, the boy hurried to obey, falling more than kneeling down onto the floor in front of the teacher's desk, tears falling down his pudgy face. Colin felt sick.

Positioning himself so he was behind the boy, he motioned to the teacher to rise and join him. Miss
Dina, a thin, sour-looking woman, appeared uneasy but rose to her feet anyway, carefully tiptoeing around students and furniture alike until she was at Colin's side. She sent the boy a short, distasteful glance from behind her gaudy, bejeweled spectacles before fixing Colin with a guarded look, her lips thinning.

"Miss Dina," Colin said softly, giving her what he hoped was a reassuring smile, "my name is Colin Smith."

"Ah, and I am Ralph Ambi, your hero and savior-"

"I know who you are, boy," Dina cut in flatly, effectively silencing Ralph. "The semester started three months ago. I'm perfectly capable of learning my own student's names."

Ralph flushed, abashed.

"Er, right..." Colin said slowly, feeling a little awkward. "Well, I need you to listen to what I'm going to tell you, and please don't interrupt; we don't have much time."

He added the last part as much for Ralph as for the teacher. Farore only knew they'd be in here forever if he decided to embellish upon Colin's every sentence.

Miss Dina regarded him thoughtfully for a moment before nodding as if giving permission, causing her garishly ornate earrings to sway. The many rings on her fingers clinked together as she folded her arms. Dina, he knew, loved jewelry, and the tackier the better. He noticed her dress was wrinkled; she likely wasn't pleased about that.

Clearing his throat roughly, he pressed on. "The police have invaded the school. It's just a matter of minutes before they make it up here. Me and some friends discovered a plot by Ganondorf to order all the remaining hostages be executed before the police could make it to them, which is why we're here. However, we need to go; there are other rooms that need help. Please, stay here, and keep your students inside; it's not safe to wander the halls right now."

If Miss Dina found anything outstanding or out of the ordinary in his admittedly bizarre tale, she didn't comment. Instead, she shot the sobbing boy on the floor a disgusted look and asked, "And what do you suggest I do with him, pray tell?"

Colin shrugged, gun still trained on his back, his arms starting to feel a little stiff from being held up for so long. "Tie him up. Shoelaces, backpack straps, duct tape, whatever. Just make sure you stay here. And try to keep quiet; it sounds like the battle's gonna reach the second floor any second now, and we don't want the attackers to realize you're here and try to finish their job."

"And if things get out of hand?" She replied quietly, giving him an unreadable glance. She was eyeing Colin's gun with interest.

Colin groaned inwardly; what, was he supposed to come up with everything? No way was he giving her his only form of protection. Forget that.

"I dunno. Hide? Fight them off with Ralph's telescope? Whatever, just do what you have to do."

She inhaled slowly, looking thoroughly displeased that he hadn't offered her his weapon, but he decided to ignore it. They were running out of time. The fight downstairs would reach their floor any minute now. It was only a matter of time before he wasn't able to navigate the halls safely, and Zelda could be in danger like Ralph was. Curse him for allowing her to wander off unarmed...

"Right," he said, anxious to get a move on. "Well... Ok then. See you later."
Turning on his heel and ignoring the curious glances of the newly liberated students, he quickly made a break for the door, his thoughts whirling in his head. Ralph followed quickly at his heels, appearing anxious to get away from Dina and her bitter disposition.

"Mr. Smith!"

Freezing, his hand on the doorknob, Colin took a deep, steadying breath, then turned back to face Ms. Dina, bracing himself for whatever overly-judgmental comment she was about to throw at him.

She examined him for a moment through her glasses, giving him a once-over with her beady eyes before gathering herself up primly and saying, "Thank you."

Colin stared, dumbstruck.

"It's a relief to see there are still boys of valor in this school. I was beginning to lose hope." She shot Ralph a disgusted look, making him bristle indignantly, his jaw hanging open as he struggled to find the words to defend himself.

And with that, she turned her back on them and began issuing orders to the students in the corner regarding their new captive, snatching up a meter stick and holding it aloft like a rapier.

Flabbergasted, Colin slowly turned the handle and exited back into the hall, his head spinning. Miss Dina had never complimented anyone to his knowledge in her entire time as a teacher at this school. She was a stiff old woman who brooked no nonsense and never showed any sense of humor or compassion for weakness. And yet she'd thanked him...

A small smile crept onto his face as he jogged quickly down the hallway.

She thought he had valor. Maybe he did... after all, he'd just risked his life, again, to save a group of strangers and his overly flamboyant comrade. It'd be much easier to just hide in the bathroom until the Police had cleared the area.

If only Aryll could see him now...

Aryll...

His smile vanished instantly. Aryll... Would she ever forgive him? He knew what he'd done was wrong, but... Could he really be blamed?

He squashed that thought vehemently. Yes, he could be blamed. Sure, he'd do anything to protect her, but he'd effectively sacrificed the lives of everyone who'd died today to do so. To be fair, there was no guarantee that the police would have been able to break through any earlier than now. It's entirely possible that his giving his police scanner to Ganondorf had changed nothing in the overall scheme of things... But if he was being honest, it had probably bought Ganon an hour or two, if not more. Lives had been lost because of what Colin had done... He wasn't deserving of Aryll's forgiveness...

Still... He'd turned around, hadn't he? He'd joined Zelda and warned the police, effectively countering the mistake he had made. He'd helped get the police in, and now, because of his assistance, all of the other captives would be freed soon. And he was even helping to save the rest of the captives at great personal risk on the possibility (Zelda seemed to think it was a fact, but she never revealed her source, if she even had one) that they'd be killed before they could be saved. Surely, that had to count for something... right?

Colin took a deep breath, fighting the weight of guilt that threatened to swallow him as they turned a
corner and continued on, Ralph's jaw still working furiously though not emitting a sound. She'd never agree to go out with him again, but… if he could just get her to forgive him… even a tentative friendship would mean the world to him. He cared about her opinion so much…

A frown tugged its way onto his face. Where was Aryll anyway? She’d left with Midna and Sheik to save Link a while ago. Link, Colin knew, was being held upstairs in the main office, so it was safe enough to assume that was where she was. There was no reason for them to have ventured downstairs amidst the chaos… Unless they'd somehow already managed to rescue him and they'd been trying to find an exit…

Shaking his head roughly, he shook the thought off. There was no point in dwelling on it now; he had to believe Aryll was safe, else he wouldn't have the strength to do what he knew needed to be done?

As he and Ralph rounded yet another corner, they were hit by a wave of sound; screams, stampeding footsteps, and the overwhelming sound of gunfire, all of it emanating from just down the hall.

The battle had finally reached the second floor.

Gut-wrenching fear seized him by the throat, and he felt himself break out in a cold sweat as he cast his eyes about for a place for them to hide. Din blast it, he needed to get to Zelda! He was so close!

"Is that… Is that the battle?" Ralph asked, breaking the silence that had hung over the two since they’d left Dina's class. He sounded anxious, but not in the excited way he had been earlier. The pistol was shaking slightly in his hands and his face had gone pale.

Noticing the door for a classroom he knew would be empty about ten feet ahead on the left, Colin made a break for it, snagging Ralph's arm and towing him along, easing the pistol in his hand, his breath coming in frantic pants.

Before he could make it two steps, three figures rounded the corner, running full speed towards him.

The only reason Colin and Ralph still lived was because all three were facing back the way they came, firing randomly at their pursuers. Two held pistols, but the third carried an assault rifle. He was providing the cover fire for his comrades in short spurts of rapid gunfire, and if the shouts echoing from down the hall were any indication, the Police were being prevented from advancing because of it. He didn't seem to have any spare cartridges on his person, but that didn't do much to ease Colin's concern. He knew what needed to be done.

Inwardly praising Nayru for his father being a cop and forcing him to learn how a use a gun, Colin dropped swiftly to one knee, aiming his pistol with one hand and steadying his arm with the other.

He took a quick, deep breath.

The first bullet took the machine gunner in the back, causing him to cry out in alarm and pain before falling to the ground, his gun spewing bullets randomly into the lockers and ceiling, the ping of ricocheting metal nearly drowning out all other noise. Before he fell, Colin had already turned to fire his second bullet, catching one of the other shooters about mid-thigh. He staggered backward, miraculously still on his feet until one of the bullets from the machine gunner bounced off of the metal surface of the locker and struck him in the chest. He fell without a sound.

The third one was smarter than his comrade. As soon as he heard the machine gunner cry out, he'd let out a loud curse and turned to the side and darted down an adjacent hallway, Colin's bullet missing him by a matter of inches and gauging a deep furrow into the brick wall.
The machine gunner had finally stopped shooting, and for a moment all was silent. Colin panted heavily, feeling spent; who knew shooting a gun took so much out of you?

Something sick settled into the pit of Colin's stomach.

*I just killed two people…*

"That…" Ralph began, his tone flabbergasted, "was amazing! Where on earth did you learn to shoot like that?!"

"My father," he replied tersely, not exactly feeling proud of his achievement.

At the sound of the approaching voices at the end of the hall, Colin stiffened, panic overwhelming any and all logical thought processes. What if he was wrong? What if it wasn't the police coming towards him? He'd be trapped with nowhere to go…!

Hurriedly scrambling to his feet, he darted to the door he'd previously noticed and threw it open, entering the dark, empty room. Ralph followed him without a word, and Colin shut the door quickly behind him, leaving it barely cracked open so he could see outside.

His breathing was frantic, and his heart was pounding uncontrollably in his chest. He'd just killed… The battle was… Were they police coming towards him, or… What about his father? Zelda? Aryll? What was he going to do?

At the sound of quickly nearing footsteps, Colin felt his grip on the now-warm pistol in his hands tighten, and he hurriedly stilled his breathing, leaning his shoulder against the wall, all of his attention on the narrow strip of light just before his eyes, Ralph leaning over his shoulder to get a better look.

Suddenly, the forms of two black-clad men darted past. He could see the bullet-proof vests, the standard-issue rifles gripped in their hands, the white words 'S.W.A.T.' imprinted on nearly every part of their person. And, most importantly, the golden star on the chest of the man in front, glinting in the dim fluorescent lighting…

Colin's chest tightened painfully, and he felt his grip on the gun in his hand slacken in shock.

"Dad…?" he whispered softly, hardly daring to believe what he'd seen.

Before he could come to grips with what he'd witnessed, another movement in the hall caught his attention: a boy was creeping slowly down the hall after his father, a pistol held in his hand, a look of triumph on his face. As he passed out of Colin's line of sight, dread sunk into the pit of his stomach; the third shooter… he'd waited until the cops passed, then went after them.

He was going to kill them while their backs were turned.

Fear and anger suddenly coursing through him, Colin clenched his teeth, seething, and threw the door open, stepping back out into the hallway.

He paused for only a second to examine the hallway before him: two police officers stalking quietly down the hall, one wearing a blue collared shirt beneath his vest and a familiar silver watch on his left arm, and behind them a boy who was silently raising his gun to point at their retreating backs.

"Stop, villain!" Ralph bellowed unexpectedly, catching Colin by surprise, and as all three males turned to face the sudden noise, he quickly brought his pistol up and fired.

Ralph, however, had absolutely no training with firearms. Having not prepared himself for the
kickback, the gun flew out of his hand as soon as he pulled the trigger, landing with a clatter, the bullet lodging into a locker ten feet away from his intended target.

The boy, realizing he'd been caught, sneered darkly and tried to turn his gun, but before he made it even halfway, Colin's bullet took him through the chest.

The boy jerked backward, a surprised look flashing across his face before he dropped to the floor beside his gun. He didn't move again.

Panting heavily, Colin slowly lowered his gun, his gaze fixed on the shooter's inert form while Ralph hurriedly scrambled across the floor to reclaim his weapon, his face as red as his hair.

*Now I've killed three…*

Down the hall, a familiar voice pierced through his thoughts, bringing him back to reality.

"Put your gun down, Shiro! That's Colin! That's my son!"

Colin waited patiently as his father jogged quickly back down the hall to join him, Shiro following more slowly, keeping an eye on the surrounding area.

When his father was within earshot, Colin turned to him slowly, his heart heavy with remorse as he realized what he had to do. He needed to explain to his father what he'd done, the truth about his betrayal. How would he react? Was he in legal trouble? Would his own father have to arrest him?

"Dad," he began, his voice croaking, "I-"

Colin suddenly found himself swept up in a fatherly embrace, effectively cutting off what he was going to say.

"Oh, Colin…" his father whispered, hugging him fiercely. "You're alright! Your mother and I, we've been… so worried about you…"

"I'm sorry…" Colin replied, letting his arms encircle his father's waist.

"No!" he said quickly, laughing a little, "No, don't be, it's not your fault! I'm just… so relieved that you're…"

Colin felt sick. Not his fault? Maybe not, but he certainly hadn't helped matters. He had a feeling his father wouldn't be too pleased to learn his son had been the reason why it took so long to get in here. But still… he had to tell him. He needed to know the truth.

"Dad…" Colin said, trying to start again, but Rusl suddenly pushed him out to arm's length, giving him a quick once-over with his eyes.

"You're not harmed, are you?" he asked quickly, "Uli will kill me if anything's happened to you."

"No, Dad, I'm fine, but-"

"That was a good shot," he said, overriding Colin once again. "You've gotten pretty good. You'll be a shoo-in at the academy when you're older, no doubt about it."

"Dad-

"Who's your friend? Why are you in the hallway? I specifically told you-"
"Dad!"

Rusl blinked, looking astounded that his son had just shouted at him. Colin flushed but kept his gaze determined. "Dad, please, I need to tell you something."

"Well, what is it? Speak up, son, I'm listening," Rusl replied lightly, looking uneasy.

Colin took a deep breath, struggling to steel his nerves.

"Dad, I-"

"Rusl, we don't have time for this," Shiro cut in from the side, casting nervous glances down both sides of the hallway. "We need to move if we're going to get Colin and his friend out of here before we get attacked again."

"What?" Colin blurted out, alarmed.

"Right…” his father muttered, looking troubled, "I don't suppose you know how we're going to do this, do you? Maybe we can leave them in a classroom until things are safe-"

"I'm not being left behind, and I'm not leaving!"

Both his father and Officer Shiro sent Colin blank looks.

"I'm sorry?"

"Colin, be reasonable. We can't let a minor roam around."

"Listen!" he spat, growing impatient. "Don't give me that garbage about me being a minor. I've been doing fine without you till now. My friends need me; I'm not about to abandon them simply because my Dad's the chief of police and I get special treatment."

"Colin," his dad said, adopting a lecturing tone, but Colin cut him off.

"Aryll's still in here. I'm not leaving without her. And Zelda's counting on me and Ralph, we're not about to abandon her either."

"Righto! We shall never abandon a woman in need! Onward the fight!" Ralph cried valiantly.

He was promptly ignored.

Shiro looked annoyed, but Rusl's adopted a pensive expression.

"Zelda?" he said curiously, "You mean the girl from the phone is Zelda Nohansen?"

Colin blinked. "What? I don't know what her last name is, I only met her today. But that's not important! She needs my help!"

"Colin, she needs to be rescued, and that's why your father and I are here. Let us do the dangerous work; you've done enough as it is."

If he was annoyed before, Colin was furious now. They just weren't listening to him! They were treating him like a child! As if any of them could still be called that after today.

Resorting to Zelda's story, Colin angrily blurted out, "Ganondorf is about to issue an order to his people who are guarding the last of the students. He's going to tell them to kill them before you can
get to them. There were six rooms. Me, Zelda, and Ralph saved one group, then split up to help the others. I did one room, Ralph did another," He carefully left out the part where he had to rescue the redhead, for his sake, "but that still leaves three, and I don't know how much time we have left or how Zelda's doing by herself. She needs us. They need us."

"Colin," Shiro said, sounding frustrated, but Colin cut him off.

"That's about forty students for us. How many have you two saved?"

That brought about a stunned silence.

"Exactly. Of the four of us, we seem to be the only ones who know what we're doing. More importantly, we're the only one who seems to be remembering that there are more lives than ours at stake right now. Those students need me. Zelda and Aryll need me. But we can't do it alone. Dad, Officer Shiro, we need you, and you need us. I know where the students are, and I know my way around the school. Please… Let me help."

He hadn't meant to sound pleading at the end, but he couldn't change anything now. All he could do was stand there and stare determinedly into his father's impassive face and silently please with the goddesses that he listen to him just this once…

After what felt like an eternity in the relative silence that was broken only by the sounds of gunfire and screaming that echoed ever nearer in the halls, somehow now disgustingly familiar, his father gave a weary sigh and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Shiro… my boy has a point."

Colin and Shiro adopted twin looks of shock.

"S-Sir, you can't be serious!"

"But I am, Shiro," he said simply. "If we turned back to escort Colin out of here, we'd be being selfish. There are other students whose lives are in danger, and if Colin is correct, we don't have a lot of time to save them. He'll need to be our guide; we don't know the layout of the school like he does. I don't like it, but... I think it's our only option."

Shiro swallowed back his response, shaking his head for a moment and looking furious. Finally, he said, "...You're right, sir. I... Goddesses, but you're right... But I wish there was another way."

Nodding, his father turned his gaze back to Colin. "We'll need to move fast, and together. You two stay behind us, you hear? And leave the fighting to us unless absolutely necessary. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!" Colin said, feeling elated.

"It would be my honor," Ralph replied, performing another odd bow.

Rusl nodded, looking at Ralph askance as he adjusted his rifle in his hands. "Then let's get going. Where to first?"

"Zelda said she was going to Mr. Adler's room. It's on the other half of the building."

He nodded curtly, and together the four set off at a trot, Shiro in the lead, Colin jogging beside his father, Ralph bringing up the rear.
"Your mother will be so proud when she hears about this," Rusl said quietly. "And then she's probably going to kill me."

Colin laughed, shaking his head ruefully before turning his attention back to the job at hand. Zelda, he thought desperately, Aryll… hold on. We're on our way.

Ganondorf's footsteps thundered down the narrow staircase, his eyes blazing with malevolent rage. Every footstep echoed in the stairwell, impacting like a hammer stroke with the force of his hulking size. He clenched his fists in fury, the sound of his cracking knuckles reverberating like a staccato of gunshots.

Hero was missing.

He'd made a bee-line for his base of operations as soon as he'd realized the Police had foiled his plans, intending on ending Hero's life and claiming Power once and for all. Only when he'd arrived at the main office, the door was ajar, Hero was gone, and Sakon's body was lying on the floor amidst a pile of dirt and broken pottery.

Rage had welled within him like an inferno at that moment, the flames licking at his heart, consuming him from the inside. All his planning, his hard work, for naught…

Arriving in the abandoned hallway before the library, he struggled to hold in the anger that was building steadily in his chest. With a wordless roar, he spun on the spot, driving his fist into the wall beside him, sending shockwaves through his arm. His blood was roaring in his ears, drowning out the pain he knew he should be feeling. Growling, he turned and continued on down the hall towards the nearest staircase. There must be something… some way he could find Hero… Some way he could still obtain the Power he sought.

He needed to do… something. Something to direct all this anger, to channel his destructive urges. He wanted to destroy, to maim, to kill… To punish those who had caused his plans to fall asunder… But how? Alone, he knew he would be more than a match for any of them. But united, he would not deceive himself and believe he could take on the entire police force. Not without having claimed the Triforce first…

At the thought of the police, the image of Rusl Smith came unbidden to his mind and he sneered dementedly. What he wouldn't give to kill that man… Why, right now, he was likely reuniting with that precious son of his and was on his way to saving the rest of their captives…

Captives…

With a sinister grin, he whipped the walkie-talkie out from within his large dark overcoat and turned, prowling down an adjacent hallway. Perhaps he couldn't kill Smith outright… but he could make sure he had no one to save.

With fiendish glee, he held the small metallic device up to his mouth and pressed the button.

"This is Ganondorf. Heed my words. The police have infiltrated the school. We have been compromised. Any moment now, they will be upon you, and will kill you without hesitation."

Yes… the same was also true for him. There was no way he'd be escaping this school alive, or else not in custody. This was his only chance. He needed to make it count.

"Here are your final orders," he continued, not waiting for a response. "Kill everyone. Leave no survivors. Let Hyrule forever remember your deeds this day. That is all."
He half expected Veran to call him back as she was so wont to do, and he was pleasantly surprised when she didn't; as if he needed the added irritation. Perhaps she was finally learning her place… though it was more likely she was scared witless by his pronouncement. It was true, however. Veran wasn't going to make it out of the building alive, and Ganondorf couldn't help but smile at the thought.

The sound of the raging battle had finally managed to make it to the second floor, though it had yet to reach him. For the moment, the battle was contained at the ends of either hallway as his forces struggled to keep back the obviously better trained and equipped police officers. It was likely the police would make it up the stairs in the center of the school, the ones closest to his position, in only a matter of moments, and for that reason, Ganondorf knew he had to move.

Letting his feet carry him blindly forward, he retreated into his pensive musings.

The only hope for salvaging his plan was if he somehow found Hero before the police could completely overthrow his forces; an inevitability, and one that would come very, very soon.

However, searching out Hero was foolish. Though it was likely he was trapped on the second floor, just like Ganondorf, it was still a large school. He wouldn't have time to search the entire thing before Smith found him.

If only there was some way he could make Hero come to him…

Ganondorf's brows drew together and he frowned thoughtfully. Make Hero come to him? But how? How could he even communicate with his prey if he didn't know where he was?

An increase of gunfire and a gurgled cry of pain in the distance punctuated his thoughts, but he pushed them away. Casting his gaze about as he walked, his eyes alighted on a circular metal speaker on the ceiling, and he smirked.

Of course. The PA system. If he made his way back to the main office, he could use the speakers to communicate with Hero directly, no matter where he was in the building.

But Hero was no fool; he would charge up to the third floor alone simply because Ganondorf told him to, and if he tried his plan now, the police would surely come flocking to him like pigeons to a bread crumb, eager to take him down.

No… He needed to be careful, conniving… He needed an ace in the hole, something to ensure that Hero did what he said…

He needed a hostage.

But not just any hostage, Ganondorf mused, turning a swiftly as the sounds of battle drew nearer, more screams and gunshots echoing just down the hall, the entire school seeming to shake from the wrack of the battle. He needed someone close to Hero, someone he'd willingly risk his life for.

The first person who came to mind was his brat of a sister, but he discarded it. There was little chance the girl remained in the school; the police's presence insured, if nothing else, that Colin had made it out with the girl in tow and had warned his father of Ganondorf's plans. A foolish mistake indeed, allowing the boy to leave, and one that he was now paying for dearly.

Indeed, Aryll Hero was not an option. However… who else was there? Shadow? A possibility, though whether Hero would risk his life for the best friend who had betrayed him was another story. Perhaps Twili then? Would Hero sacrifice himself to save his best friend's girl?
Ganondorf scowled darkly, anger and frustration building inside of him as he considered the futility of his plans.

Was he never destined to obtain the Power he sought? Was he too weak, too feeble, to hold that piece of the sacred triangle that he so desperately desired?

Or… Perhaps was it that the Goddesses feared him? That they knew of the strength he'd obtain, that he'd one day rise up and take their places? Yes… Yes, that must be it… They were interfering.

But… The Goddesses never directly interfered in the lives of mortals. It was against the rules they had founded the world upon. No, they couldn't be the cause of his downfall this day…

Unless…

Ganondorf's pacing slowed to a stop, his eyes wide as the realization hit him.

Of course… It was so obvious, why had he not seen it earlier?

The Triforce pieces called out to each other, drawing the bearers together like magnets, yearning to be hole once more.

The Triforce of Power was nearly complete, the golden insignia glowing on the back of his hand. And if one piece was here… the others likely were as well.

Courage and Wisdom. They were here, in the school, right now. They must be. There was no other logical answer. How else could his plans be upended?

But who? Who were they? In whose faces would he see the semblance of his age-old enemies, the Hero of Time and the Princess of Destiny?

Hero of Time… Hero…

Yes… It could only be him. The Hero of Time was surely Link Hero, his mortal enemy. It explained so much.

His greatest foe, come once again to thwart his plans. Well, not this time. This time, he would crush him, squeeze the life out of him until his third of the Triforce was in Ganon's possession. Then he would move on to Wisdom, wherever she was. She would come to him, of course. It was fate. Their meeting was destiny. It was always destiny.

Something surged inside of him then, a strength and energy he'd never before experienced. It flowed through him, golden and sweet, making his eyes widen and his nerves tingle with expectation. The back of his right hand burned, as though yearning for Ganon to move, to find the other two pieces and claim them for his own so it could be reunited with its missing pieces.

Ganondorf turned on the spot, his head suddenly clear. He no longer cared for the battle at hand; it didn't matter if the police overthrew his men. There was only one thing on his mind, and one thing only.

Find Hero.

With his newfound drive, Ganondorf's sojourn through the battle-torn school building no longer felt harried or harassed. He was completely at ease as he strode down the halls, apathetic towards the sounds of pain and death that reverberated off of the cold, empty lockers and grungy tiled floors.
Turning down the nearest hallway, he was met with an interesting site; before him, facing away, crouched three officers. They knelt behind opened doors, two on the left and one on the right, trusting the heavy, aged wood to give some cover from the bullets raining down on them from the opposite end of the hall, where two of Ganondorf's own cronies were situated in a similar position.

Never breaking stride, Ganon drew the gun from his pocket and deftly shot the first officer in the back of the neck. He dropped like a sack of bricks.

The second and third turned back, surprise and alarm evident on their faces, but before they could react Ganon pulled the trigger twice more, and they too fell to the ground, motionless.

His men cheered savagely as Ganondorf drew near, patting each other on the back and heaping him with praises. His expression never changed as he raised his gone once again and shot the first boy in the chest.

He fell with a cry of pain, and his companion's jaw dropped.

"Wha-?"

Ganon's bullet caught him in the throat, and he fell with a gurgle.

Calmly, Ganondorf continued on down the hall.

It wasn't until he was nearly back at the library that Ganondorf finally halted just before an intersecting hallway, the sound of voices reaching his ears.

Pressing his back against the wall, he eased the gun in his hand, preparing to take them out.

The words that drifted to his ears, however, made him pause. "…that difficult, Sheik."

Ganondorf's eyebrows rose in surprise. Sheik? Sheik Shadow, the traitor?

"Aw, come on Midna!" the familiar voice whined back playfully. "You know it was hot. Don't try to deny it."

He heard a teasing snort and an 'oof!' as he assumed Twili shoved him before she responded sarcastically, "Oh yeah, let me tell you… It was a massive turn-on watching Kafei bust in and rescue you."

Ganondorf, who'd been preparing to turn down the hallway and capture Hero's two unwitting best friends, hardly daring to believe his luck, froze at Twili's last words. Kafei? They weren't alone?

Shadow let out an indignant grunt and muttered sourly, "I had everything under control…"

"Sure ya did, sweetie," Twili replied lightly, and there was a spatter of feminine laughter; there was more than one female in their group. How many were there, anyway? He was tempted to peer around the corner to gauge the situation, but he didn't want to give himself away yet. He couldn't risk giving up what could be his only chance to capture Hero's two best friends, his only bargaining chips.

"Look," Shadow said, sounding impatient and a little hurt, "How was I supposed to know the guy had another gun? Everyone else in this school only seems to be carrying one. He caught me by surprise, that's all."

"Ah, don't worry, Sheik," a new voice spoke up, sounding suave and confident, "It's not her fault my
innate sexiness overshadowed you. It's a fact of life that you'll need to get used to."

There was another ripple of laughter, during which Shadow let out a sarcastic, "Yeah, yeah, shut up…", and the second boy, Kafei, said, "Come on, Zel, back me up here!"

A new voice, female, and slightly higher in pitch than Twili, let out a bemused chuckle before saying, "Sorry, Kafei. Black trench coats don't really do it for me. Besides, aren't you already taken? What would Anju say if she could hear you right now?"

"Probably that she agrees, that I'm unbelievably sexy and she's lucky to have a god like me in her life."

Shadow let out a snort of laughter, and Twili deadpanned, "And so humble. What a catch."

"What can I say?" Kafei responded cheekily, "It's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way. Right, Zelda?"

"Why do you keep asking me?" she asked, laughing.

"Because you're the only other single girl here, obviously. I can't be asking Midna, Sheik might start getting jealous!"

"Oh, I don't think there's any chance of that, bud."

"Besides, Zelda's already stolen the heart of a certain blonde haired, blue eyed acquaintance of ours…"

"W-what? N-no, I-"

"Oh come on, Zelly," Twili said loudly, drowning her out, "We all know you like him. You're wearing his sweater, for Farore's sake. Besides, he couldn't take his eyes off you when you two crashed into each other. Plus there was the whole 'lying on top of him for an extended period of time' thing…"

Ganondorf, who was quickly growing tired of the puerile conversation, felt himself tense in excitement at this Zelda girl's next line.

"Midna, come on! Link and I are just friends! We're not even technically that yet, I just met him yesterday, and not exactly under the best of circumstances if you remember correctly…"

Did this girl have some sort of romantic connection with his prey, Link Hero? This could be just what he needed… If he takes the object of Link's affection to the office and then makes his announcement, Hero will have no choice but to come running… He'll need to make it clear that if any police come, the girl will die. That ought to be enough to make certain that his demands met.

There he was, at the end of his rope, and the Goddesses saw fit to deliver to him this last chance as an act of divine providence…

But how was he to get her alone?

"Oh, I remember. You certainly swept him off his feet." Twili tittered girlishly, and Zelda groaned.

"I think we're getting a little off topic here, guys…" she mumbled, sounding petulant, and one of the males sighed.

"She's right. Ganondorf already gave the order to exterminate all the students over the walkie. That
was like, five minutes ago. We need to go check up on the others and make sure everything went ok."

Ganon felt his eye twitch; so, his orders were being thwarted by this rag-tag group of wanna-be heroes? Disgusting… Well, soon enough they'll realize that all of their plans were for naught. Just as soon as he found a way to snag the girl…

"You're right…" Twili replied, sounding resigned, then suddenly adopted a brisk, business-like tone, "So, where to?"

"Well…” Zelda's voice replied, sounding thoughtful, "There are only three more rooms. Link and Aryll have one, Ralph has another, and Colin has the last one."

"Colin? Colin Smith?" Shadow exclaimed, mirroring the surprise Ganondorf felt. "You mean he's still here?"

"Yes?" Zelda asked, confused. "He's been helping me since the beginning. Why, do you know him?"

"Er… yeah," Shadow replied, sounding uncomfortable. "He's Aryll's boyfriend. Or, ex I guess. They sorta had a fight earlier and-"

"Ok, really? Does now seem like the best time to be discussing relationship drama?" Twili cut in, sounding aggravated.

There was a bark of masculine laughter, followed by Kafei saying, "What was all that a minute ago about Zelda and Link?"

"It's not important right now!" She retorted, "Zelda's right, we need to get moving. It sounds like the police could reach us at any moment!"

"Right, so, Mid and I will go after Link and his precious pixie sister," Sheik said, ending the brief argument. "What about you two?"

"Zel?"

"Well… I guess we go for Colin. He's on the other side of the building though, so…"

"Right. Be careful guys."

"You too."

"Later."

As the sound of footsteps both faded off into the distance and drew nearer, Ganondorf realized the group must have broken up, and he prepared himself to move. He didn't even bother to check if the duo heading towards him was the correct one; something told him the girl was headed towards him. It was almost as if he could feel her drawing nearer…

With relaxed indifference, Ganondorf stepped slowly around the corner, stopping dead center in the middle of the hall, a triumphant smile sitting cruelly on his face.

The two teens who had been walking toward him froze in place, expressions flitting from confusion to shocked realization to terror in a matter of seconds.

"Ganondorf…” the blonde-haired girl breathed weakly, her face going ghostly pale.
"Correct," he replied monotonously, enjoying the thrill of fear he saw run through the two at the sound of his voice. Something strange was happening… almost like a buzzing, something echoing in his core. It was almost as though the air was charged with electricity. The back of his right hand prickled in anticipation.

"You..." the boy growled, his face distorting in rage below a mop of bizarre purple hair, and in a flash, he'd raised his arm, a black pistol glinting in his hands, aimed right at Ganon's heart.

He was too slow. Before the boy had even managed to take aim, Ganondorf's finger was pulling the trigger, and with a bang and a scream of pain, the gun went flying from the boy's hand, landing with a clatter behind him.

The boy hissed as he examined his hand, the bullet having ricocheted off of the gun and grazed his fingers, leaving a bloody red gash across four of his digits. Blood dripping on the floor, he turned his hate-filled gaze on Ganon, clearly seething, and whispered softly, "Zelda... Run..."

Before she had a chance to respond, he charged forward, bringing his uninjured hand back as though to strike. Calmly, Ganondorf angled his gun lower and fired once again, blowing a hole in the boy's shin.

He fell to the floor with an agonized scream, clutching at his ruined appendage.

"Kafei!" Zelda cried out in desperation, surging forward to help her fallen friend.

"Don't move!" Ganondorf barked, turning his pistol on the girl, and she froze in terror, her breathing erratic.

The girl's fierce, tear-filled violet eyes locked with Ganon's, and the odd buzzing sensation seemed to magnify.

"What do you want?" she whispered fearfully, and Ganondorf couldn't help but smirk.

"To go on a little... field trip," he replied lightly, then darted forward suddenly, seizing her by her forearm and dragging her forward.

"N-No! Stop, I-"

The girl's desperate pleading cut off with a grunt, her eyes growing wide as a sudden jolt of electricity surged between the two, making Ganondorf's hair stand on end.

"What...?" The girl whispered softly, a dazed expression on her face.

Ganondorf, however, was silent with shock.

The Sacred Triforce insignia on the back of his hand was glowing with a fierce golden light, sending shockwaves of energy through his body, making his every particle seem to hum. But that wasn't the most surprising part.

There was another Triforce, this one on the back of the girl's hand. And it was glowing just as brightly.

A slow, cruel smile split Ganondorf's face in two, and his shoulders began to shake with silent laughter.

He had found her at long last... The Princess of Destiny... and it had been completely by accident.
Ganon could no longer help himself; throwing his head backward, he let out a roar of laughter that echoed throughout the halls.

"W-what's going on?" the girl stammered, trying in vain to break free of Ganondorf’s grip. "Why is it… Why are you… What are you going to do with me?!"

Tilting his hand so the girl could see the glowing symbol on the back of his hand that mirrored her own, he felt a perverse sort of pleasure filter through him as her face paled and her knees went weak.

"Come, Princess," he chuckled darkly, turning around and dragging her weakly protesting body behind him, "our Destiny awaits us."
The Final Push

Link hadn't been out of the classroom for more than two minutes before he was brought to a screeching halt, his vans squealing on the grimy tile floor. His little sister Aryll who had been jogging beside him paused too, shooting her brother a look bordering on hysteria.

"Link? What are you doing?! We can't stop here, we need to move!"

He opened his mouth to reply but stopped as he was once again seized by an overwhelming feeling of dread. He couldn't quite explain it, but it was as though something inside of him was trying to tell him something, to give him a warning...

Something was wrong. He didn't know what, or where, or why, but knew he was right. Something had happened. Something wasn't right.

"Link!" his little sister exclaimed again, her voice shrill, and Link shook his head quickly, dispelling the confusing thoughts. Now wasn't the time to worry about things he couldn't explain or understand. Right now, they needed to get moving.

Casting his sister an apologetic smile, he started up running again, grabbing her hand with his right, the pistol held aloft in his left, ready for anything that might come at them.

Rescuing the students being held captive in Dr. Left's History class was actually a breeze; leaving Aryll in the hall as a lookout, though in reality it was because he didn't want her present if anything went awry, Link had busted into the dimly lit, cluttered classroom only to discover that the students were in no need of protection. The shooter who Ganondorf had left in charge had apparently panicked and had shot himself not even twenty minutes earlier; the class had simply been too terrified to leave the room.

Link had explained the situation to them, suggested that they stay where they were and out of harm's way, then had immediately left, towing his overly-enthusiastic sister alongside him as they raced back towards their friends, eager to check up on how their missions had gone. Aryll, of course, was convinced that Link's haste was simply because he wanted to check on Zelda. He'd ignored her teasing, trying to hide the slight pink tinge that adorned his cheeks. Din curse all little sisters…

Link had assumed that, with his assigned classroom behind him, they were finally out of danger. That as soon as he managed to rendezvous with Zelda, Sheik, Midna, and Kafei, they'd be able to take shelter in an abandoned classroom until the police arrived, and then everything would be ok.

They'd be able to leave this Goddess-forsaken school. He'd be able to hug his Grandma again, proud that he managed to find Aryll and keep her safe, that no more of his family members would be lost. He'd be able to check up on Anju in the hospital, find out if Shad and Ashei had made it out alright, see how Darunia and Ruto were doing, find some way to prevent Sheik from going to jail, spend time with Zelda…

Of course, the Goddesses weren't very keen on letting things go the way Link planned.

No sooner had Link and Aryll passed the first available intersection then it happened; the battle they'd heard raging downstairs had finally managed to reach the second floor.

Behind them, at the end of the hallway, the sound of fighting suddenly reached an alarming climax, and before Link and Aryll could understand what was happening, a cluster of gun-toting teens erupted from the stairwell, bullets flying in every which direction, curses and screams barely audible
over the roar of gunfire.

Link hadn't waited to see if the police were following; snatching his sister's hand, he'd turned on his heel and fled down the adjacent hall, eager to be out of sight before one of the gunmen decided to pick them off.

Which brought them to where they were now, running pell-mell down the hall, their breathing erratic, Aryll whimpering slightly in sheer terror as bangs and dying screams echoed all around them.

"Don't worry, sis," Link muttered softly, trying to sound reassuring as he paused to check if the coast was clear before venturing down the next hall; all good. "Come on, don't cry. We'll get out of this. I'll keep you safe, I promise."

The feeling of wrongness was still threatening to overwhelm him; he tried his best to shake it off, to focus on getting back to the library where he'd last seen his friends, but he couldn't stop wondering why he felt that way. What could have happened to make him feel so odd? His skin was prickling, the hair on his neck stood on end, and the back of his left hand seemed to be buzzing with fervid anticipation. Something was coming, and he wasn't going to like it.

Without warning, two boys his age rounded the corner up ahead of him, sprinting. They noticed Link instantly, and the first one let out a shout, raising his handgun and firing off several shots at random.

Cursing viciously, ignoring Aryll's terrified screams, Link quickly turned and darted down the next hall, tugging his sister with him, only to draw up short as he realized his path was blocked by yet another duo of gun-toting teens.

He turned back, vainly trying to run back the way he had come, but was stopped as the first two gunmen rounded the corner, panting heavily, bringing their guns up to bare.

"Stop!" One of them, shorter and more heavyset than the others, barked roughly as Link made as though to shove passed them. "Drop the gun! Don't move or the girl gets it!"

Link snarled, fear and desperation clawing away at his insides as he let the cold metal weapon fall to the floor where it was promptly kicked away by one of the assailants. No, it couldn't end like this, not now! They were so close! Link felt like screaming, but his throat wasn't working. His heart was pounding furiously in his chest, his mind spinning at a million miles an hour.

Tugging Aryll behind him he backed up against the wall, keeping her secure with his arms. She clung desperately to the back of his shirt, whimpering lightly, the four shooters extending out in a ring around them. They were all breathing heavily with wild, frenzied expressions on their faces. They knew their death was imminent; any minute now the police would have them routed. At this point, they were capable of anything…

Something sick settled in the pit of Link's stomach. He needed to protect Aryll. Somehow, someway, he would make sure she got out of this safely. It was his job… He'd promised his grandfather he'd take care of her and Granny… He couldn't let them down…

"Hey…" One of the shooters drawled suddenly, breaking through Link's frantic thoughts. "Ain't that Link Hero?"

If Link's mouth was working, he would have groaned.

"Well, well… I think you're right, Gyorg," the second shooter spot, and a manic grin nearly split his face in two. "You know, Hero, Master Ganon has expressed quite the interest in finding you… and
disposing of you."

The others in the huddle chuckled, and from behind him, Aryll let out a terrified whimper.

"What do you think, Akazoo?" the third shooter said, in a clipped, lilting tone. "Think we should do Ganon one last favor before our fun is ruined?"

The second shooter smirked darkly. "I think that's a wonderful plan. Grab him, quickly, before the police catch us."

"No!" Aryll shrieked as the two unnamed boys seized Link gruffly by either arm, tearing him away from his sister.

"Gyorg, grab that rat and shut her up," Akazoo spat in annoyance. Gyorg grinned salaciously, snatching her up in his arms.

She screamed, fighting back with her nails and feet, but the boy was clearly stronger than she was. He slapped a hand over her mouth, effectively silencing her, and with his other hand pressed the gun up to her temple.

"Keep squirming," he whispered softly, his face pressed against her neck, "and I'll blow a hole through that pretty little head of yours."

Aryll stopped fighting instantly, tears streaming down her face as she sobbed, her entire body wracked with tremors. Link tried to give her a reassuring look as he desperately wracked his brains for a way to get them out of this, but his two captors dragged him roughly away from her. In the middle of the intersection, they turned, slamming Link rather forcefully against the glass case where a fire extinguisher was encased. His head bounced off the metal corner, little black dots exploding in front of his eyes.

Link was breathing frantically now, panic shifting to sheer hysteria. He was about to die… He was seriously about to die. He'd failed. He hadn't managed to save Aryll. He was a failure…

"Well, Hero," Akazoo intoned lightly, though Link was barely listening, his gazed fixed on the tear-streaked face of his little sister, "it's been a real treat."

His fellow psychopaths all guffawed stupidly, exchanging eager looks as Akazoo lifted his pistol, aiming it directly at Link's head. Aryll's breathing picked up frantically, and she made desperate muffled sound through Gyorg's hand, struggling in vain against his grip.

Link merely met the boy's eyes levelly. An odd sense of calm had come over him; if he was going to die, he might as well do it with his head held high, right?

Akazoo smirked, then pulled the trigger.

Link flinched as the bang reverberated around the room, mingling with the sound of shattered glass.

Opening his eyes, Link was startled to see he was still alive. His left ear was ringing painfully, and he could feel stinging all up and down his neck and shoulder. Glancing down in confusion, he tried to make sense of the glass that littered the floor.

"Ok, ok, sorry!" Akazoo snorted, laughing along with the others when they saw Link's baffled expression. "Well stop toying with you now."

Toying…? Link scowled darkly. They were playing with his mind. He shot just barely over his
shoved it back into his mouth and said through gritted teeth, "You aren't going to get away with this, you coward."

"I don't think so," the psychopath spat, "I've got more than you can handle." He aimed his gun at Link and pulled the trigger.

Link was quick to react. He grabbed hold of the heavy metal tube by the pin and nozzle, gave it a short tug, freeing it from its metal prison. He saw the bullet hitting the back of his left hand and knew he was going to be in for it now.

Taking advantage of his weakness, Link quickly jerked his arm free, bringing his elbow back sharply to catch the injured shooter in the face. As he staggered backward in pain, Link turned and delivered a fierce head-butt directly into the other attacker's face with all of his might. The boy cried out in alarm, releasing Link's left arm to clutch at his chin, and just like that Link was free.

Spinning on the spot as though he'd had this planned out from the beginning, Link slammed his fist into the remaining shards of glass that clung to the fire extinguisher's window frame, effectively opening the case. Taking hold of the heavy metal tube by the pin and nozzle, he gave it a short tug, freeing it from its metal prison.

He half-expected the alarm to go off, but it didn't. Of course; Ganondorf had cut those off before the attack had started. Well, that would save them all a headache, he supposed.

Akazoo and Gyorg were completely oblivious to what was happening behind them, their attention focused on the shootout with Sheik and Midna. Aryll, however, was watching Link's fight with wide


goat growling deep in his throat.

"If you're going to kill me, then kill me already. Or do you not have the guts?" he snarled, his voice grating. Aryll made a noise, but he ignored her.

Akazoo's grin slid off his face. He looked annoyed.

"Fine," he spat angrily. "We'll make this quick then. Say your prayers, Hero. Though they won't do you any good."

Link opened his mouth to fire off one last retort when a movement over Akazoo's shoulder caught his attention.

Two figures had just rounded the corner at the end of the hall behind Akazoo. When their gaze landed on Link and the attackers, they paused, looking confused at the situation that was unfolding before them.

Link recognized them a split second before they recognized him.

Just as soon as he realized who they were, the boy holding Link's right arm became aware of their visitors, his body suddenly stiffening in alarm as he raised a hand to point over Akazoo's shoulder.

"Hey-!"

"Hey!" came the infuriated roar of Link's best friend, Sheik Shadow, and before the four shooters knew what was happening, Sheik leveled his gun and opened fire.

Chaos reigned as Ganondorf's flunkies tried to regain control of the situation. Akazoo dropped to a crouch and spun around, hefting his gun and returning fire, making Sheik leap to the side and take cover behind a doorway. He could see Midna dart back around the corner for protection.

Before Sheik hid, however, one of his bullets took the boy holding Link's right arm in the shoulder, and the boy let out a cry of pain. The back of Link's left hand twinged and something seemed to surge through him, just like it had when Sakon had been suffocating him in the main office, filling him with energy, making his mind startlingly clear.

Taking advantage of his weakness, Link quickly jerked his arm free, bringing his elbow back sharply to catch the injured shooter in the face. As he staggered backward in pain, Link turned and delivered a fierce head-butt directly into the other attacker's face with all of his might. The boy cried out in alarm, releasing Link's left arm to clutch at his chin, and just like that Link was free.

Spinning on the spot as though he'd had this planned out from the beginning, Link slammed his fist into the remaining shards of glass that clung to the fire extinguisher's window frame, effectively opening the case. Taking hold of the heavy metal tube by the pin and nozzle, he gave it a short tug, freeing it from its metal prison.

He half-expected the alarm to go off, but it didn't. Of course; Ganondorf had cut those off before the attack had started. Well, that would save them all a headache, he supposed.

Akazoo and Gyorg were completely oblivious to what was happening behind them, their attention focused on the shootout with Sheik and Midna. Aryll, however, was watching Link's fight with wide
eyes, her expression both fearful and amazed.

Link hadn't pulled the extinguisher free one moment too soon; just as he'd managed to heft the admittedly clunky makeshift weapon in his hands, the shooter who'd taken the bullet to the shoulder realized what was happening and lifted his gun hand in an attempt to stop him; it was too late, however.

With a downward swing, Link caught the pistol with the base of the fire extinguisher and sent it clattering to the floor. Taking advantage of the shooter's momentary surprise, Link quickly jerked the metal bludgeon back up, slamming it into the bottom of the attacker's chin. The adrenaline flowing through Link's body added extra power to his swing, and the boy was momentarily lifted off the ground before he fell like a marionette whose strings were cut, his eyes rolling back into his head.

From the corner of his eye, Link could see the second thug had already recovered from his ferocious head-butt and was bringing his own gun up to shoot Link in the back. Knowing he was too far to hit him regularly, Link spun on the spot, letting the hydrant slide in his grip until his hand grasped the very end of the nozzle. Utilizing the momentum of his spin, Link swung the extinguisher over his head with all of his might.

At the height of his swing, the nozzle became detached from its clasp and the hose extended to its full length, extending the reach of Link's swing by a good foot and a half; exactly what he needed. The shooter had barely managed to aim his gun when the extinguisher came crashing down onto his head with a hollow thunk. The shooter crumpled to the floor.

Something savage seemed to have overcome Link; adrenaline was flooding through him, making him faster, stronger, more agile. The blows from the extinguisher were mighty, but he didn’t have time to worry about the amount of damage he was dealing with every strike he landed; his friends were in danger, and so was his little sister. If he had to choose between crushing a boy’s skull or letting his little sister get shot, he knew what choice he’d have to make. Turning his attention to the last two shooters, he found his vision going red when his eyes landed on Aryll, still held in Gyorg's clutches, his pistol still pointed at her head.

Gyorg still hadn't noticed that Link was free. Pulling his lips back in a wordless snarl, Link stepped forward, readjusting his grip on his makeshift bludgeon.

The blind rage in Link's eyes seemed to embolden Aryll. Sending Link an understanding look, she took a deep breath through her nostrils, then bit down on Gyorg's fingers with a savage grunt, simultaneously driving her elbow into his stomach.

The unsuspecting boy let out a cry of pain, loosening his hold on the girl, and with a gasp Aryll tore free, stumbling forward quickly in her haste to get away.

"Why you-!" Gyorg snarled murderously, then froze when he saw Link towering over him.

"Nobody," he grated, his voice harder than steel, "touches my little sister."

Before Gyorg could respond, Link brought the base of the hydrant crashing down into his face, slamming his head into the wall behind him. Gyorg let out a wordless howl of pain as blood spurted from his broken nose and he slumped forward, clutching his ruined face. With a feral growl, Link slammed his weapon into the base of his skull, and the boy dropped.

Finally, it seemed, Akazoo noticed the commotion behind him. Tearing his attention away from the shootout with Sheik down the hall, he glanced behind him just in time to see Link swinging the hydrant like a golf club before it collided with his temple and he, too, was down.
Link stood there motionless for a moment, panting heavily amidst the four unconscious bodies littered around him. Without the gunfire, it seemed eerily quiet despite the still-continuing sounds of battle that called out from various places around the school. Letting the extinguisher drop to the ground with a hollow clunk, Link stared wordlessly at the back of his hand, examining the glowing Triforce symbol.

What… did this mean? The strength, the energy that surged through him when he got in a fight, did it come from this? Was it some sort of curse, or blessing? The haze was already starting to fade, and the glowing along with it, but one thing stuck out clearly in Link's mind: the sense of wrongness had seemed to intensify during the fight, and though it was lessening now, it still left him with a lingering feeling of anxiety and restlessness. But what? What could it be? What was it trying to tell him, this shape on his hand, the Triforce or the Goddesses or whatever it symbolized?

A tortured sob suddenly drew his attention, and Link turned around just in time to catch his little sister as she tackled him, clinging to him as she cried into his shirt. Sighing, he let his arms envelop her, drawing her closer.

"I'm sorry, Aryll…” Link whispered softly, feeling awful. "I'm sorry I couldn't protect you… Grandpa would be so ashamed…"

"Link?"

Turning his head, he was met with the wary, fearful faces of his two best friends as they stood awkwardly a few feet away from him, their eyes taking in the destruction around them with obvious surprise.

"Sheik, Midna!" Link cried, smiling for the first time in what felt like an eternity. "You… You saved my life! Goddesses, I don't know how to thank you!"

"Er, Link, did you…” Sheik asked slowly, gesturing to the bodies on the ground and the forgotten fire extinguisher.

Link suddenly felt awkward. How in the world was he going to explain this to them? 'Oh you know, a mysterious symbol on my hand turns me into Chuck Norris when I'm in danger and helped me beat the crap out of four guys with guns using only a fire extinguisher!' Still not the weirdest thing that had happened today, he supposed, but not an answer he was ready to give.

"Um… I don't think now's the best time to talk about it," Link evaded awkwardly, motioning to the still sobbing Aryll in his arms.

Thankfully, the two nodded in understanding, and Link breathed a mental sigh of relief.

Midna cast a worried glance down the hall from the direction they came from. "Guys, I don't think it's a good idea to just stand here… There could be more shooters around."

"You're right," Link said, sighing. He suddenly felt exhausted. That weird glowing thing really took a lot out of him. "What do you think, should we bunker down in a classroom till the cops get everything under control?"

"That's probably the smartest thing to do," Sheik replied, rolling his shoulders wearily. His joints cracked with loud pops, audible even above the wailing siren. Midna shot him a disgusted look.

"Do you guys know anything about the others?" Link asked, suddenly remembering Zelda and Kafei were still out there somewhere, possibly caught up in the fight.
"We just saw them actually. Well, Zel and Kafei," Midna replied, leaning up against the wall and crossing her arms. Her sweater was a mess, and her hair was wild. Of the four standing there, only Aryll's appearance seemed unchanged, and that was because her hair was kept back in twin braids.

"Really?" Link asked, trying not to sound too eager for news on Zelda's wellbeing. "They ok? They're hiding in a room too?"

"Er… Well, they handled their room just fine and came to check up on us, but we split up 'cause we didn't know how everyone else was doing…" Sheik said slowly, sounding as though he were trying to avoid having to say something.

"Wait, what do you mean by everyone else?" Aryll asked tremulously, pulling her face out of Link's shirt.

Midna cast her a sympathetic look, opening her arms. Aryll stepped forward and accepted the embrace gratefully.

"Oh yeah! Get this; Zelda's other two 'friends' who took the first two rooms on the other half of the building? None other than Ralph Ambi and Colin Smith."

"Ralph?" Link exclaimed, flabbergasted, at the same time that Aryll blurted out "Colin?! He's still here?"

"I know, right?" Sheik said, laughing. "It's crazy! Who would've thought Ralph of all people would be good for anything? And Colin, I thought he'd been hiding in that classroom like a scared little girl this whole time," here, Midna turned and quirked an annoyed brow at the taller blond, but he ignored her, “but I guess he's been helping her the whole time or something. I dunno, we didn't have a lot of time to talk before they left to-

"Wait, they left?" Link cut in, something painful seizing his chest. "You mean they're wandering the halls in the middle of the battle?"

"Well, yeah, but-"

"I have to go find them," Link said quickly, spinning around, prepared to dart off down the hall. He knew something wasn't right… Whatever this odd feeling was, it centered around Zelda, of that he was suddenly sure. She was in danger. Something was going to happen to her. He needed to find her, and fast.

"Whoa, Link, wait up!" Sheik exclaimed, and Link paused impatiently.

"What is it?"

"You can't just run off by yourself!" he replied, his tone suggesting Link had lost his mind. “Link, we’re in the middle of a war zone, you’re going to get yourself killed.”

"Well, I can't just leave her out there!" he retorted angrily.

"Link, she's not alone, she's got Kafei," Midna cut in, sounding just as worried about Link's sanity as Sheik was, "Besides, if you go out there, you'll just put yourself in danger, too."

"Who cares!" he shouted, throwing his hands up in the air, losing his patience. "Something isn't right, I can feel it! Something's going to happen to her! I need to be there, I need to-"

"Link, I'm all about you finding a girl and all, but… I mean, you just met her. Is she really worth
risking your life over?"

Link shot Sheik a cold, deadly look, and the boy took a step back in surprise.

"Anyone," Link growled darkly, "is worth risking my life for. I know I hardly know her, but that
doesn't make her life unimportant. Sure, maybe this is stupid, and maybe I might get myself killed,
but I'd rather give my life trying to save someone than live knowing I did nothing at all!"

"Link…" Midna said softly, sounding hurt, but he ignored her. Turning on the spot, he took a few
steps forward before he was stopped by a tug on his sleeve.

Turning in annoyance, he was surprised to find Aryll staring at him with her big, tear-filled eyes.

"Link…" she whispered softly, "I'm going with you."

"No," he said flatly, placing both hands on her shoulders and holding her at arm’s length. "You're
going to stay with Midna and Sheik, ok? I won't be long. Let them keep you safe and I'll see you
again when it's all over."

"No!" she said, her voice sounding tremulous. "Link, please!"

"Aryll, no, it's too dangerous. I can't let you-"

"You almost died!" she blurted out, startling him, and suddenly she was bawling again, clinging
pathetically to the front of his shirt, tears streaming down her face, trying to talk through her sobs.

"Y-You almost d-died, and… you're m-my b-brother, and… I'd b-be all a-alone, so you can't… y-
you c-can't leave me here… I n-need you… P-please don't leave me…"

She was barely understandable, but she managed to get her message across. Link sighed, feeling
torn; on one hand, he couldn't just abandon his little sister in her time of need… but Zelda was in
danger, he could feel it, and he didn't know how much time she had left. He needed to leave, but he
couldn't just abandon Aryll…

"Aryll…" Link said softly once she'd quieted down, "I know this is hard, but… I need to do this.
Please, stay with Sheik and Midna…"

She shook her head vigorously, her eyes hidden in his now-sopping T-shirt.

"Aryll," he tried again, exasperated, but Sheik cut him off.

"Link, give it up," he said, sighing heavily. "She's not staying behind while you rush off into
danger."

"And neither are we," Midna chimed in before Link could open his mouth to retort.

He stared at them in surprise before shaking his head in bewilderment and saying, "What? Guys, no,
that's crazy!"

"Yeah," Sheik said, shrugging lightly. "But then, this whole day's been kinda crazy, right?"

"Besides, she's our friend too, ya know. Just 'cause we don't fantasize about sucking face with her
doesn't mean we're not worried about her, too."

Link pointedly ignored Midna's playful jab, instead turning to look at Aryll again. She was staring up
at him with tear stained cheeks, but the sheer determination and ferocity in her gaze astounded him.
"I'm going with you," she said flatly, her tone brooking no argument.

*She looks just like mom…* Link thought affectionately, and a moment later he found himself sighing in resignation.

He stared at her for a moment longer, clenching his jaw painfully before taking her hand in his and muttering, "Fine. But you stay behind me."

She nodded quickly, her blue eyes sparkling brightly, and without a word they were off, Midna and Sheik following behind them.

Link paused briefly, leaning down to snatch up Gyorg's pistol, handing it silently to Aryll before taking Akazoo's for his own. He ignored the fire extinguisher. Sure, maybe he'd totally beasted those four shooters with it, but it was hardly an appropriate weapon. He felt much safer with the gun in his hand.

Rounding the corner at a jog, Link came to an abrupt unexpected halt, Aryll crashing into his back, Sheik and Midna nearly doing the same.

"Link, wha-?" Aryll said before her eyes followed her brother's and she cut off short.

There, standing just a few feet in front of them, were four of the last people he'd expected to see.

"Ralph?" Link blurted out, taken aback.

"Link!" The redhead replied, grinning broadly.

"C-Colin?" Aryll stammered.

"Aryll," he replied, sounding surprised and uncomfortable.

"Colin?" Sheik exclaimed incredulously, stepping around Link to get a better look.

"Sheik," he acknowledged briefly, though his eyes were glued on Aryll.

"Sheik?" asked a tall, mustachioed man with a black S.W.A.T. vest on, looking interested.

"Chief Smith!" Link exclaimed in delight, finally recognizing the Chief of Police.

"Link!" The older man replied, grinning broadly, stepping forward to clasp his hand on his shoulder bracingly.

"Ok, can we not do this?" Midna cut in, sounding annoyed. The group laughed, all except for Aryll and Colin, who were staring at each other silently, their expressions conflicted and grave.

"Are you kids alright?" Chief Smith asked, letting his gaze drift over the students quickly, searching for injury. "It sounded like there was quite the scuffle down here…"

"There was, but we took care of it," Link said quickly, hoping he wouldn't have to explain about the fire extinguisher.

"I see," the older male answered, puffing air out through his bushy mustache. "Well, tell me, why are you kids wandering the halls? You need to stay in a classroom until we get things under control."

"Well, our friend Zelda told us Ganondorf was gonna tell his cronies to kill all the students before you could get here, so we split up to try and thwart him," Midna answered, her gaze fixated on
Colin.

Ralph blinked in surprise. "Wait, you've been seeking to halt Ganondorf's nefarious plot as well?"

"Er… yes?" she replied, giving Ralph a funny look. Oddly, Ralph looked rather put out at this news.

"So you did it then?" The second officer asked, looking amazed.

"Well, we were just on our way to check up on Zelda, but…"

"As were we!" Ralph exclaimed, attempting to seize control of the conversation again. "We were just on our way to locate her and finish off the last two rooms, but it would seem you've stolen our thunder."

"Well, I have to admit," Chief Smith said, ignoring Ralph, wiping his brow wearily but grinning down at them all with pride, "you kids astound me. Never in my life have I ever met such a group of courageous young people."

The second officer spoke up. "It's true. The number of kids you guys have saved today is astounding. You should be proud of yourselves. We've been hearing news about you guys all day!"

This unexpected praise brought about a rather awkward silence. Link felt his face heating up in embarrassment; yeah, he'd saved some people, but… he hadn't really thought about it like that. Anyone would have done it, right? He wasn't anything special. He turned back to hide his face and glanced at Sheik, and was surprised to see a look of shame on his face, his eyes downcast. Midna was rubbing his arm consolingly. Likewise, Colin also looked upset, and Aryll still wasn't saying anything.

Ralph, however, preened. "Well, what can I say? It's all in a day's work, I suppose."

"Well," Colin's father continued, clapping his hands and rubbing them together. "Things are almost under control. We just need to round up the last of the hostiles, then we'll get you kids out of here. You'll be reunited with your families in no time. However, until things are clear, I'm going to have to ask you kids to wait in a classroom, understand?"

Ralph nodded, seeming to find this plan acceptable, and turned as though to walk down the hall. Midna took a few steps too, as did Colin and Aryll, but they paused when they realized that Link and Sheik hadn't moved.

"Is there… a problem?" Chief Smith asked, a confused look upon his face.

Link gave Sheik an odd look. He had stayed put because he still had every intention of finding and checking up on Zelda; just because Colin's father had arrived didn't mean she wasn't in danger. But that didn't explain why Sheik was still standing there, his shoulders trembling slightly, his gaze riveted on the floor.

Slowly, Sheik turned his scarlet gaze up and fixed it on Mr. Smith, his shoulders set with determination.

"Chief Smith," he said softly, ignoring everyone else's confused gazes, "you're going to arrest the ones who participated in today's events, right?"

"Yes…” he replied slowly. To Link's surprise, Chief Smith no longer seemed confused, merely curious. "Is there something you want to tell me?"
Sheik swallowed heavily, looking nervous. "Well… If you're arresting the conspirators, then-

"Sheik…" Midna cut in, sounding alarmed, but he pressed on anyway.

"-then you'll need to arrest me, too."

Ralph and the nameless officer's jaws dropped simultaneously. Colin looked sick. Aryll kept her gaze riveted on the floor.

Sheik and Chief Smith merely stared at each other, expressions unreadable.

"You helped plan today's events, then?" the Police Chief asked quietly.

Sheik nodded.

"W-Wait!" Midna blurted out, darting forward and positioning herself between the two males. "Wait, please, he… He didn't mean it, h-he was just going through a tough time, and… He's a good person! He switched sides! He saved everyone in the gym, he's a hero-!"

"I know," Chief Smith said simply, and Midna cut off with a strangled hiccup, tears streaming down her face.

"You… You know?"

"I know," he repeated, looking forlorn. "Every person who walked off that bus told me or one of my officers how a boy named Sheik, a girl named Midna, and a hapless janitor had saved their lives at great personal peril."

Sheik swallowed but said nothing. Midna was trembling, trying to contain her emotions.

"B-but…"

"Sheik has also been credited with helping to save a group of teenage girls, one of which had received what would have been a fatal gunshot wound to the abdomen. There is no doubt in my mind that that girl would be dead right now if not for him. And Link, of course."

Link said nothing, his gaze locked on his best friend.

"And now you tell me he helped stop Ganondorf from killing all the students before we could arrive to protect them? If I had my way, Mr. Shadow, I'd let you leave here with your friends. In my eyes, you're every bit the hero your friends and the students you helped save know you to be. However…"

Midna, whose face had been growing more and more hopeful with every word Colin's father spoke, absolutely fell apart at his last word.

"No… No, please…" she whispered, hands clutched at her chest.

"I'm sorry," Chief Smith replied softly, and he truly seemed it. "Shiro, if you would…"

The officer nodded curtly, a discomfited expression on his face as he stepped reluctantly forward, unhooking the handcuffs from his belt.

Sheik nodded, handing over the pistol in his hand without a word, holding his wrists out. He seemed the least upset of the group; if anything, he seemed finally content.

As Shiro turned to lead Sheik away, Colin suddenly stepped forward, looking decidedly pale.
"W-wait, h-hold on."

"Colin?" Shiro asked, confused.

"You… you need to arrest me, too."

The silence that followed that statement was one of the loudest that Link had ever heard. For a moment, there was no sound at all save for the occasional sound of gunfire in the distance, now become few and far in between as the battle died down.

Finally, Shiro and Ralph blurted out in simultaneous incredulity, "What?!"

Chief Smith had gone completely rigid, staring at his son in horrified disbelief. Aryll's face was every bit as pale as Colin's, her eyes wide with shock, one hand clasped over her mouth.

"I'm sorry, dad…" he whispered, barely audible in the din, "I found out Ganondorf's plan this morning, but… He caught me and…" Colin shook his head, on the verge of tears. "Remember that old police scanner you gave me? The one I've been keeping in my car? I… I gave it to him. That's how he was able to know all your plans. It's… It's all my fault…"

"Colin…" Shiro said, sounding scandalized.

"Why…" Chief Smith asked hoarsely, pausing to clear his throat before continuing. "Why would you do that, Colin?"

"For me," Aryll cut in suddenly, speaking up for the first time. "He… Ganondorf threatened to kill me if Colin didn't cooperate. He was just trying to protect me…"

Colin shot her a look of surprise, but she kept her gaze fixated on his father, expression unreadable.

A look of understanding graced Chief Smith's face. He still looked upset, but he no longer appeared as though he were having a heart attack.

"I… Sir?" Shiro asked, looking torn. "What… Can I…?"

Mr. Smith looked at a loss for words. Link couldn't help but feel for the man. What was he supposed to do? His son had given private information to the enemy; by all rights, Colin should be handcuffed like Sheik and taken away.

"Don't arrest him," Sheik said suddenly, and all eyes turned on him.

He smirked lightly. "Hey, I'm one of them, right? Take my testimony into account. Colin only gave away the radio because Ganondorf threatened to kill him and Aryll if he didn't cooperate. He was just trying to protect his girlfriend. Besides, I don't think today's outcome would be much different if he hadn't."

Chief Smith nodded as though having made up his mind, sending Sheik a thankful look. "Well, taking one of the conspirator's testimonies into account, Colin will not be arrested – although, he will still need to come down to the station for questioning." Shiro nodded, looking relieved. What 'questioning' meant for the son of the police chief, Link didn't know, but it didn't sound very serious, at least not compared to Sheik.

"But-" Colin spoke up, confused, when the conversation was interrupted by a group of people barreling around the corner.
Link tensed at first, ready to use his weapon to defend himself if need be before he realized what he was seeing. There were three figures approaching; two police officers on either side, and in the middle of them, being held aloft as though their arms were a chair…

"Kafei!" Link blurted out, pushing passed Shiro and Sheik and darting quickly to his injured friend. Kafei looked awful; he'd finally ditched the ridiculous black trench coat, but his left pant leg was completely soaked through with blood. His face was pale and drawn, and his eyes were half-lidded as though he were fading in and out of consciousness.

"Kafei!" Aryll exclaimed at Link's side, looking horrified, "What-"

"Link," Kafei rasped, and Link suddenly realized he was sobbing.

"Whoa, Kafei, hey, calm down. It's gonna be ok, alright?" Link said softly, placing a comforting hand on the boy's shoulder.

"What happened?" came Chief Smith's stern voice from behind them, addressing the officers.

"We don't know, sir. We found him lying in a hallway like this. The bullet seems to have shattered his left tibia, and possibly his fibula as well. There's a great deal of blood. We're taking him out to the ambulance now."

"No!" Kafei suddenly blurted out, his eyes going wild. "No! I can't, she's still… I left her… I need to…"

"Kafei, calm down," Link said, taking his head in his hands and tilting him so he was looking into his eyes. "She who? Kafei, who are you talking about?"

But he already knew. He had known all along, ever since he'd felt the first pangs of dread what felt like so very long ago…

"Zelda," the boy gasped, looking decidedly green. "Nayru, I'm so s-sorry, Link, I couldn't stop him… H-He was just there…"

"He?" Link said, panic quickly welling up in his chest. "He who? Talk to me, Kafei! He who?"

"He took her…" The boy rasped, his eyes fluttering closed, and ice seized Link's heart. He knew.

He knew who took Zelda.

At that exact moment, the sound of gunfire in the distance finally died out, and for the first time in what felt like ages, the school was completely silent. Link stepped back, looking in every which direction. He could feel his hackles rising as the profound sense of wrongness pervaded him again.

With the telltale crackle of static, a voice came on over the intercom, making everyone in the hall jump.

"Attention Ordon High. It is I, Ganondorf. You have fought bravely and well. You should be proud of yourself, Rusl Smith. You managed to defeat a rag-tag bunch of teenagers. I must say, I am impressed."

There was a pause as he let out a dark chuckle that made Link's hair stand on end.

"He's in the office," Chief Smith snarled, hefting his rifle in his hands, moving as though to run off
down the hall, Shiro following.

"If you come, she dies," Ganondorf barked, and the two officers stopped immediately, looking confused.

"It's still my game, Rusl Smith. I have a hostage with me, and she will die if my demands are not met."

Smith cursed under his breath. Midna was standing beside the handcuffed Sheik, Aryll had drifted beside Colin, her gaze looking fearful. Link still stood beside Kafei and the two officers who were supporting him, his gaze locked on the security camera in the corner from where he knew they were being watched, hanging on Ganondorf’s every word.

"I have but one request, and I make it now. I speak to you, Link Hero." Everyone in the hall turned their gazes on Link; some confused, some fearful. Link ignored them, focusing instead on Ganondorf's cruel voice.

"I wait for you at the top of the tower, just as I always have. Come to me, Hero. Come, and let us see. Can your Courage best my Power? Can you save the Princess from the Evil that threatens to destroy her? Our battle has been predestined. Our fates are intertwined. Our destiny awaits. Come to me; heed the call, the singing in your blood, and let us truly see who holds the Goddesses’ favor."

Link didn't wait. As soon as the message ended he took off running down the hall, shoving roughly passed Colin's father and Shiro as they tried to stop him.

He didn't hear his friends' cries for him to stop, the blood was pounding too loudly in his ears. He didn't see Aryll and Sheik try to follow him, only to be grabbed by Colin's father and Shiro. He didn't feel fear, or sorrow, or despair, only the rage that boiled inside of him, threatening to consume him.

The Triforce on his hand was glowing now in earnest, but he no longer cared. It didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered. Only Zelda and Ganon existed.

He would either save her and kill him, or die trying, but one way or another, it was going to end.
It was the silence more than anything that got to him. After spending the entire day surrounded by the sounds of gunfire, screams of agony, tearful sobs and frantic breathing, the quiet that now engulfed his surroundings was far beyond oppressive.

It's like a crypt, Link decided, the random thought skittering somewhere along the fringes of his mind, and in a way, it was fitting. Death and stillness seemed commonplace, now. He hardly dared to breathe, somehow fearing that any sound he made would endanger the pseudo-peace that had befallen the school from the moment Ganondorf had issued his challenge.

His footsteps, protracted and hesitant, fell dully on the tattered, threadbare carpeting that made up the short walkway before the main office. Slowly, carefully, he made his way toward the familiar doorway, Akazoo's pistol held in his surprisingly steady grip, both hands on the cold, cruel metal, the barrel pointed downward at his side.

Oddly, Link was not afraid. The one feeling that had stayed with him throughout his nightmarish ordeal at Ordon High, the one feeling he had thought would never again abandon him so long as he lived, forever haunting him in his nightmares and in his daydreams, had suddenly vanished when Ganon had spoken to him over the PA system only minutes ago.

In its place was a strange surging… feeling. A type of calmness that comes from experience and knowledge, the type that permeates the atmosphere just before a storm. He almost felt like liquid light was coursing through his veins, and the mark on the back of his hand hadn't stopped glowing. He felt… bolder. More cunning. Confidant. Driven.

There was no fear. There was no anxiety. There was only him, Ganondorf, and the girl he'd taken, the girl Link was here to save, the girl he knew so little of yet somehow seemed more important to him than life itself… Zelda.

Somewhere along the line, between her cleaving his head in two with a door and him plowing into her as he rounded a corner with his friends, she'd become important to him. He didn't question why he was putting his life at risk for a girl he hadn't even known a full twenty-four hours; she was simply worth it. It seemed almost second-nature, as though protecting her was somehow written into his genetic code.

Even the thought of her in danger made Link's heart cry out in anguish and the golden triangles on his hand seemed to glow all the brighter. He felt as though the symbol called to him, urging him restlessly forward, drawing him closer and closer to the room at the end of the hall, pleading with him louder and louder the nearer he got to his destination.

He would save her. He would defeat Ganondorf, somehow, someway. He would avenge all those he'd killed this day, put an end to today's tragedy, save his sister and his friends from further harm, get his revenge for what he'd done to Sheik, and make his parents, uncle, and grandfather proud…

Odd fearlessness notwithstanding, Link hesitated at the door to the office, momentarily debating his next choice of action before giving a mental shrug and grasping the handle with one hand; there was no time to think about a different course of action or to prepare for whatever traps might be lying in wait. Zelda needed him, and no matter how he looked at it, he needed to go in.

Easing the pistol in his left hand, Link closed his eyes for a moment, drudging up a memory of the room as he remembered it when he and Kafei had made their escape attempt. There was a desk
straight ahead and a break room directly behind it, separated by a wall with a large window. Immediately on his right would be the couches and chairs where Ganon's flunkies had been sitting when Sheik had brought Link up as his 'prisoner'. Finally, on the left was the narrow walkway that led to the Vice Principals office, the walk-in closet where Link, Aryll, and Kafei had been imprisoned, and…

The Principal's Office.

He could almost feel Ganondorf's malevolent aura radiating up ahead. Somehow, without explanation, Link knew. Ganon was in Sahasralah's office. He was waiting for the Hero at the top of the tower…

No longer concerned for what was awaiting him in the main office, Link turned the handle and pushed the door open with a calm detachment. It swung open with barely a creak, and with an impassive face, Link entered into the stillness of the office.

All the lights were off. It didn't make much difference, seeing as the door to the vice principal's office was still ajar from when Link had searched it for a weapon earlier and the sunlight streamed through from the window within; the sunlight, coupled with the light from the hall beyond, worked together to illuminate the room well enough for Link to take a good look.

Everything was just as he had left it. Upturned couch cushions, shattered vending machines in the break room, bullet holes in the wall…

Sakon's motionless body lying face-first in a pile of dirt and pottery.

Link stared at the boy's inert form, momentarily frozen, swiftly fighting down the bile that had risen in his throat. Wrenching his eyes away from the body, trying hard not to notice the gaping, bloodless bullet holes in his back, he turned his gaze toward the narrow hall that led to the Principal's office.

What small light he gained from the window and the outer hall wasn't enough to pierce the darkness of that short hallway. The gloom clung on, almost seeming to sap the light from the world around it, giving off a foreboding aura. It was fitting that Ganondorf would be holed up back there…

And Zelda was there, too. Waiting for him.

Something about that thought was oddly nostalgic, but he pushed the feeling away, instead focusing on the task at hand. With slow, deliberate footsteps, he made his way toward the back of the office. Carefully, he stepped around Sakon without looking at him again, angling his foot so as not to step on the faux tree that lay beside him. To Link, crossing the distance from Sakon to the back of the office felt like it took no time at all, and before he knew it he was in front of the Principal's door.

When he lifted his hand to place it on the handle, he half expected to see he was shaking. His limbs, however, were still. He was calm. He was in control. He would end this, here and now.

Turning the handle, Link took a deep breath and gave the door a gentle push, let it slowly swing open, creaking ever so softly.

Time seemed to stop. The world ceased spinning. Link's heart stopped beating. There was no sound, no movement, nothing to indicate that life beyond what Link could see was still progressing, still chugging ever onward in spite of him. Anticipation was at its climax, and the very universe seemed to be holding its breath as Link entered the room.

"So… You have come…"
For a moment, Link was unsure where the voice was coming from. The room was dim, the only light
coming through the tiny gaps between the blinds; blinding bars of horizontal light that pierced the
shadowy interior of the office, struggling to illuminate what was hidden in the darkness.

Eyes slowly adjusting to the change in lighting, he could see Sahasralah's massive, heavy-set
mahogany desk in the center of the room, Ganondorf's laptop perched atop its dark wooden surface;
the occasional faux-potted plant or chair lining the walls beside cheap portraits of mountains and
sailboats and the occasional motivational poster, a lone filing cabinet in the far corner of the room.
The large bloodstain adorned the center of the carpet, along with the few pieces of broken plastic
Link had noted in his first visit to the room as well as the stapler he'd dropped when Sakon had
apprehended him.

"I knew you would, Hero," came his cruel, sinister voice once more echoing from the shadows, and
with a start Link realized he was sitting in Sahasralah's chair, facing the windows, most of his body
hidden behind the chair's back. "You always were so predictable…"

Link took a step forward, letting the door swing slowly shut behind him. Opening his mouth to fire
back a retort, he cut off short when something peculiar happened.

One moment, he was facing Ganondorf's back in the center of the principal's office, and the next the
scene seemed to flicker…

They were atop a tower, in a massive room decorated with garishly ornate wall fixtures and opulent
golden floor tiles. Where before Ganondorf had been sitting behind a desk, he was now situated
before a massive organ, his hands poised on the keys in mid-motion, before with another flicker the
scene returned to normal.

Before Link could even begin to fathom what had just happened, a sudden soft whimper of fear
captured his attention. Tearing his gaze away from Ganondorf's back, his eyes darted towards the
sound, all thoughts of hatred and revenge momentarily put on hold as he felt his breath catch and his
heart throb with dull anguish.

For there she was-Zelda: beautiful, tragic, alluring, mysterious… The main source of all his worry
and dedication, the driving force behind his actions, his reason for willingly falling for Ganondorf’s
taunt. His soul ached as his steely grey eyes met her tear-filled, desperate amaranthine orbs, fear and
near-hysteria etched clearly onto her regal face. The humming that seemed to resonate from the mark
on his hand surged with a renewed vigor, throbbing in time with his anguished heartbeat.

She made as though to move towards him, her limbs straining against her duct tape bindings as she
lay slumped in the corner of the room, nestled in the shadowy darkness. The tape that covered her
mouth prevented her from making much noise, but he could still tell; she was crying. Tears were
leaking down her delicate porcelain cheeks, past the scabs of what looked like claw marks that
marred her otherwise-angelic visage, over the tape that gagged her, droplets staining his favorite
green hoodie that she still wore even after all that had transpired.

Something about that picture, the sight of Zelda quietly sobbing alone in the corner of the room in his
sweater, drove him over the edge. Rage, the likes of which he hadn't felt since Gyorg had grabbed
Aryll, suddenly roared inside of him, feral and raw. He wrenched his gaze away from the girl,
partially to direct his attention towards his enemy, partially because he couldn't bear to see her in
such a broken state. Baring his teeth, fist clenched tightly around the handle of Akazoo's pistol, Link
let his arms rise, slowly leveling the pistol at the back of Ganondorf's head. It was time… he was
going to finish this, once and for all…

Ganondorf let out a slow, mirthless laugh. "Now, now, Hero. Let's not be getting ahead of ourselves."
Do not forget who holds the cards."

And with a deft movement, he lifted his arm, his small black handgun pointed straight towards Zelda. Tilting his head to the side, he cast Link an amused, yellow-eyed gaze from over his shoulder. "Drop the gun, Hero, if you wish your dear Princess to live."

Link felt a cold sweat break out over his body. Every facet of his mind was screaming at him to pull the trigger, to end this now, to let it just be over… but some part of him knew that even if he pulled the trigger first, one bullet wouldn't be enough to bring Ganondorf down, and his heart wouldn't let him do anything that put Zelda in danger. Protecting her was second-nature, more natural than breathing. It was his reason for being… And Ganondorf knew. It was his weakness. He was trapped.

He let his arm fall.

"Put it on the ground, Hero, and slide it over to me."

Growling furiously at his own ineptitude, Link complied stiffly. He kept his gaze averted as he kicked the tiny handgun towards his nemesis, too ashamed to look at Zelda and let her witness his incompetence.

"Good… Now, kneel." Link complied grudgingly. Ganon let a sinister smile ooze across his face, revealing sharp, fang-like teeth that glittered in the half-light.

"As I thought... You obey orders well, Hero. Submission looks good on you." And then he threw his head backward with a sudden bark of laughter.

Bristling indignantly, Link jerked his head up with a snarl, visibly seething. Ganondorf laughed all the harder.

Swiveling the office chair casually to the side, Ganondorf rose to his full, hulking height. Letting one hand trail languidly along the smooth surface of the Principal's desk, he slowly made his way around the large wooden monstrosity with deliberate footsteps, a light, satisfied smirk on his face; he ignored Link's pistol, which had come to rest harmlessly by the wall beneath one of the windows.

"It has been a long time, my old foe..." Ganondorf mused simply, coming to a halt in front of the desk, his arms folded impassively across his chest. His gun was held limply in one of his fists, but Link didn't delude himself into thinking that Ganondorf was any more vulnerable now than he had been when he'd had it pointing directly at Zelda only a moment earlier. Ganondorf the man was far more terrifying and lethal than any firearm.

"It is interesting, is it not, how often this situation plays out for you and I? Does it irk you now, Hero, knowing that the tables have turned on you? That this time, I shall emerge victorious, and it is you who shall be defeated? You, and that precious princess of yours."

He spat the word 'princess' out in much the same tone that a normal person might use to speak of something particularly foul. Link clenched his fists, his hands trembling from suppressed rage, but he said nothing. His mind was whirring, frantically searching for something, anything, to get himself and Zelda out of there.

"Indeed. It can only be called fate. Destiny has played you both into my hands so nicely... Do you not agree, Hero?"

Link said nothing, his jaw aching as he clamped his teeth shut tightly in anger, glaring up in silence at his captor.
"To think…” Ganondorf continued in amusement, seemingly unconcerned with Link's lack of response, "When I plotted out today's events, my goal was simply to seize the Triforce of Power for my own. Never had I dreamed that I would be met by the other two Triforce bearers as well. An oversight on my part, admittedly. I should have foreseen your arrival beforehand, Hero of Time…”

He shook his head slowly, a slight frown on his face, before pressing on.

"Nevertheless, despite my folly, my plan continued to advance perfectly- I had you in captivity, your friends lined up for slaughter, the entire school under my command… until that pest Smith and his officers barged in. Once I realized my objective was in jeopardy, I retreated to the office quickly to finish what I'd started: ending your life that I might finally seize Power and achieve my dream. Imagine my surprise and anger, Hero, when I arrived here in the main office only to discover you had managed to escape."

His eyes took on a dangerous glint, a disgusted look appearing on his face. "Foolish Sakon… Ever fretting and pandering to my every whim, yet he never realized how utterly beneath me simpering cockroaches like him truly are. I should thank you for finishing him off, Hero. You've saved me the trouble of disposing of him myself."

Link swallowed back bile. "You're sick…"

Ganondorf merely smirked, but otherwise ignored Link's comment as he continued his monologue.

"I was enraged. Despairing of ever finding you amidst the ruckus Smith was creating among my lackeys. It was then, in my moment of deepest despair, that the truth dawned upon me; that the only ones even remotely capable of upending my plans to seize the Triforce of Power were the bearers of Courage and Wisdom… and that you, Hero, were far more than you appeared."

“Enraged, I thought that I had once again been duped by my ancient foe, that the Goddesses had interfered to prevent me from obtaining my goal… Only who should appear before me at that crucial moment, just as I had lost all hope for victory…?"

Zelda made a faint groan-like sound, and Link demanded. "Let her go, Ganondorf! I'm your target! Leave her out of this! Just… Just do what you want with me and let her go!"

"Let her go?" Ganondorf laughed in surprise, "Have you not realized who she is, Hero? Have you not yet begun to understand why you felt so compelled to rush to her aid, despite how suicidal it sounded? Allow me to enlighten you, then. Look into her eyes and see, Hero, the face of your age-old companion, the Princess of Destiny!"

Slowly, Link turned his gaze away from Ganondorf's exultant facade and searched out the bound girl in the corner, his heart thundering loudly in his chest.

His mind was blank with shock. All he could think about was that moment earlier in the hall when he'd noticed the symbol on her hand… the same one he had on his, the one they shared with Ganondorf. If Ganondorf was really the King of Thieves reborn, and Link was supposedly the Hero of Time… Then could Zelda truly be the Princess of Destiny, the bearer of the Triforce of Wisdom?

The moment their eyes met, Link knew; it was true. The girl he'd had been crushing on since she'd knocked him off his feet, literally, the day earlier, the girl he'd given his sweater to, the girl he hadn't been able to stop thinking about even in the middle of a hostile undertaking, was the bearer of the Triforce of Wisdom. The Princess of Destiny. A direct descendant of the ancient Hyrulean Royal Family.
And yet, somehow, this news didn't come as much of a surprise to Link as he'd thought it would. It was as if deep down, a part of him had already known, had already recognized her for who she really was and attached itself to her because of it.

Zelda made no sound, but he could see the resignation on her face as she met Link's penetrating stare, and through the tears that still ran down her cheeks attempted to give Link a reassuring look. His heart went out to her, yearning to take her away from there, somewhere where she could be safe, where he could protect her…

Ganondorf watched their silent exchange with dark amusement. "How pathetic. You are a sentimental fool, Hero… But then, you always were. Your biggest weakness, it would seem. How easily you can be manipulated, so long as the life of someone you care for is at stake…"

Ganondorf's booming laughter resounded around the room again, and Link felt the bitter realization sinking in. Zelda… she was here because of him. It was his fault she was in danger. Just like Aryll before her, she'd been kidnapped and taken hostage as a means to lure Link into Ganondorf's trap; not because she was a bearer of the Triforce of Wisdom… It was only through coincidence that Ganondorf had managed to find out the truth about her.

"How wonderful the hand of fate can be in drawing together the pieces for its grand design? It's been said the Goddesses work in mysterious ways, but this… To think that my hostage would be the Princess of Destiny is too much! And now, finally, Power, Wisdom, and Courage have been gathered together once more!"

Thrusting his hand forward, he showed Link the back of his fist in triumph. Unlike before, when there was merely the vague outline of a triangle on his hand, Link could clearly see the golden Triforce symbol glowing with a dazzling light just as Link's was; only where Link's had the bottom-right triangle illuminated, Ganondorf's showed the top.

"Many times have we danced this eternal dance, played this game, accepted our roles in this celestial play…" Ganondorf whispered fervently, and Link felt his skin crawl as he realized that though his words were directed towards him, Ganondorf was really speaking to himself. "Many times have we met like this, garbed slightly differently perhaps, and in a different setting, but always the same…

“And yet, not this time. This time, I have you both before me, weakened and powerless. And once I defeat you, I shall take from you the last two pieces of the Sacred Triforce, and with it finally completed, I shall obtain ultimate power and become a God!"

Throwing his head back, Ganondorf roared with laughter and what faint light there was in the room seemed to diminish even further, as though his presence was making the world darker. A cold chill seemed to sweep over Link, permeating the room, sending shivers down his spine.

"You're mad if you think I'm going to let that happen," Link grated, and Ganondorf's grin turned sardonic.

"You don't have a choice, Hero. This time, I have the better weapon."

And suddenly, his gun was pointed at Link's head.

Link opened his mouth in alarm, but his airway seemed to have contracted. His mind went blank with surprise and terror as a cold sweat erupted all over his body.

A part of him wished desperately that Ganondorf would go back to talking and give Link more time to think of a way out. From the corner of the room, Zelda let out a sudden wail of fear as she
struggled against her bindings, but to no avail.

Ganondorf smiled cruelly, a murderous gleam in his yellow eyes.

"Goodbye, Hero," he said simply, and pulled the trigger.

Something pink seemed to flash on his gun, however, and the weapon clicked uselessly.

Link knelt there, eyes wide, hardly daring to breathe, his mind reeling. What… What had just happened? His gun hadn't worked? But how? And what was that odd flash of light?

Ganondorf, however, didn't appear the least bit perturbed. An amused, slightly surprised glint in his eyes, he turned slowly to face the bound Zelda, a cruel smile forming on his face.

"Well well…" he said softly, chuckling in dark amusement, "That was clever, Princess. To have stopped my gun like that, utilizing the magical talents that you haven't even begun to understand... Impressive."

Zelda, tear streaks on her face, still breathing heavily through her nostrils, fixed Ganondorf with a look of pure loathing.

"Still, I'm not picky," he continued lightly, taking a step toward her. "I can certainly kill you first if that's what you prefer."

Zelda's eyes seemed to pop out of her head as she struggled futilely against her bindings to get away from him, a frantic, strangled sob issuing from her throat.

At the sound of her distress, something in Link seemed to snap. With a feral growl, he quickly rose to his feet and charged, heedless of the danger, his only thought to protect Zelda.

Ganondorf barely even glanced behind him before scoffing, pivoting on one leg and delivering a powerful kick to Link's abdomen.

Link literally flew backward, landing on his back with an almighty crash, all of the air driven from his lungs. The world seemed to spin for a moment and he struggled to regain a sense of his surroundings. Arms wrapping protectively around his injured stomach, Link fought in vain for breath as he curled into the fetal position, pain coursing through his trembling frame, the prickly fibers of the carpet digging into the exposed skin of his forearms and cheek.

"Idiot boy…" he thought he heard Ganondorf spit contemptuously. "As if anyone could match me in strength."

Head swimming and eyes blurry, Link struggled through the pain to make his vision focus on something – anything – as he desperately fought to reclaim control over his tortured body. Still hazy, his gaze alighted on a bizarre vaguely-rectangular shape lying on the carpet just before him. Something seemed to tell him that he ought to know what this object was, but his pain-induced, oxygen-deprived mind simply refused to let him focus on anything other than the sheer agony his abdominals were currently experiencing.

Forcing his hand to move, he let his palm drag across the scratchy carpet towards the object, his fingers trembling, his head still swimming, convincing himself that if he could just grasp the object, he'd be able to reclaim his hold on reality, if only for a moment…

Across the room, he heard a muffled whimper of pain and a cruel, mocking burst of dark laughter. From the corner of his eye, he thought he saw Ganondorf bend over, seize Zelda by the scruff of
Link's sweater and lift her effortlessly into the air.

"Now, Princess… This is a moment I have been waiting for… for a very long time…"

The sound of Ganon's words sent hatred coursing through Link's body, and with one last desperate push, he felt his fingers brush against the cold metal object in front of him.

Cold metal object…

A gun! Link thought excitedly, not pausing for a moment to ask himself how a random weapon had shown up on the floor in front of him, only thinking of rescuing Zelda from Ganondorf's clutches. Grasping the object in his hand, he swiftly dragged it back towards him, struggling to get a feel for the odd, clunky shape…

It wasn't until he'd managed to pull the object directly in front of his face that he finally realized what it was, and he felt the last feeble tendrils of hope inside of him wither and die.

It was a stapler. The same stapler he'd dropped there earlier that day when Sakon popped out of nowhere and taken him by surprise.

Unbidden, the image of him holding the stapler aloft like a club when confronted by Sakon's gun came to his mind and Link groaned… or at least attempted a groan. With the lack of oxygen in his lungs, it came out more like a strangled cough.

It was over, then. With one kick, Ganondorf had beaten him. Any second now he'd finish what he'd started. He'd take the Triforce of Wisdom, and Zelda… Zelda would be dead. He failed her. He lost.

Clenching his fist around the office tool in despair, Link's tear-filled eyes landed on the bright Triforce insignia on the back of his hand. Anguished, he mentally railed against the marking, hating the symbol and everything it implied.

Triforce of Courage? Hero of Time? What did it matter? What did any of it matter if he couldn't save her! 'Blessing of the Goddesses'? If anything, the Triforce was a curse, singling him out for the slaughter; him and Zelda both. What good had it ever done for him?

As if in answer to his question, memories of him swinging the faux-potted plant over his head and wielding a fire extinguisher to fight off a small group of shooters came to his mind.

But how? Link raged mentally, whether to himself or the Goddesses or the Triforce he wasn't sure; the futility of his situation was bearing him down, crushing his spirit, destroying his will to go on. How am I supposed to fight Ganondorf without an actual weapon? I can't battle the wielder of the Triforce of Power with only a stapler! He has a gun! It's useless! This is impossible!

…Impossible?

It wasn't a voice exactly; more like a feeling, a memory, that surged through him, stilling his trembling limbs, opening his eyes wide with awe and wonder as a strange presence suddenly settled over him like a mantle.

And suddenly, Link remembered. Impossible? Had he not faced impossible situations before, and prevailed? Had he not scaled frozen mountains, spanned scorching deserts, traveled the darkest forests, dove into the deepest lakes, and explored the deadliest volcanoes? Had he not walked into Death's very home and returned alive? Had he not battled numerous foes, some more innumerable than the sand of the sea, others larger than life itself, and emerged victorious? And had he not battled and subsequently defeated Ganondorf more times and in more lifetimes than he could count?
He wasn't just Link; he was the Hero of Time, and while he may not have Ganondorf's raw power, he did have one thing his foe did not… He had courage. Courage – the will to face any danger or obstacle in spite of one's fear.

And for the Bearer of the Triforce of Courage… Nothing was impossible.

'So the question isn't 'can it be done,' the voice seemed to whisper to his subconscious, 'but rather, 'do you have the will to try?''

Zelda let out a muffled scream from across the room, and Link moved.

Clenching his fist around the stapler, Link felt sudden renewed strength flood through him, washing away his pain and fatigue. With a relieved gasp, he took in a great gulp of blessed air into his tortured lungs as he pushed himself slowly up onto all-fours, turning his gaze toward Ganondorf, determination steeling his gaze.

His Triforce was glowing like a tiny sun, but Link paid it no heed; a bizarre understanding had rapidly overcome him, and the symbol was suddenly both familiar and comforting, a trustworthy constant in his otherwise hectic existence. Thousands of feelings and images were flooding through his mind; memories of places and moments in hundreds of past lives that seemed foreign yet familiar all at once, too many to focus on at one time.

Link felt stronger than he ever had before; swifter, more agile, his body a lithe, nimble machine. The empowering force he'd felt earlier had now fully consumed him, and he rose from the ground not just as Link, but as Link – the Hero of Time. He was one now with his past lives with the power the Triforce of Courage granted him, and nothing could stand in his way. It was time to act.

Ganondorf was across the room, his back to Link, still holding Zelda up with one hand by the scruff of Link's green hoodie. Zelda's fear-filled gaze was locked on Ganon's face, tears streaming down her cheeks past the duct tape that covered her mouth as she struggled against her bindings, sobbing. Ganondorf's free hand was poised in the air, fingers extended like claws, the Triforce of Power shining ominously on the back of his hand.

As Link rose slowly to his feet, tugging on the base of the stapler so that it swung backward, extending its reach, the scene seemed to flicker just as it had earlier, and suddenly he was atop the highest tower of an old, abandoned fortress, the wind rustling his hair through an open window, carrying with it the familiar salty tang of the sea. Ganondorf stood before him, broad-shouldered and impossibly large beneath the moonlight, holding aloft the familiar struggling form of a petite blonde girl. Link grimaced darkly, hefting the weapon in his hand as he darted forward, desperate to save her. With a cry of rage, he swung the weapon horizontally towards the villains head.

"Flicker"

Ganondorf roared in pain, promptly dropping Zelda to the floor as he spun around to face Link, his hand clasped over the side of his face. Zelda hit the ground with a grunt, her head rebounding off the wall with a sickening thud.

"Curse you!" Ganondorf snarled, swinging his fist wildly in Link's general direction, forcing him to dance back a couple of spaces to avoid the blow. Gingerly, Ganon pulled his hand away, revealing his ear newly stapled to the side of his head.

Link grinned, holding his makeshift weapon at the ready. "It's a good look for you, Ganondorf. I think you should keep it."
Snarling, Ganondorf gradually began reaching his hand behind his back as he spat viciously, "I thought I'd put you in your place, boy."

"Well, I thought about it for a bit, but you just make beating you so hard to resist."

"Well, well," Ganon taunted in response, a demonic grin forming on his face, "tough words for one wielding a stapler."

"You always were too prideful," Link responded lightly, though on the inside all of his muscles had gone taut, ready to spring into action at any moment. "That was your weakness. You're so sure of your own strength that you never take into consideration the strength of others, those you consider beneath you. And every time, it's your undoing. It's pathetic."

"Pathetic, am I?" Ganondorf mused thoughtfully. "Well then, I suppose we'll simply have to put it to the test. Your so-called 'power' against my own."

"Bring it on," Link spat. And they charged.

Ganondorf pulled the handgun out of the waistband of his pants, jerking it forward and letting off a series of shots, the sound deafening in the confined room. Link, however, had already moved; diving forward as soon as he'd seen Ganondorf's arm start to pull forward, he rolled between Ganondorf and Sahasralah's desk, coming up on one knee just behind the taller man, slashing the stapler like a dagger, sending another staple into Ganondorf's lower back. As the man bellowed in rage and pain, Link quickly planted his hand on the ground, using it as a pivot to twist his body around and deliver a powerful kick to the back of Ganondorf's knee.

As Ganondorf toppled backward with a startled yelp, Link seized his opportunity. Rolling to the side to avoid being crushed, he quickly pounced on the other boy, trapping his gun-arm between his body and the floor, he hurriedly jabbed the stapler as many times as he could into the tender, exposed flesh of Ganon's under-arm and wrist. Ganon screamed in rage, quickly shoving Link off of him, but not before the damage had been done; the pain of being stapled repeatedly had loosened his grip on the gun just enough so that when Link was pushed off, he was able to tear the gun free of his grip.

Link's plan hadn't work quite as well as he had hoped, however; Ganon's shove had carried with it more force than he had anticipated, the result sending him slamming into the wall, knocking a picture frame off of its perch. Link kept his grip on the stapler with effort but the gun slipped free from his fingers, clattering against a chair leg and bursting apart, the magazine landing just beside Link's foot.

Staggering to his feet, Link squared off with his foe again, breathing heavily. He knew there was no point in going for the gun again; he had no idea how to reassemble a firearm, and even if he did, it wasn't like Ganondorf was going to wait for him to finish putting it together. Link's own pistol was lying forgotten on the other side of the room; it might as well be in Holodrum for all the good it did him.

With a grunt of annoyance, Ganondorf began picking the tiny bits of metal out of his arm.

"Not bad for a guy with a stapler," Link jabbed, feeling slightly better now that he was the only one with a weapon.

"Hmph. Don't get cocky, Hero. This isn't over."

And then from the inside of his coat, he drew a small black knife.
Link blanched, then stilled his features, adrenaline coursing through his body as he zeroed in on his foe, a thousand-lifetimes of battle experience flowing through him, giving him strength.

Ganondorf smirked, remarking casually, "Just like old times, eh?"

Then without warning, he slashed viciously at Link with his knife, the blade aiming straight for his throat.

As Link spun out of the way, leaping bodily over a chair to avoid Ganondorf's second blow and give himself more room to move, the memories and images that had been flashing randomly throughout his mind ever since he'd felt the strange presence earlier suddenly rose to the forefront, bubbling up inside of him. He wasn't entirely sure what was happening to him, but he knew that whatever it was, he couldn't hold it back anymore.

Darting quickly to the center of the room, Link spun around frantically, searching for his foe, only-

*Flicker*

-the room was too dark to see clearly, the residual shadow of Ganon's lair pervading his very mind, working in tandem with his own primal fears, making the very shadows around him seem to dance. His heart was pounding too loudly in his chest, his mind whirring too fast for rational thought, and he slashed wildly at the shadows, hoping by some miracle that his weapon would connect. From his side he heard a beastly roar and barely managed to avoid Ganon's sudden stab, pivoting on his heel on the filthy granite flooring. Leaping narrowly over a pit dark as midnight he struggled frantically for better footing.

Desperate for a counterattack, Link spun once more, swinging his weapon fiercely towards where he'd last seen his foe when to his immense horror-

*Flicker*

-Ganondorf caught his arm with one hand and with a devilish smirk twisted around, heaving Link upward and tossing him effortlessly across the room like a rag doll.

Link crashed loudly into a filing cabinet and pain exploded throughout his side. His mind was disoriented, struggling to fight past the memories that kept cropping up in his mind so he could focus on the battle at hand.

Certain that he'd broken a rib, Link struggled to rise, grasping wildly at the nearest object—a tall, free-standing metal lamp—and flinging it desperately at Ganondorf.

With an impatient sigh, Ganon caught the object in his free hand. Then, hefting it in his arms he swung it baseball style straight at Link's head. With a cry of alarm Link was forced to dip backward to avoid the blow, feeling the wind pass over his face as the-

*Flicker*

-Trident came within centimeters of his nose. Scrambling to the side, Link darted away from the wall, over the garish Triforce insignia that was printed on the floor. His footsteps echoed loudly off the gold tiles and the torches in the corners cast shadows in every direction; dancing shadows that seemed to flicker with malevolence, tricking Link's imagination into believing that his foe was everywhere at once.

Blinking hurriedly, Link shook his head in an effort to clear away the distracting thoughts, focusing on Ganondorf's massive, hulking form, the red cape billowing out behind him as he sneered coldly at
Link from across the antechamber.

Ganondorf swung his massive bladed weapon once more, but this time Link was prepared; ducking the blow, he darted quickly within Ganon's reach, jabbing him twice in the side with his own weapon. With a bellow of pain, Ganon swatted his arm towards Link's head, but once more Link rolled nimbly out of his way, coming up just in time to see Ganon turn and hurl the Trident in his direction.

*Flicker*

With a yelp Link dove frantically behind Sahasralah's desk for protection as the lamp narrowly missed him, exploding harmlessly against the wall, raining bits of metal down on a screaming Zelda.

"Coward!" Ganondorf boomed loudly, taunting Link. "Come out and face me like a man, Hero! Or are you too afraid?"

Scowling, Link wiped the beaded sweat from his forehead as he fought for breath, his heart hammering painfully in his chest. What was happening to him? It was as though memories from his past lives were merging together, coalescing into a terrifying montage of final showdowns between him and Ganondorf. Worst of all, they were distracting him, making it hard for him to tell if what he was seeing was really happening or just some figment of a long-forgotten battle.

Reaffirming his grip on the stapler, Link took a deep breath readied himself to face his enemy once more.

*Please, Goddesses, let the visions stop so I can focus on the battle at hand…*

His prayers, it seemed, were not answered.

Darting out from around the desk, the scene flickered again and suddenly he wasn't behind a desk, but a large chunk of rubble. Link swung his makeshift weapon in desperation, aware that attempting to defeat Ganondorf with his current tool was futile but pressing on anyway. The air was heavy with the acrid scent of smoke, stinging Link's eyes and choking his airway.

Ganondorf met Link's blow with one of his own, their weapons colliding and bouncing off of each other uselessly. Rolling to the side, Link made every effort possible to get behind his foe, hoping for a chance to strike him in his blind spot. His feet crunched noisily on the gravel and broken bits of stone below as lightning arced wildly overhead, the thunder booming with so much force that the very earth seemed to tremble with its might.

A muffled scream suddenly drew his attention, and he turned his head from side to side, desperately seeking out Zelda, making sure she hadn't been harmed. Ganondorf, however, took advantage of his distraction, aiming a savage slash at Link's arm.

The lightning flashed once again and the world seemed to hold its breath…

*Flicker*

Link stumbled back, clutching his right arm in agony as he gingerly examined the wound. The gash was long, but thankfully not very deep, and stretched from the apex of his deltoid down to the pit of his elbow. His shirtsleeve was rent in two, blood flowing freely down his arm, slick and wet and warm.

Ganondorf laughed in triumph, his voice nearly overriding Zelda's horrified squeak at the sight of Link's blood.
Enraged, Link charged Ganon once more, his stapler at the ready, but Ganondorf let loose another wild swipe with his knife, keeping Link at bay. Undeterred, Link charged again, repeatedly slapping at Ganon with his stapler, searching for an opening. For all of his desperation, however, his attacks were in vain; Link couldn't even tell if what staples he managed to get in were slowing him down any, Ganondorf's attacks as ferocious as ever. For every swing of Link's that wasn't parried by Ganon's knife, a staple entered Ganon's body, making his clothing stick to his body in odd places, but Ganon acted for all the world like he couldn't feel them at all.

Deciding it was time for a different tactic, Link moved further back, away from the desk, searching for space to move freely but before he could act Ganondorf surprised him with a lunge, his forearm slamming into Link's chest, sending Link stumbling backward. Twisting on the spot, Ganon followed up with a ferocious kick that would have put Link down in two seconds flat, but at the last moment-

_Flicker_

-Link ducked, rolling under the strike, popping up behind Ganondorf with a heroic cry as he leaped into the air, striking him on the back of the head with the butt of his weapon.

Ganondorf let out a roar of pain as he staggered forward, his free hand clutching at the back of his head, rage painted on his face. Link faced him, ready, ignorant of the rain that poured all around them. A torrential downpour seemed to be coming from the sky, as though the very sea itself was crashing down on top of them, soaking through their clothing, plastering Link's unruly blonde hair to his head.

Ganon lunged again, his heavy footsteps splashing in the numerous rocky puddles around them, slashing wildly with his blade, but Link sidestepped again, swiping at the larger man's arm, scoring a glancing blow on his shoulder.

Darting away swiftly before Ganondorf could retaliate, Link let out a sudden gasp of surprise as he slipped in one of the puddles, losing his footing and crashing to the ground with a pained "oof!", mud splattering everywhere, his weapon flying out of his hand.

_Flicker_

Rising onto all-fours, Link scrambled forward, searching desperately for the stapler when Ganondorf suddenly seized his leg, tugging him roughly backward across the scratchy carpet, leaving nasty rug burns on his chin and forearms.

Laughing in triumph, Ganondorf raised his knife high in the air, ready to stab, keeping the struggling Link in place with a vice grip on his ankle. At the last second Link twisted around and lashed out wildly with his free foot, catching Ganon just beneath the chin. His captor staggered backward with a curse, releasing his hold on Link's leg.

Scuttling backward like a crab, Link cast his eyes about wildly for his weapon, desperate to find it before Ganon recovered. A feminine grunt from behind him caught his attention and he turned his head just in time to see Zelda, her limbs still bound with tape, twist her body and kick the wayward office tool, sending it skittering across the carpet towards Link.

Sending her a brief look of gratitude, Link snatched it up hurriedly and turned to look back across the-

_Flicker_
-field towards his archenemy, the world seeming to glow in the orange haze of twilight as the sun set off on the horizon. The air was warm and humid, the sweet scent of grass thick in the air as the distant sound of crickets and cicadas echoed throughout the land, ignorant of the battle for life just before them.

Ganondorf, on his part, looked livid. Snarling venomously down at Link, he roared in rage, "Enough! Die, Hero!", and charged, putting the full force of his might behind one final stab with his blade.

Link didn't have a lot of time to react. Struggling to rise to his feet, he barely managed to grasp his weapon in both hands before Ganondorf's body collided ferociously with his own. At the last second, Link took a chance… and managed to catch Ganon's blade with his own.

The two stood like that for a moment, locked in fierce combat, faces inches from each other, weapons connected, each struggling with all of their might to force the other one back.

"Do you really think you're stronger than me, Hero?" Ganondorf grunted, confidence at his assured victory painted on his face. "Me? The King of Thieves? The Emperor of Darkness? The bearer of the Triforce of Power? You honestly believe you can defeat me?"

Link could feel his boots slowly begin to slide backward in the loose dirt and grass, Ganondorf's strength beyond him. Looking up into the feral, yellow-eyed stare of the monster before him, Link answered truthfully.

_Flicker_

"I know I can."

Ganondorf grunted darkly, a look of fierce determination on his face as he prepared himself to use the last of his strength to push Link back. Link, however, had something else in mind.

Right as Ganondorf moved to push forward, Link willingly stopped resisting, allowing Ganondorf to push him to the floor, rolling neatly onto his back. Ganondorf let out a cry of surprise as he fell forward onto Link, his hands still holding the knife that was trapped in Link's stapler. Utilizing the momentum of Ganon's would-be lunge, Link hiked his legs up between himself and Ganondorf and as they fell back he kicked out with all of his might, sending Ganondorf flipping over him, crashing into Sahasralah's desk.

Scrambling to his feet, Link managed to pick himself up just before the disoriented Ganondorf. Closing the stapler with a snap, he seized the office tool in both hands and, just as Ganondorf managed to rise on one knee, his hands searching frantically for the knife he dropped, Link let out a roar and slammed the butt of the stapler into Ganon's temple with the last of his strength.

And just like that, Ganondorf fell, his eyes rolling back into his head, the knife tumbling uselessly to the floor beside his unconscious body.

Link stood there for a moment, gasping for breath, his limbs trembling from the adrenaline rush, not trusting what his eyes were telling him had just happened.

He'd won? Ganondorf was down? It was over? His entire body ached, his ribs burned, his arm stung as blood still dripped from his fingers, but still, he didn't sit down or move away, not trusting himself to move his gaze from the unmoving figure on the floor.

A soft whimper from the right managed to slice through his stunned reverie, and with a start, he remembered the girl in the corner.
"Zelda!" Link blurted out,dropping the stapler and rushing to her side. Dropping to his knees he slid the last few feet, coming to a rest beside her. Tenderly, he lifted her up into a sitting position so her back rested against the wall.

"Oh, Zel... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry..." Link murmured softly, gently cupping her face with his hands, wiping her tears away with his thumbs. She was still trembling, but her crying at least seemed to have stopped for a moment. Gently brushing the hair out of her eyes, Link was momentarily breathless; even beaten, bruised, and bound by a maniac, her beauty was undiminished.

She made an impatient grunting noise, and Link jumped with a start. "Oh! Right, sorry! Here, let me just..."

Delicately, he grabbed the edge of the duct tape that covered her mouth and slowly peeled it off, trying his hardest not to pull it too fast and hurt her.

"Ow..." Zelda muttered softly once the tape was fully removed, wincing as she took a moment to work her jaw, stretching her tired facial muscles.

"There. Better?" he asked somewhat breathlessly, still exhausted from his showdown with Ganondorf.

"Much better. Thank you," she murmured in reply, and then for a moment, they both were at a loss for words.

Swallowing roughly, Link's gaze met her own and for a moment, he was paralyzed; her brilliant violet irises still sparkled with tears that were waiting to fall, but the only emotions he could see reflected in them were slight confusion and awe. Slowly she looked him over, wincing every time her eyes alighted on a new injury.

"Your arm... does it hurt?" she asked hesitantly, and Link shrugged, trying to appear masculine and tough so as to not worry her.

"Not too bad. It doesn't really sting anymore."

She looked unconvinced, so Link decided to change the subject. Casting his eyes around for something to say, he finally noticed her limbs were still bound behind her back.

"Oh crap! Hold on, let me get you free."

She chuckled lightly at his flustered expression but allowed him to turn her to the side and start working at the duct tape that bound her wrists.

"Link..." Zelda asked softly as he withdrew the screw he'd used to cut Kafei free earlier from his pocket and began hacking at her bindings.

"Hmm?" he grunted in response, his attention focused mainly on trying not to accidentally nick her wrist in his zealous efforts to liberate her limbs.

"...Why did you come for me?"

Link hesitated, suddenly feeling very hot and uncomfortable, not daring to look into her eyes. The problem was, he wasn't entirely sure how to answer her question.

Why had he come? Because as the Hero of Time it was his duty to protect the Princess of Destiny? It was a valid answer, perhaps, and one he knew she'd accept without comment, only... He knew deep
down that wasn't the truth. At least, not all of it.

"Because…" he started, trailing off awkwardly as the words needed to explain his motives died on his tongue. What was he supposed to say? What could he possibly say to convey exactly what he wanted to tell her?

With a snap, he tore through the last bit of tape that bound her hands behind her back.

"Ah, there we go!" he said quickly, hoping it would distract her enough to allow him to change the subject to something less dangerous. Gently peeling the tape off of her skin, he let her sit back against the wall as he pulled her legs forward and began attacking the tape that bound her feet while she gently began massaging her wrists.

"Link?" she asked again, and Link studiously ignored her, feeling his face start to heat up.

"Link," she repeated, this time more forcefully, gently taking his chin in her hand and tilting his head up to meet her gaze. Her eyes, so kind and concerned, seemed to pierce into his very soul and he soon found himself swallowing thickly in an effort to clear his oddly obstructed airway. "Why…?"

"Because you matter to me," he blurted out before he could stop himself, his voice sounding raspy and unnatural to his ears.

Zelda blinked in surprise, her cheeks turning pink. "$\ldots$ what?"

"You matter to me," Link repeated softly, deciding that if he was going to do this, he might as well go all the way. "$\ldots$ For some reason, I can't really begin to explain, you're important to me, and I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you. And maybe it's because of who we are; you the Princess of Destiny and me the Hero of Time, and maybe it's just some aspect of our former lives that carried over, but… I don't think so.

"Before I knew anything about this, the Triforce and Destiny and everything, you were already important to me… Or well, I already cared about you. Which sounds, I mean, just… absolutely insane, right? I mean, what kind of person risks their lives for some random person they only just met? N-not that you’re just some random person – I mean, I guess you are, technically, but I mean, in spite of the fact that we’ve only actually spoken like, three times in the last 24-hours, you’ve somehow become, like, really important to me, y’know? Like, I was really worried about you, and I was scared that you were hurt, and I guess I’ve just been thinking about you a lot, and—"

Link cut off with a strangled choke, his face turning beet red as he realized what he’d just said. Utterly mortified, he turned his attention back to hacking through the tape that restrained her ankles, inwardly hating himself for not keeping his stupid mouth shut.

That was stupid, he decided bitterly. He was stupid. She was probably totally freaked out right now; emotionally unstable after what had just happened to them, and when he's supposed to be supportive and comforting he decides to lay $that$ on the table instead? Forget the fact that he just saved her life, he wouldn't be surprised if she never wanted to talk to him again. Since when had he become such a scatter-brained idiot around girls, anyway? What was wrong with him? What, was he 12?!

Ugh… Face down the most evil villain of all time? Sure. Admit his feelings to the girl he liked? … He'd almost rather face the villain again. Almost.

For a moment, the awkward silence seemed to stretch out between them indefinitely, making Link hate himself even more. Clearing his throat, he gave the screw one last jerk, severing the last strand of duct tape and freeing Zelda at last.
"So… yeah," Link said blankly, tossing the screw off to the side. "I guess… You're free, so… Let's just hurry up and get out of here, and then…"

Link kept his eyes averted throughout his whole awkward speech, not daring to look at the girl in front of him, so naturally, he jumped in surprise when he felt her small, delicate hands reach out and grasp his own.

Startled, he gazed down at their linked hands, his mind not fully comprehending what he was seeing. Slowly, Zelda let her thumb slide across the Triforce symbol on the back of his hand before giving them both a reassuring squeeze.

Hesitantly, Link let his eyes travel from her delicate hands up her arms, past Link's own favorite green hoodie until at last, with slight trepidation, his gaze met hers. To his immense surprise, Link could see the exact same fear and uncertainty he felt reflected in her perfect irises.

Zelda swallowed uncomfortably before murmuring, "Link, you… You're important to me too…"

And then suddenly, without warning, she was moving forward, her head tilting down slightly to meet his, her golden hair falling in cascading rivulets in front of her face.

Link felt his breath hitch, his mind going completely blank in shock. He couldn't stop glancing down at her perfect lips as they slowly grew closer, reveling in her warmth, not able to believe that he'd actually done it; saved her from Ganondorf's clutches and somehow managed to win her over.

Things, it seemed, were finally looking up…

The only warning he had was the slight flicker of motion reflected in Zelda's eyes before she suddenly surged forward, tackling him to the ground and rolling to the side. Not even a second later there was a tremendous crash like a miniature explosion had gone off and Link was showered with splinters and bits of wood.

Struggling to pick himself up with Zelda's weight atop his chest, Link stared in stupefaction at where he had been kneeling just a moment earlier. The remains of Sahasralah's desk lay in pieces all around his half of the office, a massive hole in the wall right where Zelda had been sitting. If she hadn't pushed him down when she had…

Jerking his head to the side, Link felt his stomach drop out… for there, standing in the center of the office right where the desk had been a moment earlier, stood Ganondorf, his chest heaving, his eyes glowing with murderous rage.

No… they were glowing. Literally. They were two yellow orbs of sinister light, granting Ganon the image of an inhuman monster.

"Did you think it was over, Hero?" Ganondorf spat, his voice hoarse and grating, his entire frame trembling with rage.

Link said nothing, slowly rising to his feet, his arms wrapped protectively around Zelda.

"Did you think, perhaps, that I could be so easily defeated? That you had won, and you and your precious Princess could waltz off and live happily ever after? Well, think again, Hero! Do you not know who I am? I am Ganondorf, the King of Thieves, the bearer of the Triforce of Power! I am immortal!"

And with that, he thrust his arms out to either side, letting out a roar of rage. From his body, something dark seemed to burst forth, like a shockwave of pure evil. Link braced himself a moment before it hit him, but he and Zelda were still slammed back against the wall by its sheer force.
Like a dark wind, the malevolent aura exuded from his body sent objects in the room flying; the splinters from the ruined desk were whipped about in the maelstrom, pictures torn violently from the wall, the filing cabinet toppling over like a domino. With the sound of shattering glass, the windows were blown apart, shards raining down three stories along with the tattered remains of the thick plastic blinds that had covered them.

The sudden sunlight that exploded into the room seemed to sear Link's eyes, blinding him, and he struggled to blink through the tears as his vision adjusted to the scene before him. Ganondorf stood tall and impassive before the now-open windows, his figure a dark silhouette before the blinding sunshine, his eyes still glowing like monstrous yellow orbs.

Releasing Zelda, Link staggered forward against the dark pressure, determined to finish Ganondorf once and for all. Only too late did he remember that he'd dropped his stapler earlier and it was nowhere to be seen, presumably blown away by the force of Ganondorf's radiating evil energy.

Ganondorf let out a mirthless chuckle as Link slowly advanced, decidedly weaponless, his hair whipping about in the wind. And then suddenly…. the energy stopped. All was quiet. There wasn't a sound apart from the slight breeze blowing in through the now-open windows…

"Link, watch out!" Zelda suddenly shrieked, and Link started, barely moving in time to avoid what would have been a fatal slash to the throat.

Stumbling across the carpet, Link dove again to avoid a second stab, his mind reeling frantically. When had Ganondorf gotten so fast? It was as though he were fighting an entirely different person than the man he'd battled before. It took every ounce of skill and speed he possessed to avoid Ganondorf's strikes, but he knew he couldn't keep this up forever. Sooner or later, something was going to go wrong.

And he was right. Not even a moment later, Link moved to fake past another of Ganondorf's strikes when suddenly his free arm caught him around the chest. Before Link could react, Ganondorf let out a bark of triumph and slammed Link against the wall beside one of the windows, his hands tightening around Link's throat.

"And now, Hero…" Ganondorf growled, baring his fang-like teeth in glee, "We end this…"

"No!" Zelda cried out, charging forward recklessly.

Without even glancing backward, Ganondorf held up a hand and a wall of dark energy seemed to spring forward, slamming into Zelda and knocking her backward with a strangled cry of anguish.

Link tried to call out to her, to make sure she was ok, but Ganondorf's hold was restricting his airway. His fingers clawed frantically at his captor's arm, attempting to pry his hand free, but to no avail. He was simply too strong.

Before Ganondorf could turn his attention back to Link, however, there was a sudden zing-like sound that echoed throughout the room. Ganondorf's face grew impatient and he turned his attention out the window where he glared down with a menacing expression on his face.

There soon came another zing, followed by another, and it took Link a second to realize what they were- police snipers! When Ganondorf had blown the windows out he'd given the police a clear view of what was happening upstairs! The bullets flew through the window, lodging themselves harmlessly in the ceiling, each one seeming to barely miss Ganondorf.

Ganon looked unimpressed. Waving his hand across the open expanse, a wall of dark energy seemed
to stretch across the hole, covering the entire window. The zing came again, but this time the bullet bounced harmlessly off of the wall of energy Ganondorf had erected.

"Now, where were we..." Ganondorf chuckled evilly. Link fixed him with the most threatening look he could manage in his oxygen-deprived state, but he was quickly starting to lose his ability to focus, black dots exploding all over his vision.

"Ah yes. Goodbye, Hero."

And just like that, Ganondorf's knife pierced the soft flesh of Link's belly, and he released his hold on his throat.

Link slumped back against the wall in shock, pain radiating from his naval, acute agony such as he had never before experienced. He struggled to inhale through his newly- liberated windpipe, but his body didn't seem to be responding to his commands.

He'd been stabbed... He'd been stabbed? This wasn't supposed to happen, he was the Hero! He wasn't supposed to lose! There had to be some sort of mistake!

But even as his mind struggled to grasp this foreign concept, he knew with a sinking certainty that it was true. He was dying. Link Hero was dying. His hands clasped feebly over the hilt of the dagger still protruding from his naval, his fingers trembling, not fully responding to his commands. He struggled to get a grip on the handle but it was too slippery with blood; his blood, scarlet and wet, dripping all over his pants, pooling on the ground below his feet...

It was over. He was going to die.

Somewhere in the haze of pain, he saw Ganondorf stride across the room to Zelda's body, lifting her off the floor and dragging her across the room.

"Now, Princess... Shall I end your life in front of the window, so Smith and all his flunkies can see just how hopeless defying me really is?"

The part of Link that was still coherent struggled to move, but he was slowly losing all the feeling in his legs. There was nothing he could do to save her... he watched in agony, his vision starting to blur, as Ganondorf positioned himself directly in front of the windows, Zelda's sobbing, struggling form held in his grasp.

"Do not worry, Princess," Ganon said with mock sympathy, "You will be joining your beloved Hero soon."

And he held his hand out before her face, a small ball of black energy forming in his palm. Zelda screamed again, the sound of her terror spurring Link on in his struggle to maintain consciousness, but it was hopeless.

There was no way he could stem the blood flow, no way to return strength to his limbs, no way to save the girl he cared for. It was over. He was done.

There was nothing he could do. It was impossible.

And then, unbidden, the words seemed to spring back into his mind from earlier.

...Impossible?

And he remembered...
It's not a question of if it can be done…

But rather, are you willing to try? The strange voice whispered to him once more.

The Triforce insignia on the back of his hand flared once more, and Link made the decision. He was going to die, yes; there was nothing he could do about that. But he was going to make sure he took Ganondorf with him if it was the last thing he did.

Tightening his hold on the knife, Link clenched his teeth and squeezed his eyes as tight as he could, trying not to groan as he concentrated every ounce of his will-power to one simple task: pulling the knife back out.

Nothing in his life could have ever prepared him for this; the agony was so intense, so sickening, that he nearly lost consciousness. His hands were still trembling, and added to the slipperiness of the handle, the process was beyond laborious. Before the entire blade cleared his abdomen, the blood flow increased dramatically, and by the time he had the knife gripped in his shaky fist, it seemed to be flowing out of him in a stream.

Knowing he was swiftly running out of time, Link struggled to take his first step forward, toward Ganondorf, but his feet still weren't exactly responding to his commands, and he ended up half stepping/half stumbling forward. Pushing himself away from the wall, he staggered toward his foe, his entire body trembling, a cold chill sinking in, fingers starting to go numb…

Zelda noticed him first. Her eyes, tear-filled and panic-stricken, noticed the movement over Ganondorf's shoulder and widened in shock when she recognized who it was. Ganondorf, taking note of her reaction, glanced curiously over his shoulder.

"What the-?" he snarled, disbelief evident on his face, dropping Zelda unceremoniously and turning his full attention toward Link.

He was too late.

Charging the last few feet, Link tackled Ganondorf… or rather, stumbled and fell into, but the effect was essentially the same. Link's momentum knocked Ganondorf off balance, and together, the two teenagers teetered precariously on the edge of the third-story window. Desperate to ensure Ganondorf's defeat, Link threw caution to the wind and, utilizing the last of his strength, buried the knife in the gap between two of Ganondorf's ribs.

The taller boy let out a roar of agony, and then together the two Triforce bearers toppled out the window.

At the last second, Zelda darted forward with a terrified cry, snagging Link's arm and ripping him away from Ganondorf.

And Ganondorf fell, his scream fading away until it abruptly cut off with a sickening thud.

Link hung there for a moment, his eyes hazy with pain and blood loss, staring blankly up at the beautiful blonde girl above him, her frame quivering with the effort of holding on to the larger boy, her hair whipping wildly about in the wind. She had one arm clinging to the wall, the other clamped tightly around Link's wrist, her face a mask of emotion and desperation.

Even in Link's weakened, near-dead state, he could tell; Zelda couldn't last much longer. Even if she had the strength to hold him, she'd never be able to get him back inside the window. To make matters worse, Link's hands were coated in blood from his stab wound and, try as she might to hold on, he was slowly slipping through her fingers.
"I won't let you go, Link…" Zelda called desperately, her voice choked with tears and strained with effort.

Slowly, Link shook his head. Every second she spent clinging to him she was in danger of falling out herself. He was dying anyway… she needed to let him go…

"I won't…"

Her grip had slid past his wrist; any second now…

"No…"

He was down to his fingers…

"Please…"

"Let me go," Link gasped, his voice barely audible over the wind.

"No!"

"Zelda…"

"No, Link, I can… I can pull you back up, I-"

"No…"

"I won't let you go!"

Link shook his head resignedly, a sad smile on his face as his vision slowly clouded over, and then her grip finally gave away.

And he was falling, falling, the wind whistling through his hair, his body tumbling over itself, Zelda's scream piercing through his mind as his thoughts slowly faded to nothing, and then there he was, lost in a world of bright white light, warmth enveloping him, a vaguely familiar verdant figure coming toward him, her arms outstretched, and a gentle whisper of "You did well, my son…"

And then he was gone.
Interlude with a Goddess

The world was green.

Well… Perhaps a more accurate description would be 'the world was various shades of green, mixed with some browns and yellows and a few shades of red', but that was a bit much to process at the moment, so he decided to stick with the more simple 'green'.

Link found himself in the middle of a forest clearing, surrounded by life. He wasn't sure where he was or how he came to be there, but for the moment he was too distracted by the breathtaking scenery to care much.

Trees, some young and short, some ancient and as tall as the sky itself, rose up all around him out of the rich, chocolate ground. The grass ran wild and untamed as far as his eyes could see, dotted with dandelions and the occasional wildflower, vines crawling up the trunks of weathered oaks and moss dotting the tops of ancient boulders. The air smelled fresh and clean, rich with the scent of forest air that he had loved so much as a child when his grandfather had taken him and his sister out to the mountains to play and explore…

Something wasn't quite normal, however.

The light that illuminated the woods… It seemed to glow with an ethereal quality, making everything it touched feel fey and magical, and yet Link couldn't tell where the light was coming from. There was no sun in the sky; rather, the sky was one endless sheet of glowing gold without a cloud in sight. The light seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere at once, eliminating the shadows that ought to have existed. The result was a strange loss of depth perception, making it difficult for Link to tell exactly how far away anything actually was.

Also… there were the glowing balls of light.

All around the woods, hundreds of thousands of tiny glowing balls of light flitted and floated their way in between the trees; they flew in packs or else drifted alone, some alighting on the tips of flowers and others on the ends of tree branches. They chased each other around over fallen logs and under the boughs of trees, racing between the rocks and over the streams and all across the meadow, bobbing and weaving and dodging and frolicking in an all-around dizzying performance.

When the overall oddness of the situation finally seemed to catch up with him, Link staggered back weakly, his mind reeling.

"That's it," he muttered aloud, feeling dazed. "I'm dead."

A frenetic eruption of giggles had him whirling around on the spot in alarm, throwing his hands up defensively, waiting to be attacked by whoever had crept up so silently behind him.

What he found, however, was not what he was expecting.

"Dead?" a little girl asked, grinning up at him in dimpled amusement, her hands interlocked behind her back. "Why would you say something silly like that?"

"I, um…” Link spluttered, momentarily stymied. The girl standing before him was arguably the most peculiar thing he'd ever seen.

She was short and wiry, with large, twinkling eyes and an omnipresent smile, complete with an
adorable dimple. She wore a simple faded white shirt and a pair of unassuming brown pants that cut off mid-calf, below which her feet were completely bare, her toes wiggling playfully in the dirt. Her hair was at least a dozen different shades of green, tied back in two verdant pigtails on either side of her head that streamed down past her shoulders and swayed playfully in the wind. Around her neck hung a flute made of hollowed reeds suspended on a thong of worn leather. Going by her appearance, if Link hadn't known any better he would have guessed she was about nine or ten.

There was something about her eyes, though… The dark, rich green of moss; they twinkled with merriment and joy, and yet… There was something deep and unfathomable about them, something vast and knowing that made him shiver uncomfortably. And in a way, she frightened him.

"Um…?" The girl parroted back to him playfully, and he came back to himself with a rough jolt.

"Um… I, uh… I'm sorry. Are you saying I'm not dead?" he asked hesitantly, deciding that wherever he was and whoever she was, he clearly had no idea what was going on and needed to rectify that immediately.

The girl put on a pensive frown at his question and cocked her head to the side thoughtfully.

"Hmm…" she hummed, sucking her lips in and giving him a studious look. Without warning she stepped forward, violating his personal space and startled him by reaching up with both hands and grabbing his cheeks, squishing them around.

"…Nope, you don't feel very dead," she stated, her tone matter-of-fact as she pulled his cheeks apart painfully. Leaning forward, she gave an audible sniff and said, "You don't smell very dead either. Looks like you're still alive to me."

Flustered, Link stepped back from the strange girl and said, awkwardly, "Er… great. Thanks. Who are you exactly?"

At this, the girl simply gave a knowing smile and answered, "You keep asking the silliest questions, Hero. You know me."

Link gave her a blank look, resisting the urge to reply with something like 'Um, no I don't actually', and waited for her to elaborate. Instead, she held her arms aloft and twirled around, giggling as a sudden breeze kicked up, rustling through the trees and grass and whipping her hair about.

"Come on, Hero!" she called out, pausing in her revelry to shoot him a cheerful look before skipping off into the woods, "Don't just stand there, walk with me!"

Link gave a resigned sigh; clearly, he wasn't going to be getting any easy answers from her. Breaking into a trot, he headed off after the small, strange girl, following her between the trunks of massive trees and down a large grassy hill. The girl was prancing gleefully ahead of him, giggling occasionally as she twirled about, her braids bouncing along behind her as the tiny faerie lights swirled around her, seemingly rejoicing in her presence.

After a moment, Link began to notice that something about him felt odd. His clothing felt heavier than he remembered. Glancing down, he was momentarily surprised to find that his outfit had been completely altered.

Where before he'd been wearing his classic dirty skater shoes, his baggy jeans and his black 'Skull Keeta' T-shirt, he now had a whole new wardrobe. On his feet, he bore well-worn, sturdy leather boots that reached all the way up to his knees. Beyond that, he had on light khaki pants of a material he didn't recognize, though was surprisingly comfortable.
His shirts were the strangest; he had on two— one, a white long-sleeve turtleneck with what felt like lace around the collar, and the other a large, baggy green short-sleeved thing (the word tunic came strangely to mind) that extended down below his waist to about mid-thigh and was surprisingly heavy. On his hands, he had some nice, sturdy gauntlets that reached almost to his elbows, heavily padded and complete with finger holes. To complete the bizarre ensemble he had on a wide leather belt with a large golden buckle cinched about his waist, and a floppy green hat sat perched upon his head.

Strangely enough, he felt right in this outfit, almost like he was born to wear it. Something was missing, however; some part of him wasn't complete… And yet try as he might, he couldn't put his finger on what it was.

It took him a moment to realize he'd lost sight of the little girl. Scowling to himself for not paying attention he trudged on, careful not to tread on any of the flowers or run into any of the strange glowing lights. Just when he was beginning to despair of ever finding her, he heard it; the light, playful sound of a pan flute echoing from a clearing just ahead.

He found her soon thereafter, perched primly atop a boulder, holding the flute daintily up to her lips as she played a quick, lively tune that made the strange glowing lights seem to dance around her excitedly. As he approached her, panting slightly, they scattered, hiding out amongst the trees and bushes that surrounded the clearing.

Momentarily distracted by their beauty, he asked, "What are they?"

"Fairies, silly," she replied, in the tone of one explaining something incredibly obvious. Letting her flute drop so that it swung once more on the thong around her neck, she rested her chin in her hands and observed Link with a quiet eagerness.

"Fairies…" Link said softly, awe and wonder filling his voice as he turned in place slowly and examined the lights with newfound interest. "Fairies… what kind of place is this?"

He had meant it more as a rhetorical question, but she answered just the same.

"This," she said, leaning back and holding her arms out above her, "is a special place. A silent place. A Sacred place. This is the world between our worlds, Hero, where the Golden Power was said to once reside."

"The… Golden Power?" Link repeated, feeling suddenly apprehensive.

"Yes, Hero," she said quietly, beaming at him. "A piece of which you now bear, as is your right."

Slowly, Link lifted his right hand and stared at the golden insignia emblazoned on the back of his gauntlet.

"The Triforce…" he breathed, hardly daring to believe what he was hearing.

The girl giggled again, seemingly glad that he'd come to the correct conclusion. Hopping down off the rock with a flourish, she turned and began twirling around the clearing again, pausing only to leap atop a fallen log and begin walking along it with her arms outstretched like a trapeze artist.

"But then…" Link said, following after her at a distance. "But then that means that… that this is the Sacred Realm."

"Yep!" the girl chirped brightly, giggling as a number of fairies alighted on her arms, one going so far as to tickle her nose.
Link was floored. "But..." he spluttered, his mind reeling at the implications. "But this... I mean... It's not... how did I get here?"

"I brought you here," the girl answered, stepping down off the log and turning to face him. The fairies who'd been hitching a ride vanished into the trees as if sensing the shift in mood. "I felt that my sisters and I owed you an explanation and a warning."

"You..." Link replied slowly, trying in vain to process the information. "Your sisters... Are you a spirit?"

The sudden feeling of dread that had surged inside of him at the thought all but vanished at the sound of her light, infectious laughter.

"A spirit? No, not really." And once again, she turned her deep, unsettling eyes on him. "Think, Hero. You know me. You, the mortal who perhaps understands best of all the things I stand for."

He stared at her for a moment, uncomprehendingly, until with a start he felt the Triforce on his hand begin to glow. Holding his hand up, he examined the symbol with consternation, watching the golden triangle on the bottom-right side begin to glow with particular fierceness, burning the image into his mind.

A thought occurred to him, then; one so outlandish, so absurd that under normal situations he wouldn't have spared it a moment's notice and yet... deep, deep inside him, he knew it to be true. He suddenly felt faint.

"You're the Goddess Farore," he whispered, hoping with all his might that he was wrong.

In response to his statement, she merely smiled knowingly.

The shock of the revelation was too great for Link. His knees gave out, and he landed heavily on his backside on the soft grassy ground. Drawing his knees up under his chin, he placed his hands on either side of his head and shook it frantically, his breathing erratic.

"No, no, no, this is crazy, I'm crazy, I'm-! This is a dream! Yes, a dream, I'm dreaming, this is all a dream and I'm going to wake up soon and it'll be just like it never happened..."

Farore giggled again. "This is no dream, Hero."

"It has to be!" he blurted out, his eyes wild, pointing his finger at her accusingly. "You're just a kid!"

She cocked her head to the side once again, as though considering his words. In a flash her appearance changed to the form of a beautiful woman in a resplendent emerald dress, the viridian hair flowing down her back threaded with wildflowers before, in the blink of an eye, flashing back to the appearance of a child.

"I am what I am, Hero," she said, stepping in front of him, heedless of his gaping expression. "My spirit is invoked in all that I represent. In the heart of the forest, in the soul of the wind," as she said it, a breeze picked up in the clearing, touching everything in a moment and then vanishing without a trace, "and even in the innocence of a child.

"I represent life; the flow, the change, the chaos. In the beginning, it was mine to create and even now it is my domain. The movement, the progression, the regression- all is reflective of me. All life forms owe their existence to me, and so I serve them also. I am the mother of all; I am Farore."

And just like that, she sat herself cross-legged on the dirt in front of him.
Link blinked a half-dozen times, then slowly righted himself, crossing his legs and placing his arms in his lap hesitantly, feeling for all the world like he was back in grade school. Clearing his throat roughly, Link struggled to accept the reality that he was face to face with a Goddess and formulate his thoughts accordingly, just in case she could read them or something… which, now that he thought about it, she probably could. He shivered involuntarily.

"…why have you brought me here?" he asked again, his voice coming out hoarse and shaky. He couldn't seem to swallow past the lump in his throat.

"I told you, Hero. I brought you here because there is much I need to tell you. Yet… I perceive you have questions of your own. That is fine; we are beyond the scope of time in this place, and I will permit you to ask. However, know this: there is much that I cannot tell you, Hero. There are some things you need to discover on your own. Now, ask."

Link hesitated, staring at the body of the young girl before him knowing that inside was a Goddess older than time itself. Her childlike countenance from earlier seemed to have faded, even her voice sounded different; older and more mature. It occurred to him then that one wrong move, one false step, and she could potentially erase him from existence entirely. Not particularly comforting.

Working the moisture back into his dry mouth, he asked, "May I ask why?"

"Why?" Farore echoed, tilting her head to the side again so that her braids swayed in the breeze.

"Yes, why. Why do the Goddesses always choose me? Why am I the one who always has to suffer and bleed and risk my life to stop Ganondorf and save Hyrule? I only have a handful of fuzzy memories from my past lives, but I know that much is true. Why me?"

Farore seemed to consider his question for a moment before asking rhetorically, "Would you rather leave your fate in the hands of another?"

Link thought about that for a moment, then conceded, "Maybe not, but that doesn't really answer my question. I mean, you're a Goddess; couldn't you have stopped Ganondorf on your own? Prevented all the wars and deaths that he's caused over the years? I just don't understand why you'd abandon us like that."

For a moment, Link thought he'd gone too far. The deep, knowing look in Farore's moss-green eyes turned indignant, even reproachful, and Link was certain she was going to turn him into a rat or a ferret or else cause him to spontaneously combust as divine retribution for his insolence.

He did not, however, expect her to hang her head in sorrow, her shoulders slumped. All around her, the trees seemed to droop along with her, the strange source-less golden light dimming along with her mood.

"What would you have us do, Hero? We cannot, as a rule, interfere directly with the lives of mortals. It is why we prepared the Golden Power for you in the first place; that, if the need for our help would arise, one who was worthy might touch it, and with it have their heart's desire granted by our power and bring an age of prosperity unto the people. That there is evil in the world is a truth that cannot be undone, even by one such as I, for a world without evil is a world in which there can be no good. They are two halves of the same coin. One cannot exist without the other."

"And so what?" Link growled, suddenly angry, ignoring the tiny voice of reason in his head that was attempting to remind him he was speaking with a Goddess. "So whenever there's a problem, you just send me in and expect me to clean up the mess? Never mind that I'm risking my life again and again, never mind all the pain and agony I go through, never mind that if I fail the world is doomed
eternally. Why does it always have to be me?!

Farore sighed, and the entire clearing was bombarded with a rush of wind. "I can answer your question only in part, Hero. I am forbidden by my sisters to reveal too much; such knowledge would be dangerous for you to have at the present. However… you should know, Hero, that I did not choose you."

That caught him by surprise. Blinking rapidly, he held up his left fist and said, "What is this then?"

"The Triforce of Courage does indeed contain my essence, and with it my blessing. I would gladly bestow it upon you were I able Hero, however… You claimed the Triforce of Courage for your own, and by your own ability."

"I don't understand…"

Farore smiled sadly. "Many times, and in many lifetimes, you have claimed my blessing in the past, Hero. You must understand; the Triforce is not something that can merely be given away. It is impossible to claim a piece of the Triforce if your heart is not in tune with it. In this case, Hero, my blessing is yours because you have earned it; because your heart has always been in the right place.

"This is why you are always the Hero. Because you cannot and will not allow yourself to stay still and do nothing when another is in need. Because no walls or borders can contain you. Because you exemplify all that which I stand for—freedom, courage, and life. I did not choose your destiny, Hero… You chose it for yourself."

Link sat motionless on the cushiony grass, allowing Farore's words to sink in. Part of him still wanted to rant and rage and blame all his past sorrows and pains on her, but deep down he knew she was right. Even if he didn't have the Triforce of Courage, he'd still have done whatever it took to rescue Zelda from Ganondorf. Sure, he'd suffered much in the past, and likely would in the future, but so long as it meant he could keep his friends and family safe…

"Do you understand, Hero?"

"I think…. I think I do," he replied softly, and she beamed.

Leaning forward, she cupped his cheeks lightly and turned his face to meet hers.

"You always were my favored, Hero," she said softly. "Always. Now it is time for you to return to your world; you have done much and have earned your rest. However, there is something I must tell you first."

Gently, she rose to her feet and Link followed, his eyes locked on hers intently, hanging on her every word.

"Your destiny is not yet over, Hero. There is a great and ancient evil in the land, one whose memory has all but been wiped from the world, and it is rising once more. I am forbidden by my sisters to give you any more information… However, when the time comes for you to take up your Heroic mantle once more, you must seek out your other half, for without it you cannot hope to win. She is the key to your victory."

"Find my other half. Got it." Link said firmly, nodding in understanding.

"When you part from this place, Hero, and awake in your own land, the memories of our visitation will fade from your mind until such a time as you have need of this knowledge. Then, you shall remember it, and you shall remember that we have not forsaken you. Now go, Hero, and sleep."
She stepped forward and, leaning up on her tiptoes, pecked Link lightly on the cheek. Instantly, a strong wind gusted into the clearing, whipping at his hair, tearing through the tree branches with savage ferocity. Link struggled to brace himself against the onslaught, but the wind was too ferocious and, try as he might, he could not keep his footing. He began sliding backward.

"Take care, my son," he thought he heard Farore whisper, but a moment later he was overpowered by the gale which lifted him off his feet, flinging him savagely into the empty sky, and all was lost.
His first sensation was darkness. Not the frightening, foreign, all-consuming darkness that swallowed all - even time - within its vast, endlessly gaping maw, but rather a warm, muted, familiar darkness that he quickly recognized as the insides of his eyelids.

And just like that, Link Hero came to the conclusion that he was not, in fact, dead.

The next sensation was pain. His entire body ached as though he'd recently gone twelve-rounds with a magical boxing kangaroo. His right arm in particular seemed to throb with a savage ferocity, and he wasn't entirely sure what was going on with his abdominal region, but his muddled, disoriented mind seemed to flinch away from the swirling vortex of pain and agony that was his stomach when he attempted to mentally probe the area.

Every joint seemed to throb in time with the languid beating of his heart, and yet in spite of the pain, Link was grateful for the tiny tidbits of information he was able to gain from them.

His heart was beating; i.e., he was alive. His limbs hurt, which meant they remained wholly intact. And he was capable of keeping up a string of coherent thought, meaning his mind was working properly… Or so he hoped.

However, something still didn't seem right. He distinctly remembered falling… How, and from where he wasn't quite sure; his memory was a little fuzzy on that particular subject, though he seemed to remember someone screaming, the horrible sensation of tumbling through the open air, and a great deal of pain… And there was a strange figure… A woman, dressed in green…

By all accounts, he ought to be dead. So it didn't really make any sense that he wasn't.

But if he wasn't dead, then… Where was he?

Groaning involuntarily at the thought of exerting even minimal effort, Link finally forced his eyes to crack open, and they did so blearily and with much resistance. It was like waking up from sleep; which, he supposed, was precisely what he was doing. The thoughts and sensations he'd been experiencing moments earlier all finally coalesced into one steady, rational stream of consciousness, and Link gave a great, relieved breath; the world made sense once more.

After blinking a few times to clear his surprisingly blurry eyesight, Link only had a moment to take in his strange new surroundings (dimly lit room, pale turquoise walls, hardwood floor) before his slightly-muddled gaze landed on a mane of golden-blonde hair resting on the bed beside him.

She was slumped forward, her head pillowed on her arm as she slept, her mouth gaping partially, a cute trail of drool dampening his light azure bed sheets. Her brows were knitted together as though troubled by less-than-pleasant dreams, and she mumbled something incoherently in her sleep before shifting forward, her arm brushing lightly against his left leg.

But the thing that stood out the most was the familiar, battered green hoodie that engulfed her slight torso. It was his most cherished article of clothing, one he vaguely remembered loaning to her in a fit of contrived gallantry. He thought for sure she'd have discarded in favor of something a little less frayed and worn-out the first opportunity she had, and yet… She was still wearing it.

Speechless (although to be fair he hadn't uttered a word yet anyway, and wasn't even certain that he could), Link let his stunned gaze travel over Zelda's peaceful, slumbering face, down past her curtains of golden hair, over the folds of his favorite hoodie… and then down her sleeve, which led
to her hand, which led to *his* hand, which he realized with a small jolt that she was holding.

Link stared at their joined appendages for a moment, his mind racing; or at least attempting to race, as it was still cloudy and confused, and the sight before his eyes wasn't exactly helping make things any clearer. No matter how hard he tried, he simply couldn’t get his mind to move past the fact that Zelda, Zelda Nohansen, beautiful and quirky and apparently an adorable sleeper was there, at his bedside, clinging to his hand as she slept.

Almost subconsciously, he began running his thumb across the back of her hand, marveling at how smooth her skin was…

For an odd moment, he felt like he was trapped inside one of Granny’s atrocious soap operas. Any minute now, his dark evil twin Fernando was going to barge in, dressed as a surgeon or a Fed-ex delivery guy and attempt to murder him in cold blood, only he’d be saved at the very last moment by his long-lost father who would barge in, brandishing a shotgun and prepared to save him by whatever means necessary; only he’d get confused over who was who because Fernando looked so much like him and-

Zelda mumbled softly again, her hand twitching lightly in his, and Link’s mind went blank as he watched her stir, iron bands crushing his chest as the anticipation welled up inside him, threatening to burst.

Her eyes fluttered opened wearily.

For a moment they stared at each other in silence, steely blue meeting sparkling violet, and Link was sure that his heart would break free of his ribcage at any moment…

A soft smile graced her lips, illuminating her entire being for a startling moment like the morning sun at dawn as she gazed serenely back at him, the very personification of contentment and peace. And then, with a soft sigh, her eyelids drifted slowly closed once more, a comfortable smile adorning her face.

Link lay there, stunned. Feeling awkward and a little unsure about what to do with himself now that he’d experience all that buildup for nothing. He tried to fight down the sudden surge of anticlimax that her reaction to seeing him awake hadn’t been at least a *little* bit more exciting when suddenly, and with a strangled gasp, Zelda’s head shot up off her arm as if she’d been electrocuted. Her hand clenched his in a painful vice grip as she stared at him, pale-faced and silent, her eyes almost as wild as her hair, her mouth gaping soundlessly.

Finally, in a hushed, almost disbelieving voice she whispered, "Link?"

Link gave his best attempt at an amused smile.

"Hi…” he managed to croak out, wincing at how gruff and hoarse he sounded. He cleared his throat with a grimace, trying not to groan at the sharp stab of pain from his midsection.

Zelda scooted forward on her chair looking frazzled, her free hand quickly brushing her loose hair out of her face. "I… What… You're awake! Oh, Nayru, I… H-How are you feeling?"

"Tired," he replied lamely, not willing to reveal how much pain he was in and worry her. She seemed to sense it anyway, however, because her eyebrows creased in concern.

There was an awkward moment as the two teens regarded each other at a complete loss for words. What are you supposed to say when you wake up with the beautiful object of your affections sleeping at your bedside in a foreign building? ‘Thanks for keeping lookout, champ,’ The moment
seemed to stretch on endlessly, Link's discomfort growing exponentially with every uncomfortable second that passed. Din blast it, he was no good at talking to girls! That was Sheik's department!

Casting his eyes about the foreign room, he blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"So, er… where are we?"

Zelda's eyes widened in surprise. "Where… Link, we're in the hospital."

"Oh," Link said blankly, unsure how to respond to that. Now that he was actually paying attention, it was kinda obvious that's where they were. When he'd first opened his eyes, he'd been immediately distracted by the girl he'd found resting beside him, but now as his eyes swept the room he began to take in the little details.

The first thing he noticed was a gentle beeping noise emanating from someplace just over his right shoulder. His neck was painfully stiff, but he forced himself to move through the discomfort, trying hard not to groan as his joints ached in protest, his eyes searching for the source of the noise. Finally, his gaze landed on a tall machine situated in the corner, between his bed and a small side table. It was a heart monitor; the jagged green lines spiking in time with the gentle thudding of his most important muscle.

Link settled back against the pathetically flat pillow he'd been gifted and continued to survey the room, conscious of Zelda's gaze as she quietly watched.

The table by the heart monitor was littered with cards and notes and a rather overstuffed vase of colorful flowers into which had been stuck a large card bearing the inscription 'Get Well Soon!' Beside the table was a window, though the curtains were drawn, blocking most of the sunlight. A little further was a large beige cabinet with a rather serious looking lock on the front, complete with a keypad.

Hanging on the wall beside the cabinet was a dirty whiteboard upon which a series of nearly indecipherable notes had been scribbled in medical shorthand; below them were the words 'How do you feel today?,' complete with ten little faces arranged in a row showing varying signs of discomfort. Ten looked to be overly exuberant for any setting, especially a hospital. One was bawling comically, a heavy frown on its face. If Link could have marked his pain on the chart, he'd put it at about a negative thirty-four.

Continuing his visual tour, Link spotted a heavy wooden door at the far end of the room, which he assumed was the restroom, then continued to the left, his eyes skating across the tacky wallpaper, pausing for a moment at the flat screen television that was hanging on the wall directly before his bead before moving to the door that he assumed led out into the hallway.

The rest of the room was hidden from view behind Zelda's body. Link allowed his gaze to meet the silent girl's again, unable to resist the magnetic pull. She had a look of tense apprehension on her face as she watched him, her eyes sparkling with worry.

"Uh… So…" Link began again, then suddenly grimaced at the taste in his mouth. Man, that was some nasty morning breath!

"Oh, geez," he groaned, making a face as the taste pervaded his senses, "How long have I been out?"

He hadn't really been expecting an answer, meaning for the question to be a lighthearted attempt at breaking through the awkwardness that had all but destroyed their previously attempted
conversations. So it went without saying that her answer took him completely by surprise.

"About four days."

Link felt as though the ground had dropped out from under him.

"...What did you say?" he asked weakly.

"About four days," she repeated somberly, and for the first time since waking Link noticed how ashen she looked and the slight tremor in her voice when she spoke. "We've been so worried... the doctors, they told us that you might... that you might not..."

Zelda tore her gaze away from his, choosing instead to stare down at the drool stain on his bed sheets, hiding behind a curtain of hair as she released a shaky breath, trying valiantly to calm herself down.

The chivalrous thing to do at this moment would be to comfort the emotionally compromised damsel in her time of need, but Link's head was too busy reeling to think straight. He'd been out for four days? And the doctors were telling people that he might not wake up at all? What in the world was going on?!

Link took an unsteady breath and let his eyelids slide shut, lifting his right hand to massage his eyes wearily... or at least, that's what he tried to do, only something was wrong. His arm felt unusually stiff and heavy, and despite his best efforts, he couldn't get it to bend at the elbow. Cracking his eyes back open, he felt his stomach drop for the second time in five minutes- his entire right arm was completely encased in a cast.

Swallowing gruffly, he turned his attention back to the silently trembling girl beside him.

"Zelda?" he whispered hoarsely, trepidation lacing through his words, "...What happened?"

At his quiet inquiry, her head snapped back up. Her eyes, red and puffy with silent tears still etching their way down her cheeks, were wide with shock.

"Y-You don't remember?" she asked tremulously, hiccupping slightly at the end.

He shook his head numbly, though he couldn't quite fight down the small voice in his head that was telling him that he didn't want his question answered.

In answer, Zelda gently untangled her fingers from his and, hesitating only a moment, showed him the back of her hand.

There, etched into her delicate skin, were three golden triangles...

The memories slammed into Link’s mind like a runaway bus.

The school, the shooting, Shad and Ashei in the vents, Aryll in danger, saving Darunia and Ruto, fighting with Sheik, Anju dying on the floor, Ganondorf’s plan, breaking out with Kafei, killing Sakon, finding Zelda in the hall, the group splitting up, the fire extinguisher, the Triforce, Chief Smith and Colin’s confession, Sheik turning himself in, Ganondorf’s announcement, running after Zelda, the showdown in the Principal's office, the stapler, the memories, the voice, the windows, the knife, teetering over the edge...

The moment where he slipped through her fingers.

"Oh, Goddesses…” he whispered as all the pain and devastation and terror came rushing back to him. "I fell… I fell three stories. I had a knife in me! I should have died! How am I still alive?!"

Zelda shook her head frantically, tears still spilling over her cheeks. "I don't know… The doctors were amazed. They said you should have died on impact but when the EMT's got there you were still breathing, so they loaded you up and took off before I could even leave the principal's office."

"And… And Ganondorf?" Link rasped, hardly daring to breathe. Fear clutched his insides in an icy fist. If he had survived the fall, then surely Ganondorf…

But Zelda slowly shook her head again. "He's dead, Link."

The panic that had begun welling up inside him vanished at her words. "He's…"

"Dead," she repeated, and there was a forced harshness in her tone that didn't fit her at all. "When you stabbed him, the knife punctured his lung. Even if he'd gotten lucky like you and survived the fall, he would've died anyway."

Silence gripped the room again aside from the steady beeping behind him. Link was stunned. He'd taken a knife to the stomach and fallen three stories and somehow survived… And Ganondorf was finally gone. It was over… It was finally over…

Without warning, Zelda lunged forward, and before Link could process what was happening she'd wrapped her arms around his neck and was sobbing into his chest.

She was saying something, but her words, muffled as they were in his hospital gown, were lost to Link. Instead, he was left to focus on the sudden warmth that was spreading through his weakened body, the smell of her hair and how incredibly soft she was.

It was over, then… The shooting had come to an end, he'd saved Zelda and his sister, and all of his friends had pulled through… Who cared what he had to go through to achieve it? This moment right here was worth all of the pain and agony he’d endured, and all that he would endure as he healed. Awkwardly wrapping his good arm around her shoulders, he traced comforting circles on her back and rested his head against hers, making soothing sounds in her ear.

"Shh… Zelda, come on, it's ok… We're ok now, it's over… It's over…”

"I-I thought you were d-dead…” she managed weakly through her sobs.

"I know…” Link murmured, feeling guilty that he'd been the cause of her pain.

"I th-thought I lost you again…”

Something seemed to reverberate in Link's heart and he hesitated, not sure if those words were coming from the age-old princess or the emotional teenage girl, or if there was even a difference anymore.

Removing his arm, he coerced her into lifting her head so he could meet her gaze. Her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy and brimming with tears, but her gaze was steady and imploring and near took his breath away. Reaching up, he let his free hand cup her face, his fingers tangling in her hair.

"I'm not going anywhere,” he whispered, somewhat hoarsely.
It was déjà vu; she was leaning forward, tightening her hold around his neck, her eyes slowly drifting closed. Link's hand gently pulled her down before sliding his arm around her back as his breathing hitched, ignoring the rapidly increasing beeping from the heart monitor behind him. His last thought as he closed his eyes was of how grateful he was no psychotic, power-hungry teenagers were there to interrupt them this time…

"…Link?"

Link and Zelda both froze. For a moment, frustration and annoyance welled up inside of him, and he readied himself to explode on whoever it was who had interrupted the moment he had faced down numerous psychotic gun-toting teenagers, battled the most evil and powerful man in the history of the world with an office tool, and survived a three-story fall for.

However, when Zelda moved back and allowed Link to see into the area of the room he hadn't yet examined, he felt all of his self-righteous anger and resentment evaporate as his gaze locked with a pair of familiar cerulean irises.

Before he could open his mouth, the smaller blonde launched herself out of the chair where she’d been sleeping, the blue jean-jacket she’d been using as a makeshift blanket falling forgotten to the floor. Zelda only just managed to scoot away from Link's bed before Aryll all but tackled him with a joyous cry.

"Link! Link, you're awake! You're ok! I don't believe it, I can't- You're alive!"

"Aryll…” Link whimpered, "Aryll, you're… you're hurting me…! Aryll, there's a hole in my stomach and you're not helping…!"

Link’s little sister seemed to be oblivious to his pain, however. If anything, his feeble protests made her cling to his neck all the harder.

"Oh, Goddesses, I've been so worried, the doctors kept saying all this scary stuff about how you might not wake up, and I've been so scared, and after you just ran off and left me with Colin and Sheik, I didn't know what to do, and then we were outside, and there was shooting, and the glass, and then I saw you fall and- You idiot!

Aryll suddenly jerked upright, her ocean blue eyes swimming with outraged tears as she viciously began pummeling every inch of Link she could reach.

"I- ow! Aryll! Aryll, stop, Aryll- I'm in the hospital! I just fell out of a building! You're going to break me all over again!"

"You'd-better-hope-that's-all-I-do-to-you-mister!" Aryll spat viciously, smacking Link soundly between each word. Over Aryll's shoulder, Zelda looked torn between being scandalized that a defenseless, hospitalized boy was in the middle of being mauled to death, and humor at Aryll's enthusiasm.

"Aryll, please! I'm sorry! Ow, Aryll, you're going to rip my stab wound open all over again!"

"Well, what do you care?" she spat, standing up suddenly and glowering down at Link, looking very menacing with her hands on her hips and tears running down her face. "It doesn't seem to matter to you very much whether you live or die. Getting yourself stabbed didn't work, so you decided to throw yourself out of Sahasralah's window!"

"W-what?" Link stammered, flabbergasted at her rapid change of emotion. "No, Aryll, that's not-"
"You broke your promise..." she whispered, her aberrant mood swing cutting him off once more, only this time she didn't look scathing, or enraged, or overjoyed at his being awake; she looked broken.

"I-...what?"

"You promised me. You promised that no more Heros were going to die, that our family wouldn't lose any more members... Remember? In the closet, when you came to find me. And I believed you... I really thought you and I were going to get out, somehow, and Granny wouldn't have to lose anyone else... But then you went back, just like Dad did for our uncle, and I just... I just kept thinking about what happened to them in Labrynna, and I thought... I thought..."

As Link watched his baby sister fall apart, an enormous wave of guilt and self-loathing washed over him. All throughout his ordeal in Sahasralah's office with Ganondorf and Zelda, when he was battling for his life and the sake of humanity, never, not even once, had he spared a thought for his tiny family and the people his death would leave behind.

To be fair to him, if he hadn't fought Ganondorf it would have meant a veritable apocalypse and the end of civilization as they knew it, so it wasn't as though he had a choice in the matter... Still, the sight of his sister reduced to tears because of him made him feel lower than dirt.

Hesitantly, he extended his free hand and wordlessly offered it to the trembling girl. She resisted at first; biting her lower lip to hide how it was quivering, her eyes hidden behind one hand, the other wrapped protectively around her midsection. But after a moment she relented, grasping his hand gingerly and allowing him to pull her down in a tentative embrace.

"I'm sorry..." he whispered softly into her hair, and she gave a choked up sob, burying her face into his shoulder and shaking her head.

"No... I-It's ok..." she stammered back, and Link felt his heart melt ever so slightly as she once again wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed for all she was worth. It hurt, obviously, given his physical condition, but he didn't complain; it was his way of atoning for all the pain and agony he'd caused her over the last few days, and he accepted the pain willingly.

Over Aryll's head, Link could see Zelda smiling endearingly at the two of them, her eyes watery. Feeling slightly embarrassed that his emotional family reunion was being spied on, Link hastily wrenched his eyes away from the girl, his face heating up, and patted his little sister softly on the back.

"You ok?" he asked gently, not wanting to be rude but also yearning to get her up; he loved her and all, but it was hard enough to breathe as it was without another person's body weight atop him.

She sniffled, nodding slowly and gently detangled herself from her injured brother. She gave a weak, slightly embarrassed laugh as she began mopping up the tears on her face with her shirtsleeves. "Sorry about that..."

"Nah, it's cool," Link replied with pseudo-sarcasm. "It's good to know there's at least one softie in our family."

"I- Oh!" Aryll started, the very picture of indignation as she readied herself to fire a scathing retort when all of a sudden a look of surprise flashed across her face. Whirling around, she called out, "Granny! Granny, wake up! Link's awake!"

Link blinked in surprised disbelief. Surely not. Not noticing Aryll when he first woke up was one
thing; he could blame his lack of awareness of his surroundings on his still-muddled brain and the presence of Zelda at his bedside, but Granny was here too? He surreptitiously began casting his eyes about the room once more, waiting for more random people to start popping out from behind medical equipment shouting 'surprise!'

With an exasperated sigh, Aryll stomped forward toward the corner where she’d been sleeping earlier and began gently prodding the figure Link now noticed was resting in the chair beside the one Aryll had previously vacated, a large lavender rain jacket covering most of her torso and face as she leaned up against a wall. A slight, soft buzzing could be heard emanating from beneath the confines of the jacket.

"Granny!" Aryll hissed, poking the jacket once more. "Granny, wake up! Link's awake! Granny!"

There was a grunt as the figure shifted around for a moment, then finally a tired, grumpy voice muttered, "What is it, Aryll? Can't you see your grandma's trying to get her beauty rest?"

"Granny! Link's awake! He's awake!"

There was a pause, and then slowly the jacket slid off of her, revealing the wrinkled older woman he knew and loved who turned to face him quietly.

They regarded each other for a moment in silence, Link struggling to comprehend the tangle of emotions on her face. Finally, he flashed her a weak grin and offered up a tentative, "Hey. Morning, Granny."

To his complete and utter horror, she twisted her lips in a disapproving manner and gave a loud 'harrumph!' before climbing off her chair and scowling at him.

"Well. It's about time you woke up," she scolded, stalking over to his bedside and looming over him perilously. "If I'd known it'd take you so long to do it, I'd have stayed at home! Don't know why I'm surprised though; you sleep all day normally, why should now be any different?"

Link winced, feeling abashed and mortified all at once. He could feel it coming; Granny was setting herself up for a record-breaking tongue-lashing, the kind she kept reserved for when Link or Aryll had gone and done something tremendously foolish. And worst of all, it was all about to go down in front of his… whatever Zelda was.

Reprimanded like a child. Some things never change, be he an age-old mythical hero reincarnate or no.

It was odd that he could face down the greatest evil the world had ever known with unrelenting courage, but all his confidence wilted in the face of his grandmother's scowl. He supposed that no matter who you were, some part of you would always be wary of the woman who raised you.

All was quiet for a moment as she stared down at him, her face a mask of cool reprobation before suddenly, without warning, she gave him a full, toothy grin.

"It's good to see you're ok," she said with surprising gentleness before bending over and enveloping him in a tender embrace. And just like that, the tension in the air was seemingly swept away by Link's relieved sigh.

"Aw, isn't this sweet?" came a surprise, cocky voice from the direction of the doorway. Link jerked his head quickly to the side (and regretted it instantly as pain shot up and down his spine) and found himself looking at the smug grin of his best friend as he leaned casually against the doorframe, his scarlet irises flashing with barely withheld amusement.
Granny straightened up and fixed Sheik with a heavy, irritated frown, but before Link could utter a single response Sheik suddenly pitched forward as he was unceremoniously shoved into the room by the short, petite girl standing behind him.

"What kind of moron just stands in the doorway? You're such a dork." Midna muttered dryly as Sheik landed comically on his face with pained 'oof!' Giving the room a brief once-over, her gaze landed on Link and instantly her countenance changed from her usual bored indifference to suddenly ecstatic.

"Link!" she practically squealed with bubbly excitement, darting over to the opposite side of the bed from Grandma (from the sudden yelp of pain, she clearly stepped on Sheik in the process) and all but flung herself on top of him.

Link once again found himself letting out a girly squawk of pain similar to Sheik's.

"Oh Goddesses, you're ok! We all thought you were dead for sure after you fell out of that window! I was all ready to beat the crap out of Ganondorf till I remembered he'd taken the dive just before you!"

"Ack! M-Midna, please, it- Ow! You're hurting m-AH! -me! Please, get off, you're gonna break my bones all over again! Egh! Woman! There is a hole in my stomach and you're making it worse!"

Like an act of divine providence, Sheik suddenly rose from the ground at Link's bedside. Leaning over, he wrapped his arms around Midna's waist and literally lifted her off of Link's twitching, writhing body and gently tugged until she released her death-grip on his throat.

"Whoa, now. Easy Mid, or you're gonna squish him."

"Fun killer…" she muttered darkly, but thankfully stayed where she was when he set her back on her feet.

Sheik, blessedly, merely offered a simple fist to Link rather than full-body tackling him, which Link returned with nearly tearful gratitude.

"So. How're you feeling?"

"Well, if the women in this hospital would get it through their heads that I'm a severely wounded human being and not a bounce house, then I might be able to say that I'm feeling better," Link muttered darkly and with only slight sarcasm.

Zelda and Aryll at least had the grace to look somewhat abashed. Midna, however, merely shrugged indifferently and said, "Well, if you weren't such an easy target, maybe people wouldn't pick on you so much. Besides, don't most guys like getting lots of female attention?"

"It depends on the female," Link and Sheik replied simultaneously, then made eye contact and laughed.

It was then, in that moment, surrounded by his friends and family, that the reality of the situation came crashing down on him. He was alive. He was actually alive. They all were. And it was over… finally, blessedly over… the nightmare had come to an end.

All the frantic thoughts and fearful doubts that had plagued him during his eternity in the assault on Ordon High came rushing back to him as though the emotional cork he'd subconsciously installed to keep the horrors at bay had been unplugged, and he remembered wondering, as he was sure every other person in that building had at one point or another, if he was ever going to make it out there
alive… And yet, here he was.

Beaten, bruised, broken, and bleeding, but his heart was still beating, and in that moment, surrounded by loved ones, he found it was all that really mattered.

He watched as the still, sickly hospital silence that had pervaded the room since his awakening was quickly forced out in favor of a warm, convivial babble of voices as his friends began interacting with one another.

Midna released her hold on Sheik's hand to scuttle quickly around Link's bed, throwing her arms around Zelda in her traditional exuberant greeting, to which the taller blonde eagerly responded with a cheery laugh. Aryll made a snide, teasing comment about Sheik's newfound love, causing him to grunt and start jabbing at her sides where he knew she was most ticklish as she squealed in mock outrage, as comfortable around Link's longtime friend as if he was Aryll's second brother.

Granny Hero sat back with a contented smile and met Link's wandering gaze with a small wink, causing him to grin broadly in return. He could tell she understood what he was feeling. How good it felt to be around jokes and smiles and laughter again, knowing that he and his friends were finally ok and not having to wonder if they'd live to see tomorrow.

Before long, they'd arranged themselves in a rough semi-circle around Link's bed, talking and laughing and generally reveling in their hard-won peace. His hospital room only contained three chairs, however, so their seating arrangements were a little odd.

Zelda sat in the chair nearest Link on his left, exactly where he found her when he first awoke. Her eyes were still a little baggy, but she was grinning for all she was worth and her amaranthine irises seemed to have regained the sparkle that had drawn him to her in the first place. Granny Hero was on her left at the foot of Link's bed, beaming at them all and yawning occasionally. Aryll was perched on the bed beside Link's feet, her hands folded on her knees and legs dangling off the edge. The bed wasn't particularly large; but then, neither was Aryll, so her position didn't cause Link too much discomfort. Sheik occupied the last chair which he'd dragged to Link's right where there was a bit more space (aside from the side-table holding the flowers, which he moved against the wall), his position just opposite Zelda. Midna lounged languidly in his lap.

It was Aryll who asked the question that brought Link's attention back to the here and now.

"So, Sheik… Why are you here? It's just… I thought you had… I mean, I thought you were…" She trailed off awkwardly, looking flustered, her cheeks slightly pink.

"Arrested?" he offered casually and she flinched, looking wary and very much as though she regretted mentioning it in the first place.

"Arrested?" he offered casually and she flinched, looking wary and very much as though she regretted mentioning it in the first place.

"You mean you guys didn't hear?" Midna asked incredulously.

Aryll, Grandma, and Zelda all exchanged puzzled looks.

"Well, in my defense, I've sorta been unconscious for the last couple days, so…” Link offered jokingly from his spot on the bed.

"Shut up, Link," Aryll said, waving off his flippant comment impatiently. "What didn't we hear?"

Midna and Sheik paused for a moment to exchange looks. Sheik was smirking devilishly, looking for all the world like a smug little boy who knew a really juicy secret. Midna was basically bursting at the seams with barely suppressed giddiness as she eagerly nudged her makeshift chair with her shoulder, urging him to tell them.
"Well," Sheik said slowly, milking the moment for all it was worth, "as you apparently don't know, the trial was this morning."

"Already?" Grandma exclaimed, looking shocked. "These things are usually tied up in court for months! How did they get it set so early?"

Sheik shrugged nonchalantly. "I don't really know. I guess since this thing has gained national attention, people wanted to see justice dealt as soon as humanly possible. I suppose it helps that the mayor's son is one of the students who was injured in the shooting, but even so-

"Will you get on with it already?" Midna blurted out impatiently, scowling up at him.

"Right," Sheik said, looking slightly disgruntled at being repeatedly interrupted and then getting told to hurry. "Well, to make a long story short, the trial was-

"He got off!" Midna practically squealed, cutting her boyfriend off once again and cutting to the chase.

"What?"

"What?"

"You're kidding! That's great!"

"No," Sheik said loudly, holding up his arms to stave off the flurry of questions and stunned acclamations from Link and the rest. He sent Midna a dark look to which she merely responded with a flirtatious grin.

"I didn't get off, Midna's not telling the whole story. The jury decided that, in light of my actions during the 'crisis', and my heroic efforts to 'right my wrongs at great personal peril'…" at this, Midna pinched his cheek and cooed teasingly, forcing Sheik to dig his fingers into her side, making her screech, "…they agreed, as per the judge's suggestion, that my sentence be reduced. Instead of going to jail like the rest of Ganondorf's surviving flunkies, I'm receiving two-hundred-and-fifty hours of community service."

There was a stunned pause in which the four other occupants of the room stared at the couple in shock. Midna looked utterly triumphant and proud as a peacock, but Sheik merely smiled back at them humbly, looking as though he was still as stunned at the verdict as they were.

Finally, Link burst out laughing, only to regress to regretful moans a moment later as razor sharp stabs of pain lanced up and down his midsection.

"Link, are you ok?" Zelda asked worriedly, leaning over and shooting him a concerned look, biting her lip which he noticed had become her habit when she was anxious.

Link did his best to muster up a reassuring grin, feeble as it was. "Yeah… I'm fine… Just don't make me laugh, I might just keel over."

It wasn't his finest joke, admittedly, but it seemed to have done the trick. Zelda shook her head and rolled her eyes as if to say 'why am I still sitting at this idiot's bedside?', but she was smiling while she did it. It was a big improvement over scared, worried Zelda; he'd been the unintentional cause of her discomfort long enough. He was going to see to it that she didn't have to worry about him ever again if it was the last thing he did… which, at the rate he's been going lately, it just might be.

"Oh, come on," Sheik said flatly, cutting through his thoughts. "You survived a stab wound straight
in the gut and a three-story fall onto concrete. I don't think a little chuckle's gonna do you in."

"No, but all that community service might just be the end of you," Link shot right back, grinning at his best friend. "Sheik, you've never worked a day in your life. You might end up wishing they'd locked you away after all."

"Well..." Sheik said, stroking his chin in a mock-thoughtful pose, making some of the group laugh (though not Link; he'd already learned his lesson. Laughter was painful).

"Nah, he'll be fine," Midna said, patting Sheik on the knee good-naturedly. "He'll have me as company."

"What?" Sheik exclaimed, a look of surprise his face as he cocked his head to stare up at his girlfriend. "No, Midna, you don't have to-"

"Nah, he'll be fine," Midna said, patting Sheik on the knee good-naturedly. "He'll have me as company."

"What?" Sheik exclaimed, a look of surprise his face as he cocked his head to stare up at his girlfriend. "No, Midna, you don't have to-"

"Well, it's not like we're going to get to spend any time together anyway," she said, shrugging. "I might as well take what I can get. Besides, this way I can keep an eye on you and make sure you do your service so the judge doesn't change his mind and take you away from me."

Sheik remained silent for a moment before smiling at the smaller girl softly and gently wrapping his arms around her waist. Aryll and Zelda let out loud 'awe's at their expense, but the simple affectionate gesture left everyone in the room smiling.

"Why do I get the feeling Midna wouldn't be offering to join me if I got assigned community service?" Link asked thoughtfully, scratching his chin.

"Never mind that," Aryll said exasperatedly, cutting off her brother's musings once again. "Tell us about the trial! How come they knew you were really a good guy? Did some of the students you helped save come testify on your behalf?"

"Not the students, no," Sheik said, shaking his head. "Though a lot of the faculty showed up to offer support."

Link was surprised. "Really? Like who? I would have thought that since you were technically one of the co-conspirators they would have all turned against you."

"So did I. And actually, a lot of people in the community weren't happy with the verdict when they found that out."

At the mention of the less-than-positive view of Sheik's lighter sentencing, Midna scowled darkly and began muttering several choice threats under her breath about things she'd like to do to certain people in the community. Link grinned at her, flashing back to when they used to mutter like that about Professor Ezlo after one of his senile fits of rage.

"You don't think they're going to give you any problems, do you?" Zelda asked, looking anxious, but Sheik shook his head.

"No, I don't think so. Not after what happened."

"Well, what did happen?" Granny grumped, finally deciding to chime in and sounding distinctly irritated that Sheik hadn't gotten around to explaining it yet.

"Well," Sheik said, casting Granny Hero a slightly fearful glance; his friends knew his Grandmother's temper only too well. "First, Mr. Oshus came in, bringing Coach Nabooru and her assistant Jolene. They were there in the gym when Midna and I dealt with Zant, so they were able to
"testify about my part in rescuing the students in the gym." It was barely perceptible, but Link still heard him stumble over saying Zant's name.

"Then, Mr. Auru of all people showed up." That caught Link off-guard; Mr. Auru was easily the most popular teacher in the school, but Link and Sheik had taken his class last year, and he hadn't seen him at all during the attack. He'd assumed he'd managed to escape before Ganondorf's flunkies had taken control of the school. If so, what could he possibly be able to say that would help Sheik? And why would he want to?

"Why was Mr. Auru there?" Aryll asked, clearly thinking along the same lines as Link.

"Mostly to show support to the other teachers," Sheik replied, "He was one of the lucky ones who got out with his entire class before Ganondorf could trap us all inside, so he didn't have to witness anything. Although he did give the jury a detailed report of what we all did for the last trapped students during the police raid, since apparently Zelda's ingenious plan was hatched in his classroom and that somehow got back to him." He looked at Zelda for confirmation on this when he mentioned her name and she nodded, smiling.

"Huh." Link said, drinking in the new information. So Auru hadn't been inside, but he came to Sheik's aid anyway… Sheik, a student he hadn't taught in over a year. Link's appreciation for his favorite teacher suddenly grew exponentially. "Who else was there?"

"Linebeck," Midna chimed in, sounding rueful.

"The janitor?" Link exclaimed, stunned.

"Yup. He was there in the gym, too. He didn't really say much, but he defied all expectations by showing up in the first place, so that's more than we could have hoped for anyway."

"The jury had seemed surprised by the teacher's testimony," Sheik said, continuing his story, "but it wasn't until Rusl showed up that they started wavering on their decision to send me off to jail with the others."

"Rusl?" Aryll asked, surprised. "You mean Colin's dad?"

"Yeah. He came marching into the court looking all impressive and cop-like, and when they called him up to testify he gave this whole speech about how I had his full support, and how impressed with us he was because of everything we did at the end there, and how I apparently showed more guts and bravery in the face of danger then half of his men…"

Sheik trailed off, looking slightly embarrassed. Midna, as though sensing his discomfort, took up the storytelling from there.

"The jury was all impressed, obviously," She stated matter-of-factly, as if the concept of not being impressed by Sheik was a logical impossibility. "But you could tell it was still up in the air, half of them sympathetic toward Sheik, the other half listening to the outcry of the nation who wanted justice for all the kids who lost their lives… But then the Chief brought in his Coup de Grace."

"His what?" Link asked, looking baffled.

"Mayor Dotour," Sheik said softly, and there was a collective gasp throughout the room.

"The mayor?" Aryll breathed. "What in the world was he doing there?"

"Well, Rusl apparently informed the mayor that I was part of the group responsible for saving his
"son's girlfriend," Sheik murmured softly.

"Or, as he put it, his future daughter-in-law," Midna cut in, smirking slightly.

"He told the court that he owed me a personal debt of gratitude, and explained that his son Kafei had been working alongside us and had received a wound to his leg and was currently in the hospital with Anju and hadn't left her bedside once…"

"Well…" Link said slowly after Sheik trailed off and remained silent for a few seconds, "That's a touching story and all, but what did Kafei have to do with your sentencing?"

"Pretty much nothing," Sheik admitted with a small laugh. "But he got the whole room all teary-eyed and emotional and played me out to be some big hero who helped save his son's love from the icy clutches of death or some such. He basically turned all the negative opinions about me around single-handedly. I don't know if I would have gotten out of jail time if it wasn't for him."

Link gave a hollow whistle. To think, despite all the support Sheik had received from actual witnesses, it took the words of a single well-known man to change his sentencing…

The silence that had once again claimed the room at the end of Sheik's tale was suddenly rudely interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Don't mind me," came an official, business-like feminine voice from the doorway, and in walked a middle-aged woman dressed in navy blue scrubs. "I'm just stopping by for a minute to check Mr. Hero's-

The nurse stopped dead when she saw Link staring at her blankly.

"But… you're awake," she said after a moment, sounding mystified.

"Um… Yes. Yes, I am." Link replied, equally as confused as the nurse.

She continued to stand blankly in the doorway for a moment, slowly glancing between him and the clipboard she carried in her hand. Then, after shaking herself slightly, she put on a bright, false smile and said, as though to cover up the sheer awkwardness of the moment, "Well, forgive me, Mr. Hero for not coming to check on you sooner. As I'm sure you're aware we've been very busy the last few days since the … the incident and… well, to be honest, I was under the impression you were in a coma."

That certainly brought Link up short. A coma? When was he ever in a…

Zelda's words came flashing back through his mind.

"We've been so worried… the doctors, they told us that you might… that you might not…"

"He was, ma'am," Zelda's answer to the nurse caught Link off guard, and he turned to look at her. "He only just woke up."

The nurse's eyebrows, which had been climbing at an alarming rate when she'd realized Link was up and coherent, suddenly shot down with disapproval.

"I see…" she drawled softly, a sudden dangerous tone to her voice, "So a boy, our patient, wakes up after a few days from a coma and you don't think it's a good idea to inform the hospital staff?"

Zelda clamped her mouth shut, looking sheepish in the face of the nurse's reprimand. Aryll merely
gaped soundlessly while Sheik and Midna appeared determined to keep quiet and look everywhere except at the nurse.

Granny Hero, however, scowled right back at the woman with gusto.

"I nearly lost my grandson," she stated bluntly. "Forgive me if my first instinct once he regained consciousness wasn't to hand him off to a bunch of strangers."

The nurse took a deep, steadying breath.

"Be that as it may," she replied, struggling to keep her voice calm and professional, "this is a hospital, and his health is our number one priority. All personal opinions have to take a back seat. Now, Link?" she said, turning her attention to him as she surreptitiously checked her clipboard for his first name. "I'm going to go fetch the doctor now, but it may take a few minutes; the hospital's nearly bursting at the seams with your injured classmates and teachers and he's very busy. However, when the doctor does arrive, everyone else in the room needs to leave, and he'll likely want to run a few tests on you. Is that understood?" She finished her speech with a sweeping glance, including everyone in her query.

The room murmured their assent, begrudgingly in Granny's case, and with a prim nod, the nurse turned briskly to leave.

She paused briefly at the door, however, and turned to face Link once more.

"I'm sorry if I came across as abrasive," she admitted, and to his surprise, she really did sound it. "I'm very glad to see you're up and awake. The Goddesses must be smiling on you, young man; you seem to be healing at an extraordinary rate."

And with that, she was gone.

Link felt a sudden surge of dread in his gut as a previously overlooked thought struck him; of course he was healing at an extraordinary rate… he was the bearer of the Triforce of Courage! And now every medical professional that had seen him had seen the marking on the back of his hand! How many of them recognized it for what it was?

And what about Granny? He glanced at her surreptitiously, but she kept her gaze fixated on the door where the nurse had vanished, looking weary. Had she noticed it yet? Would she even know what it meant? It was more than likely that she had seen it, but just in case… he nonchalantly turned his left hand over so that his palm faced upward, obscuring his marking from view.

To his surprise, as soon as he made the move he felt a soft, familiar hand reach out and catch his, gently entwining their fingers. He turned his head and met Zelda's gaze, searching her eyes questioningly. In response, she offered him a small smile; so, she'd understood the truth behind the nurse's comment as well… but did she know if his secret had been discovered? He would have to talk to her eventually… later, when they had more privacy…

Because privacy was something he was just bursting with here at the hospital…

Sheik gave a loud yawn that cracked his jaw, letting go of Midna to stretch his arms over his head.

"Well… You heard the boss lady. Looks like it's time for us to go."

Link gave a resigned sigh, not wanting his friends to leave. He hated being cooped up inside, and the prospect of having to endure it alone, especially in a hospital, seemed far less than inviting. Still, as he took in the gaunt, sleep-deprived faces of his family and Zelda, he knew they needed to go home.
"Link," his grandmother asked gently, as though reading his thoughts, "if you want, Aryll and I can just go grab a quick bite at the hospital cafeteria then come back once you're done with your tests."

He could see Aryll blanch at the prospect of more hospital food in the corner of his eye and he smiled.

"Thanks, Granny, but no. You and Aryll need to go home and get some sleep. Look at you, you're exhausted."

She tried to protest weakly, but Link wouldn't hear any of it. "No excuses, Granny. Go home, really. Eat something that isn't served to sick people and I'll see you tomorrow, ok?"

After a moment, she finally relented and, bending over, placed a quick kiss on his temple.

"That goes for you, too," Link told Zelda, and she smiled at him.

"What? Since when were you allowed to tell me what to do?" she asked cheekily, and he chuckled.

"Since I became your personal bodyguard, that's when." he gently squeezed her hand and almost imagined he could feel his Triforce symbol glow.

"Mmm," she hummed lightly, giving his shoulder a playful poke with her free hand. "Some bodyguard you are, laying around in a bed all day."

Their budding conversation was quickly interrupted by a loud cough coming from Link's right.

"Sorry to interrupt, guys," Sheik said flatly, "but we're gonna head out now."

"Don't want your nurse to blow a gasket," Midna chimed in, flashing Link a warm smile. Her eyes darted to his and Zelda's linked hands then back in a flash. "Besides, I told my mom we'd be back for dinner by six. We didn't think you'd be up so we didn't plan on staying for long."

"Nah, that's fine," Link replied, his brows furrowed. "Only… Sheik, where are you staying now? With Midna?"

"Um…" He scratched the back of his head lightly, looking embarrassed. "Well, sorta. Her dad agreed I could stay there for the night, but that's it. He doesn't want me sleeping in the same house as his daughter. Something about being a bad influence or something… So I guess after that I'm technically homeless."

"Nonsense," Granny interrupted from the corner, fixing Sheik with a stern look. "There's more than enough room at our house. You can stay there till you're done with High School. I'm sure Link and Aryll will be more than happy with that."

Sheik's jaw nearly hit the floor.

"I… B-but Mrs. Hero, are you-"

"Of course I'm sure," she replied, cutting him off brusquely. "The house will be too quiet while Link's here recovering for my tastes. And besides, you spend enough time there anyway, you might as well make the change permanent. You can sleep on the pull out bed in the den if you like, or share
Zelda seemed genuinely surprised by Granny Hero's offer, but Link wasn't. That was just the kind of woman she was. If anything, he was surprised that Sheik hadn't seen it coming. His best friend was positively speechless, and if he wasn't mistaken there were tears of gratitude welling up in his eyes.

Midna was positively beaming, not nearly as reserved with her emotions as Sheik was, and she practically leaped forward, enveloping Link's grandmother in a bone-crushing hug.

"Thank you so much, Granny Hero!"

"Goodness," Granny muttered, lightly patting Midna on the back and grinning awkwardly. "What has gotten into you kids today? I don't think I've ever seen you so touchy-feely."

Midna had barely stepped back before Sheik was there, grabbing Granny Hero and practically lifting her up in the air, and she let out a bark of laughter at his enthusiasm.

"Yes, well," she said breathlessly as he set her back down on the floor. "You can bring your stuff over tomorrow and we'll get everything set up."

"Oh great," Aryll grumped, speaking up finally, her voice flat and unemotional. "Now there are two teenage boys in the house. Whoopee…"

Everyone laughed, and her fake despondency cracked with the sound. Giggling, she moved to talk to Sheik and the rest at the foot of Link's bed. Link, however, was distracted by the sudden loss of warmth as Zelda gently removed her hand from his.

Turning to shoot her a quizzical look, he was surprised to see her cell phone pressed up against her ear.

When she noticed him watching she flashed him a brief smile, mouthing 'I'm calling my ride' before turning away to face the wall.

He was distracted from wondering who her ride could be by Sheik, who once again strode over and offered his fist to him.

"Well, we're heading out, man," he said, sighing slightly.

"You don't seem too happy about that," Link observed casually, and Sheik gave him a sheepish look.

"Well… let's just say Midna's parents aren't as warm and welcoming as they used to be…"

Link couldn't resist the laugh, even if it hurt his chest to do so. "Not too keen on you now that you're the boyfriend, eh?"

Even if they hadn't officially come out and told him yet, he knew it was true. His best friends were dating… he had become the dreaded third-wheel. Oddly, the thought really didn't concern him as much as he thought it would. Sheik shrugged. "Well, there's that… plus I'm a felon now, so…"

"Oh, stop whining," Midna cut in, dodging around Sheik to give Link one last hug. "My mom still likes you. It's just my dad who has to bring the shotgun out whenever you come around now. I think he thinks you're constantly packing heat."

"Come on now, kids. That fussy nurse and her doctor are going to be back any second now,"
Granny said, ushering Sheik and Midna out of the way. He nodded to them as they waved and started towards the door.

"Now Link, remember, we'll be back tomorrow morning, but don't hesitate to call if you need anything, alright?"

"I think I'll be fine, Granny," Link chuckled, returning her hug when she offered it. "I'll probably just go back to sleep once they're done with their tests anyway."

"Just make sure you don't sleep for half a week again, ok?" Aryll called from near the door where she was standing with Sheik and Midna.

"Yeah, I'll think about it," he teased, and she smiled.

"We'll see you later, ok?" Midna said, and Link nodded.

"Bye, Link!"

"Later man!"

"Oh, Zelda dear, aren't you coming?" Granny asked quizzically, pausing in the act of closing the door when she noticed the blonde girl was still standing in the corner. "They weren't kidding when they said they needed us out of here, and I know you're just as exhausted as Aryll and I; we've been here for four days, after all. You need your sleep."

Hearing that Zelda had been waiting at his bedside for the entire time that he'd been there made Link's stomach flop unexpectedly, but he shook it off.

Zelda, who had just snapped her phone shut when Grandma started speaking to her smiled at the older woman endearingly and said, "I am, don't worry. I just have to wait for my sister to get here and pick me up, so…"

"You sure? I can always give you a ride…"

"No, really, Mrs. Hero, it's not a problem. Tetra's already in the area anyway, she said she was a minute or two out and she'd text me when she got in the parking lot."

"Well, if you're sure then…" She sent a dubious look between the two of them before striding over and casting her arm around Zelda's shoulders amiably, drawing the taller blonde in. "Link, I really like this girl. Why haven't you brought her around before?"

"I, uh…" Link spluttered, feeling flustered.

"I just moved here, actually," Zelda stammered, flushing prettily under Grandma's scrutiny. "Link and I had only just met the day before the shooting."

The old woman was quiet for a moment as she observed the two teens, and Link could have sworn that she shot a quick glance at his left hand. Then, with a mischievous glint in her eye and a wide, toothy grin, she said, "Well, it must have been quite a first impression for him to throw himself out a three-story window for you. I expect you knocked him right off his feet."

Link and Zelda both blushed scarlet as the memory of her whacking him with a door flashed through their minds, and Granny Hero quickly exited the room, cackling madly.

_Curse you, Aryll, _Link thought savagely. _What have you told her…?_
"Sorry about that…" Link muttered morbidly as the door snapped shut behind his grandmother.

"No, it's fine…" she replied, just as softly.

And just like that, the room was silent once more.

Link fidgeted with his hand nervously, wondering what exactly he was supposed to say in this situation. Here he was, alone, finally, with the Zelda, and he had no clue how he was supposed to conduct himself. He'd already poured his heart out to her, attempted and subsequently failed to kiss her twice. He'd even risked his life to save her. And still, when it came down to it, he was hopeless.

Seconds crept by and still, nothing. Zelda was nervously biting her lip, absently playing with the phone in her hands while she waited for her sister's text.

What happened to that easy banter he had with her earlier? Was it that he could only talk to her when there were other people around? But no… he'd been doing just fine when he'd first woken up… He was probably just feeling awkward because of his grandmother's parting comment… Yeah, that made sense. Blame his insecurities on Granny. Excellent scapegoat technique, Link; real befitting of the wielder of the Triforce of Courage.

Just when he had about gathered up the willpower to ask her whether anyone had remarked about the symbol on the backs of their hands, her phone gave a loud, threatening buzz.

"Well… that's her…" Zelda said slowly, and Link was sure he could hear the resignation and disappointment in her voice.

Clearing his throat roughly, he tried his best to think of something clever and confident to say.

"Oh, um… Ok."


"So, I, ah… I guess I'll see you tomorrow?" she asked rather than said as she stood from her seat and took a few hesitant steps toward the door.

"Oh! Uh sure, yeah, that'd be great. I mean, if you want to. You don't have to feel obligated or anything, I mean, it's not like you owe me anything or…"

He trailed off quickly, feeling stupid. Ugh, I thought I was passed this! Pull it together, Link! Stop acting like a complete idiot around Zelda! You need to keep your thoughts straight. Focus on something: Her eyes. Whoa, no, not her eyes, too distracting. Her hair? Nuh uh. Her lips- NO! No, not her lips! Definitely not her lips!

Thankfully, Zelda couldn't hear his terribly awkward internal diatribe and instead chose to smile and laugh at his previous comment.

"What, you mean I shouldn't feel obligated to spend time with my self-appointed bodyguard? Well, if you say so then I guess I have no choice…"

He found himself suddenly grinning at her quirkiness, relieved at how easily she managed to turn the tide of their conversation from awkward to nonsensical banter and a bit of his nervousness seemed to melt away. "Nuh-uh. We can't have you going off on your own anymore, Princess. Not until I'm back up and running. We don't want you getting yourself in 'damsel in distress' situations if I can't play the knight in shining armor."
"Well, I could always get a new knight…" she mused teasingly and Link offered up a longsuffering sigh.

"Perhaps, but he wouldn't be near as dashing and gallant as me."

"True, true. I suppose I'll just have to wait for you to heal then," she stated despondently, then grinned.

There was a moment, a long, lingering moment, in which the two Triforce bearers locked gazes and stared at one another…

And then the moment passed. Zelda gave her bottom lip a nervous bite, then whispered softly, "I'll see you tomorrow, Link."

"You too, Zelda," he replied, feeling thoroughly empty as he watched the object of his affection walk away from him once again.

He sighed inwardly, cursing his luck. If only he wasn't restrained to a bed he'd go after her, chase her through the hospital if he had to, anything at all so long as it meant stopping her from leaving. The first two times had failed, but you know what they say; third time’s the charm, or… something like that. Whatever. He'd have found a way to make it work, regardless.

"Wait."

Link blinked, drawn out of his muddled, wishful reverie by Zelda's voice. She was standing still right in front of the door, her hand outstretched and resting lightly on the doorknob. The soft breeze from the air conditioning vent situated above her stirred through her hair absently, making it shimmer and flow.

"Zelda?" he asked, confused.

"Wait," she repeated, this time with a note of desperation in her voice.

Before Link could ask her what was wrong she spun around and marched back toward him, her stride purposeful, her jaw set and her eyes blazing with determination.

Link didn't have anything to prepare him for what happened next. One moment she was at the door, and the next she was bearing down on him, one hand on his shoulder, the other sliding behind his neck, fingers tangling in his messy hair. His heart skipped a beat as he felt her warm breath on his cheek, felt her nose brush his and the silky tendrils of her hair curtain down around his face, her eyes drifting slowly closed…

And then she was kissing him, finally, gloriously. Her lips were warm and soft and so full of pent up emotion and desire that his mind was instantly wiped blank in the deluge and he willingly allowed himself to get lost in their moment; the feel of her skin, the smell of her hair, her taste. He wrapped his good arm around her back and drew her closer, ignorant of the pain that flared all over his body. It was worth it, anything was worth it for this one moment…

When she pulled away, seconds or minutes or hours later, they both were breathing unsteadily. Resting her forehead against his, she gently brought her left hand up off his shoulder to run through his hair. Her eyes slid slowly open once again until she was gazing into his eyes, this time from centimeters away, irises sparkling with emotions that he couldn't even begin to define, ones that both thrilled and terrified him, and he suddenly came to a realization.

It didn't matter if they were Link and Zelda or the Hero and the Princess as long as they were
together, united, the both of them. He felt the truth of it echoing through the fragmented memories of his past lives as surely as it resonated in the here and now. He needed her in his life. That's all there was to it.

Zelda swallowed, then whispered unsteadily, "Thank you…"

"…For what?" Link asked, perplexed.

"For saving me. For never giving up. For just being you."

She leaned down once more and placed one last, lingering kiss on his lips before she was up, straightening her hair and walking to the door.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Hero."

"I'll be waiting, Princess."

And just like that, with a wave and a grin, she was gone.

Link sighed contentedly, leaning back into his pillows. Everything was going to be ok…

…Until his nurse came barging back into the room a moment later looking frantic, demanding to know why his heart rate had just spiked unexpectedly. He didn't really have an answer for that.
The rest of Link's week was plagued with random visitors.

The day after Link's return to consciousness, he was awoken from his mid-afternoon slumber by a sharp rap on the door.

Grumbling darkly about his lack of privacy, Link called out for whoever was so rudely knocking to enter.

With a creak, the door swung open and Link found himself staring at a grinning, wheelchair-bound Kafei Dotour, his long purple hair as luxurious as ever, a garish lime-green cast encasing one of his legs and carrying of all things a pineapple in his hand, complete with a large red bow.

Before Link could ask why he was toting random tropical fruits through the hospital, his purple-headed friend called out leisurely, "Are you a fan of delicious flavor?" and lobbed the spiky golden snack at Link's head.

Link barely managed to bring his free hand up to catch the fruit before it collided with his face, a shockwave of pain rolling through his body at the sudden jerky movement. He hissed as the rough exterior stabbed into his palm, and he shot the beaming boy a dirty look.

"What in Din's name was that for?!"

"What?" he asked, sounded genuinely confused.

"I'm pretty sure it's against hospital regulations to go chucking fruit at its patients," Link deadpanned, still glaring at the upperclassman for all he was worth.

Kafei waved Link's remark off airily, wheeling himself into the room with one hand, the door swinging shut behind him as he slowly rolled to Link, pausing just beside the chair Zelda had been occupying earlier and propping his good leg up on Link's bed.

"Well, I wasn't aware it was a crime to spread delicious joy," he replied lightly, smirking at Link's indignation.

"It is when the joy has lethal spikes on the outside. Where'd you get a pineapple from anyway?"

"The hospital's gift shop, if you'll believe that. I bought it for Anju originally, since she thinks pineapples are quirky, but as she's not really awake yet…"

Link suddenly felt sick. "She's… she's not awake yet? Is she ok?"

Kafei nodded but carefully avoided making eye contact. "Yeah, she's ok… She just got out of surgery yesterday; I guess getting shot in the gut really messes up your intestines. The doctors say she's gonna pull through, but it'll be weeks before she can leave the hospital, and it might be months before she can get back to her life. That's part of why I brought you the pineapple; when I heard you were awake, I couldn't believe it. I guess I thought you'd be in surgery as long as she was since you had similar wounds. You must have some crazy supernatural healing powers or something."

Link's only response was a weak grin. What was he supposed to say to that? That as the chosen wielder of the Triforce of Courage, he really was gifted with supernatural healing properties by the Goddesses which was why he was already awake and responsive while his poor girlfriend had to
suffer through weeks of bed rest and physical therapy?

Kafei seemed to notice his discomfort, however, and rolled his eyes. "Don't be like that, Link. It's not like I hate you for healing faster. I'm glad you're ok, really. So don't get all noble on me and start feeling guilty. I'm sure Anju would be relieved to hear you're already up and awake too."

If anything, Kafei's little speech made him feel even more uncomfortable, though for an entirely different reason. Casting his eyes about for a way to change the subject and hide his embarrassment, he finally settled on the cast around Kafei's shin.

"How're you holding up?" Link asked, gesturing with his free hand.

Kafei shrugged nonchalantly. "Meh. Ganondorf's bullet shattered my tibia, and my fibula doesn't look much better. They did some surgery, realigned the bones and slapped a cast on me. Normally, I think they'd make me stay at the hospital a while longer, but what with the shooting and all... They're kinda running out of rooms. Ordon hasn't got the biggest hospital, you know. So they let me go. I'm not complaining though- at least I get to wear pants."

Link snorted and Kafei shot him a cheeky grin.

"Too bad you're wearing shorts though," Link chuckled, gesturing to the khaki cargos the purple upperclassman was wearing. "If you had actual pants you could cover up that hideous cast of yours."

"Ugh, not you too, Link!" Kafei groaned loudly, throwing his head back in dramatic dismay. "First my mom, then Mrs. Pots, then Cremia... I swear, nobody gets my sense of style except me, Romani and Aryll."

"Aryll's been to see you?" Link asked, his attention perked.

"Oh yeah," Kafei replied, settling back in his wheelchair and folding his arms behind his head. "She and Zelda stopped by a few days ago during lunch to check on Anju, and of course I was there. In fact," he added, glancing down at his wrist and pushing back the length of his purple sweatshirt to get a better look at his watch, "I actually have to get going. It's not that I don't wanna stay and chat, I just... I really wanna bet there when Anju wakes up."

Link nodded sadly, his heart going out to his injured friend.

"Tell her I said hey when she wakes up."

"Will do. Later man," Kafei replied, quickly wheeling his chair back around and rolling back toward the door.

When he got to the handle, however, Link stopped him.

"Hey Kafei, hold on a sec."

"What's up?" he asked, glancing curiously over his shoulder.

"It's just... when you see your dad, tell him I said thanks."

Kafei looked perplexed.

"You know," Link explained awkwardly, gesturing with his free hand, "for what he did for Sheik. He didn't have to do that. It was really nice of him."

Kafei smirked and gave his head a rueful shake. "Link, come on. Were you expecting anything less?"
You and Sheik… you saved Anju's life. You saved a lot of lives. My dad's the mayor; he has a responsibility for the people in this community and he owed you guys for what you did… we both do. And us Dotours, we pay our debts."

He didn't say any more. With a cheeky grin, the cocky teen wheeled out of the room and was gone, leaving Link chuckling lightly to himself.

Link didn't get to relax just yet, however.

Not even fifteen minutes after Kafei's departure, just as Link was beginning to fade out of consciousness, the door to his room was thrown open and the sound of it reverberating against the wall had his head jerking up in alarm.

A wicked jolt of pain flashed through his body at the start but he gritted his teeth and bore through it, struggling to blink away his sleepiness and see who the intruder was.

He needn't have looked, however. He'd know that obnoxious voice anywhere.

"Oh. My. Goddesses. Roonie, it's him! It's Link! You were right, he's alive! This is so exciting!"

Link felt completely pole-axed as the high-pitched squeal of her voice stabbed into his ear canals and he found himself mumbling in a horrified, disbelieving sort of way, "…Ruto?"

She squealed again when she heard him, the sound of it rattling through his brain like the discordant tones of a cat being tossed down a staircase. The overly-excitable cheerleader quickly flounced across the room, stopping precariously close to Link's bed and hovering over him, rocking back and forth feverishly on her toes as she gazed at him in admiration, her eyes wide and sparkling with awe.

"Din, Link, you look terrible!" she said, not sounding sorry in the least for his condition. "Did Ganondorf do that to you before you killed him? I heard you rushed up to the top of the building to save that new girl. Is she your girlfriend? Oh, was it a forbidden love kind of thing, and the evil guy made off with her and you had to fight your way through hordes of bad guys to get to her, only after all the dramatic tension, right after you'd found her and managed to sweep her off her feet the villain made his dramatic appearance and stabbed you in the chest and left you to die on the floor while he killed the woman you loved in front of your very eyes?"

Link was left staring in dumbfounded stupefaction, his mouth hanging open slightly as the perky girl's overly exuberant tirade washed over him like a tidal wave. He couldn't even tell where she was getting the air to say all that from, because she was talking way too fast to let her pause for breath… But she just kept right on going, talking animatedly to herself about Link's daring bravery and boundless feats of courage as he struggled to save the woman he loved from the evil wicked bad man. To be honest, he wasn't even sure she was paying attention to him anymore, as lost as she was within the fantastically dramatic love story she was spinning for herself.

His rescue came in the form of another teenager whose presence at Link's bedside was every bit as absurd as his girlfriend's.

"Whoa! Hold on there, babe!" Darunia the high school quarterback chuckled amiably as he strutted across the room to join Ruto, his arm snaking casually around her shoulders, drawing her flush against his side. She stopped talking immediately, though she kept staring at Link with fervid admiration, breathing heavily through her nostrils like a winded rhinoceros.

"Give the poor guy a little room to breathe, yeah? He just took a dive from Sahasralah's window! Like a boss, might I add," he shot a conspiratorial wink in Link’s direction as if the two were buddies.
and had planned Link's final blow against Ganondorf together in the locker room after team practice.

"And so brave..." Ruto chimed in, clasping her hands together in front of her chest.

"I can't think of a better way to have taken that prick down," Darunia added darkly, taking his hand off his girlfriend's shoulders for a moment to crack his knuckles menacingly. "I just wish I'd been there to do it myself. Maybe I could've helped you out, Hero. Stopped you from getting stabbed."

The two teens grinned down at Link, Darunia looking smug and triumphant, Ruto about ready to burst from repressed excitement. To Link, the entire situation was surreal.

What in the world were Ruto and Darunia, the two most popular students at Ordon High, doing visiting him in the hospital? They weren't exactly friends; they never got along in school, Ruto having marked him a social outcast back around seventh grade and Darunia nearly always made sure he didn't have to be on a team with the 'losers' back when they had gym together. To say he was surprised to see them would be like saying the gaping hole in his midsection was only a minor inconvenience to his health.

It took him a moment to realize they were waiting for him to respond.

"Oh, um, yeah. Yeah, maybe," he said quickly, trying not to look too bemused as he wracked his brains for the appropriate response. They seemed not to notice his discomfort, however, and kept right on grinning down at him.

"So, uh... What, uh, what brings you guys here?" Link asked awkwardly, inwardly wishing they'd hurry up and leave so he could get some rest. He may be pumped full of pain killers, but that didn't mean he enjoyed being conscious and dealing with his aching, throbbing body if he didn't have to... unless, of course, Zelda or his real friends and family were around.

"We stopped by to visit some of the guys," Darunia explained, shrugging lightly. "Not everyone on the football team was blessed enough to make it out of that building without a scratch like we were, but we have you to thank for that, don't we?"

Link suddenly felt uncomfortable. "Really, guys, it's not a big deal-"

"What are you talking about?" Ruto gasped, sounding scandalized at the very thought. "Hero, you're like... the most popular guy in school! You're all anyone can talk about! Do you have any idea how jealous the girls were when I told them I'd been rescued by the Link Hero? They were, like, crazy! I bet you could get any girl you wanted to go with you to Prom this year!"

"If we even have a prom..." Link muttered, but neither of them seemed to hear him.

"Din, I'd ask you out right now if I weren't already taken by the dreamiest man alive!" Ruto proclaimed proudly, and Link was glad that the couple was too busy giggling at each other to notice the look of utter revulsion that flashed across his face at the idea.

"So Hero, spill!" Darunia said, turning his attention back to Link who quickly schooled his features so that the duo wouldn't see his impatience at their presence. "Tell us what really went down! The news isn't telling us squat!"

"Well, I-" Link started, frantically thinking of a viable excuse to not have to explain anything when a sudden thought crossed his mind.

"Hey, wait. What exactly has the news been saying?"
"You mean you haven't been watching it?" Ruto gasped theatrically.

"Er, well, no… I've sorta been unconscious for the last few days, and…"

Ruto's voice ran right over him. "Oh, just wait till you see it, they've been talking about you on TV for days! Everyone in the country knows your name, Link! You're going to be so excited!"

And with that, she snatched the remote that had been dangling, forgotten, off the side of his bed by its thick white cord and directed it towards the flat screen on the wall opposite him.

With a brief flash and a quiet hum, the television came to life, the sounds issuing out of the tiny speaker on the remote rather than from out of the TV itself.

"-found out anything new regarding the incident at Ordon High earlier this week, although rumors have begun circulating that Link Hero, the courageous young man who took on the key orchestrator in what has been confirmed as the largest school-based massacre in Hyrulian history in a terrifying tussle to the death, has finally awoken from his coma."

"See, Link!" Ruto squealed excitedly, drowning out the voice of the news reporter, "It hasn't even been on for ten seconds and they already mentioned you!"

"Yeah…" Link muttered weakly, his eyes glued to the screen, something very much akin to dread welling up inside of him.

"Officials have been unable to confirm or deny this, however, and for the time being, police have made no motions to question the boy as to the truth behind what actually went on behind the final moments of the vicious assault."

The reporter, a middle-aged blonde woman with too-white teeth and too-tan skin, gave a fake smile that was emphasized by her excessive makeup and sharp blonde hair. Link almost felt like she was taunting him through the screen, as though she were demanding that he answer the question immediately.

The next scene they showed wiped all other thoughts from his mind.

"Here again, the stunning footage taken four days ago during the final moments of the shooting of Ordon High. Viewers are once again warned that some of the images you are about to see are of a highly sensitive and potentially offensive nature. Discretion is advised."

And then Link was watching it; the final events of his showdown with Ganondorf as seen from the outside world. At first, there was nothing special; just a camera panning the building slowly, seemingly waiting for something dramatic to happen, the cameraman fervently anticipating a scoop. The occasional gunshot could still be heard, signaling that the police raid was still happening on the lower floors, but all other sound was suddenly drowned out by a collective cry of alarm issued from the crowd of reporters, police officers, EMT's and concerned parents as, with the distinctive sound of shattering glass, the entire third floor window of Principal Sahasralah's office exploded outward.

The camera snapped up haphazardly to focus on the newly formed hole on the side of the building, and you could see the glass raining down, glittering like raindrops as they slashed through the air, the tacky blinds slowly trailing after them like streamers. There was a moment of confusion, and you could hear the crowd murmuring amongst itself as they examined the broken glass and the now wide-open expanse of windows, struggling to piece together what had just occurred and what it meant…

A moment later, someone screamed.
There, for a moment, a brief flash of movement was visible through the hole. The camera jerked upward once more, zooming in as far as it could, focusing all its attention on the hole.

The movement appeared again, then again, just enough to make out a flash of red hair… and then suddenly Link was looking at himself pressed up against the wall beside the pane-less window as Ganondorf was bearing down on him.

He heard the crowd's collective cry in fear and alarm as their eyes alighted upon Ganondorf for the first time, and over the panic of the audience, he heard the distinctive barks of police officers shouting frantic orders, struggling to take control of the situation.

The crowd screamed again as Zelda suddenly came into view, charging at Ganondorf, and then… she was knocked backward, but nothing had touched her. He could hear the confusion in the crowd's cacophonous babble, but deep down, Link remembered what had happened; the dark energy Ganondorf had exuded from his hand had kept her at bay.

When the police snipers fired, Link was able to actually hear the gunshot. It was probably because they were so much closer to the camera than they had been to Link from way up on the third floor. In any event, the sound was so loud and unexpected that he actually jumped in shock before realizing what was happening.

He watched numbly as the first bullets missed, then suddenly began ricocheting harmlessly off what looked like thin air, letting the shocked and fearful whisperings of the crowd grow louder and louder in his ears as he waited, feeling slightly sick, for what he knew was coming next.

The movement on the screen hardly seemed dangerous, but the memory echoed throughout Link's body and made his actual stab wound throb with the ghost of the pain.

In the moments that followed, as the confused crowd struggled to understand what was going on, Link felt himself break out into a cold sweat as the dark memories of that moment came flooding back to him. He could feel the sickly warm and wet feel of his own blood oozing out onto his fingers. He could feel the razor-sharp edges of the knife slicing through him for a second time as he struggled with gradually less-responsive digits to pull the weapon back out of him. And he could feel his legs falter as he struggled to lunge forward and drive the bloody blade into Ganondorf's own heartless chest.

He didn't know when he stopped breathing. It might have been when he watched the tiny version of himself on the TV collide with Ganondorf, or maybe when the two started teetering precariously over the edge of the window and the crowd began its collective gasp. All he knew for sure was that as he watched Ganondorf's body tumble towards the ground, one of the machines started beeping loudly, and a nurse he didn't recognize came flying into the room looking alarmed.

It wasn't really until she had forcibly kicked Darunia and Ruto from the room without so much as an explanation that Link began to realize that something was wrong; his heart was pounding too loudly in his ears, he was having difficulty breathing, and the world was starting to spin around him. Yet still, he couldn't bring himself to tear his eyes away from the television screen as he watched himself dangling precariously out of the window, the only thing preventing him from free falling to his death was the trembling arm of a familiar, beautiful blonde girl…

"Mr. Hero? Mr. Hero, can you hear me?" The nurse called out loudly from her position less than a foot from the side of his bed. He wanted to answer 'yes, of course I can hear you, you're yelling for Farore's sake!'; yet he couldn't make a sound, his eyes glued to the screen, watching as his slick, bloody hand began to slip slowly from Zelda's desperate grasp.
"Mr. Hero?" The nurse said again, lowering herself down and gazing at Link in concern, lifting a hand and thumbing his eyelid.

He continued to ignore her, staring in horror at the screen just over her shoulder, watching Zelda's lips move soundlessly, hearing the frantic, terrified screaming of the crowd, waiting for the moment that he'd begin to fall…

The nurse finally seemed to notice what he was staring at. She reached down swiftly and plucked the remote from off his bed, and just as his body began its terrible freefall…

The screen went black.

Link lay there, motionless, his chest heaving, his heart hammering painfully against his already bruised and battered ribcage. He felt sticky and cold from sweat, and every muscle in his body had gone taut, straining against bones that hadn't fully healed yet, sending shockwaves of pain rippling throughout his musculoskeletal system.

In his mind's eye, he could see all of the horrors of that day replaying over and over like the news footage; the screams, the gunshots, the panic, the blood… Sahasralah, Viscen, and Salvatore stacked neatly behind a desk… the nameless shooter who'd killed himself before Link and Aryll had gotten to his room… Anju, lying crumpled on the ground, her body pale as porcelain, the pool of liquid surrounding her as scarlet as her hair…

Sakon, face-first in a pile of dirt, a bloodless bullet hole in his back…

With a jolt, he came back to reality to find the nurse standing over him, gently shaking his shoulder as she did her best to speak to him in soft, gentle murmurs.

"Mr. Hero… Mr. Hero, listen to me, you need to calm down, everything's ok now… It's over, you're safe now. I need you to calm down, ok? Breathe… That's right, just breathe… Everything's ok…"

It took a while for his heart rate to drop back down to normal levels, and even longer for his muscles to unclench. His nurse said he'd had a panic attack, likely brought on from watching the footage of the shooting and threatened to unplug his television if he even thought about turning the news on again. She needn't have worried, though. Link wouldn't have gone back to watching the news if his life depended on it.

His nurse told him she would be turning away any more visitors for the day, which was fine by Link, only he discovered when she left the room that he couldn't sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, visions of what he'd seen on the television flashed before his eyes and he'd jolt awake, his breathing erratic, trying hard to calm the frantic beating of his heart as to not draw the attention of his nurse again.

Just when he was beginning to think he'd have a sleepless night, the door opened once more. He turned his head, expecting to see the doctor there to run more tests or his, and was surprised to see not one, but three figures standing in his doorway. And two of them were arguing.

"Please, Chief, don't go in there, not right now, not for this. He's had a bad day, this isn't a good time to make him go over this-"

"Ma'am, with all due respect, there will never be a good time to go over this," came the exhausted voice of one haggard looking chief of police, Rusl Smith. "Now please. Your supervisor already instructed you to let me pass."

Link's nurse, who Link could already tell was fighting a losing battle, clenched her fists, pursed her
lips, and exhaled heavily through her nostrils. Finally, with a sigh and an apologetic look to Link, she said, "Fine. But make it quick. My patient needs his sleep.'

Rusl strode into the room without further delay, followed quickly by the third figure; his son, Colin.

Rusl immediately folded into the chair at Link's bedside, his head slumped back with a groan. He looked haggard; the top buttons of his navy police shirt undone, his sleeves rolled up, his pants wrinkled, his face gaunt and sleep deprived. He'd likely been working all-nighters every day since the shooting. Link felt pity for the exhausted man welling up inside of him. Colin followed after his father much more hesitantly, lowering himself slowly into the empty chair beside him, his eyes glued to his shoes as he ignored Link's quizzical gaze.

Link turned his attention back to Rusl and said, without preamble, "You look like crap."

Rusl shot Link a wry look and said, "I could say the same about you."

There was a pause, and then the two broke out in conspiratorial grins.

"Ah, Link, it's good to see you're ok. Uli was hysterical after you took your dive from Sahasrahla's office. She cried for hours until we heard you were alive and in surgery. And now look at you; awake, alert, cracking jokes… You'd never believe you were near death not even a week ago. Amazing. Truly amazing."

Link said nothing. How was he supposed to respond to that anyway? Thankfully, Rusl wasn't expecting a response.

"Now, as for why I'm here… Your nurse is right, you need to get some sleep. And quite frankly, I need some too, so we're going to keep this short and sweet. I've been putting off coming to see you ever since I heard you were awake. I wanted to give you some peace before asking you to relive the nightmare that was the Ordon High Massacre, as some upstart reporter has so lovingly coined it. Honestly, I'd really rather not have to do this at all, but the fact remains… we need your testimony, Link."

Link blanched. He didn't know why, but somehow, he wasn't expecting this. Maybe because Sheik had said the trials were already over. Maybe because some part of him was hoping that they'd show him mercy and not make him do this, or that he's missed it all when he was unconscious. He could feel the dread from earlier welling up inside of him; the beginning vestiges of the panic that had incapacitated him when Darunia and Ruto had turned on the news.

Rusl seemed to sense his disquiet.

"I don't need to hear everything, Link," he said quietly, and Link could tell he was trying his best to sound soothing. "We got most of what we needed from your friends, the faculty, and the shooters themselves. What we really need from you is your account of what happened in Sahasrahla’s office between you and Ganondorf. That's all."

Something dark settled in Link's chest. He wanted to know what went down between him and Ganondorf… What was he supposed to say? He couldn't tell him the truth; about Ganondorf being the reincarnated King of Evil or his plot to reunite the Triforce for the first time in centuries and take over the world. He'd think he was nuts!

"You need to cross-examine my testimony with Zelda's?" Link asked, trying to delay the moment where he'd be forced to come up with a convincing lie.

"I never asked Ms. Nohansen. I assumed it would be easier if I were to ask you because you know
me, rather than having some random officer question her. I didn't want to cause any more harm than had already been done."

Link smiled at the man weakly. It was a kind gesture he supposed, only now that he was the one being questioned he couldn't help but resent Zelda slightly for getting away so easily. He wracked his brains, searching for a plausible story.

"Why don't we start from the beginning. You ran off after you heard Ganondorf on the loudspeaker, and…"

And so he began, spinning a web of lies and deceit and praying he didn't trap himself in it. For the most part, he kept as close to the truth as possible, detailing Ganondorf turning his gun on Zelda, him kicking Link, Link assaulting him with the stapler, wrestling the gun away from him. It was at this point, however, that Link hesitated.

"Ok, so… you wrestled the gun away from him and…? What happened to the gun?"

"It, uh, it broke. It hit the wall and fell apart and was sort of forgotten."

Rusl nodded, scribbling something on the paper. "Yes, we found the fragments against the wall. What happened to the desk?"

"The desk?" Link asked blankly, his thoughts in disarray as Rusl leaped ahead in the story.

"Yes, Sahasralah's desk. We found it in pieces on the floor. Was there some sort of explosion in the office? Is that what blew out the windows?"

"The, er… The windows?" Link could remember perfectly well what made the windows explode. The wall of dark energy Ganondorf exuded from his body. Only, he couldn't tell Rusl that. "They were… Oh! Oh, explosion! Yeah, he had a, um… A bomb. He had a bomb. And it… exploded."

Rusl stared at him blankly. "He set off a bomb?"

"Yes."

"In the room?"

"Yes."

"With all of you still in it? And none of you were hurt?"

"…Yes?"

There was a moment of silence as Rusl fixed him with a look of complete and utter disbelief. Link broke out in a cold sweat, his fingers twitching nervously. Please, Farore, let him move on, don't call me out, just ignore how stupid I sound and move on…

With a disparaging shake of the head, Rusl thankfully chose not to comment again on how much of an idiot Link sounded. He was eternally grateful.

"Ok… so after the… bomb… that was when you were stabbed?"

"Yes," Link said with conviction, eager to change the topic. "Yes, but you could see all that from the window, right? It's on tape. I saw it."

"Right, but we're just making sure. Can you explain what was happening with the snipers?"
"The snipers?"

"Yes, the snipers. They were attempting to shoot Ganondorf from the moment you were stabbed up until the two of you toppled out the window, however, none of their shots could get through. Can you explain that?"

This, Link knew, was the real reason Rusl was there. It was why he let his bomb comment slide. He didn't care about the rest, only why his snipers were ineffective. Link wracked his brains for an answer.

"Um… the snipers… I don't really… I don't really remember that, sir."

"You don't," Rusl said flatly, irritation starting to shine through his words.

"No. But then," Link said, with a sudden rush of inspiration, "I sort of had a knife in my gut. I wasn't really paying attention to anything other than my imminent death."

Rusl was taken aback by Link's bluntness, and he could see the chastened look on his face. Clearing his throat roughly, he sent Link an apologetic look and said, "Right. I'm sorry, Link, I didn't mean to…"

Link shrugged nonchalantly. He felt bad for taking a shot at Rusl like that, but what else could he do?

He fully expected Rusl to get up and leave then, but was surprised when, after a moment of shuffling through more papers, he looked back up at Link and said, "I have one final thing I need to discuss with you, Link."

"You do?" he asked tentatively, awaiting the moment where he'd have to perform more imaginative gymnastics to avoid telling Rusl the truth.

"Yes. The general consensus we've received from the students is that Ganondorf was the leader of the attack and that he had four main subordinates. Can you confirm this?"

"Yes." Link said, feeling relieved. He didn't have to lie about this. This was easy.

"Can you give me their names, please."

"Well, there was Zant, Vaati, Sakon, and Sheik. Only, Sheik was-"

"I know, Link, I know. I was at his trial, after all."

"I know, Link, I know. I was at his trial, after all."

Link sent Rusl a grateful look. "Is that all you needed to know?"

"No, that wasn't the question. We already knew that, I was simply confirming. No, what we need to know is this: We have confirmation on the fates of all five conspirators but one. Sheik was mostly pardoned for turning sides and working to save everyone. Ganondorf, as you know, met his fate at your hands by being stabbed in the chest and falling three stories to his death, and then having your body fall three stories and land on him-"

"Wait, what?" Link cut in, flabbergasted. "I landed on him?"

"Yes. Well, mostly. The right side of your body hit the concrete which is why you have more injuries on that side, but it's believed that the main reason you survived the fall is because his body cushioned you. A bit ironic, don't you think?"
Link was at a loss for words.

"Now," Rusl said, peering back at one of his papers and continuing where he left off, "we have multiple eyewitnesses that have informed us that Zant was killed by Sheik due to a fatal blow to the throat, crushing the cartilage in his esophagus, suffocating him. Vaati likewise was suffocated, only by chemical gas and by the hand of a boy named Shad."

Link felt sick. Hearing these things read off so casually made them sound all the more horrific. Sheik got Zant, and Shad did in Vaati. That only left…

"And finally, we have Sakon. His body was found in the principal's office lying face down in a pile of dirt and broken pottery. His skull was partially crushed and there were two bullet wounds in his back. We've received numerous reports that you were in the main office at least twice during the attack. Can you shed some light on Sakon's demise?"

He felt his throat stick at the unpleasant memory, but he forced himself to swallow through it and whisper hoarsely, "It was me, Rusl. I did it. I killed Sakon with the pot. When Kafei and I escaped from the room they had us trapped in, Sakon found us… there was a tussle over a gun, he was about to shoot me, I reacted instinctively… And that's it."

Rusl stared at him for a moment, his face expressionless. "And the bullet wound?"

"That…" he hesitated briefly, choosing his words with the utmost care, "…was after the fact. Kafei… and I, we didn't know if he was unconscious or… or not. And we felt like it was too big a risk to leave up to chance."

Rusl nodded before saying softly, "…Alright. Thank you, Link, for telling me that. It's one less loose end we have to worry about."

"Any more questions?" Link asked, feeling nauseous and a little rung-out, emotionally speaking.

"No, that should be good. Told you it was short." He flashed Link a small grin as though to clear the air between them and stood, stretching his back with a groan.

"Good Farore, am I sore! Well, best of luck to you, Link. Give Aryll and Granny Hero my best when you see them next, because Nayru only knows when I will." He chuckled lightly, casting the folder in his hands a rather sadistic look. "I expect Uli will be along sometime to see you. She was so worried about you and your sister during the attack…"

Rusl trailed off unexpectedly, and he and Link both turned their heads toward Colin who had abruptly stood from his chair, facing Link, his hands balled into fists, his arms and shoulders rigid. His head was hung low, however, and he refused to make eye contact. His entire frame was trembling.

"Link…" Colin began tensely, then hesitated, looking unsure.

Link raised his brow in confusion. "Er… Colin? You ok?"

"Link," he said again, only this time he held his head high and squared his shoulders. He had a fiercely determined look in his steely grey eyes, his jaw clenched rigidly, looking for all the world like he was about to do something incredibly unpleasant.

Link was baffled. What in the world was going on?

"I'm sorry," he blurted out suddenly, and Link blinked in surprise. Rusl leaned back, a troubled look
on his face, studying his son quietly.

"Uh…” Link said blankly, but Colin cut him off.

"I'm sorry that I betrayed you to Ganondorf. It was my fault that he went looking for your friends. I told him where you all were… and I… I understand if you… If you can't forgive me."

There was a tense moment following his pronouncement in which Rusl fixed his unreadable gaze on Link, Link looked on in amazement at Colin, and Colin stared resolutely at the floor.

Finally, Link let out a snort and said, "Colin, what are you talking about?"

Colin glanced up in mild surprise. "Huh? I… Link, I'm trying to apologize for-"

"Yeah, no, I got that," Link cut him off, waving his hand impatiently. "But I mean, why?"

Colin merely stood there, looking confused. "Aren't you… Aren't you mad at me?"

Link barked a laugh. "Uh, no? Colin, really, come on. Ganondorf had you at gunpoint. What were you supposed to do, die? If I were you, I would've done the same thing. Anyone would. You don't need to beat yourself up over it."

"But Link," Colin started to argue, but Link rode him over.

"And another thing. From what I understand, you flat out refused to give Ganondorf his information unless he promised not to hurt my sister, right?"

Colin's mouth gaped like a fish, but no sound came out.

"Right," Link said, matter-of-factly. "You did what you did not for yourself, but for your girlfriend; my little sister. You were trying to keep her safe. How am I supposed to be mad at you for that?"

Rusl was grinning now, but he hid it behind his hand so Colin couldn't see. Link could tell; he'd been worried that Link would hold a grudge against him for what happened back at the school, and they both knew Colin was beating himself up over something that was ultimately out of his control.

"Besides, Colin," Link continued, his voice growing a little softer, "do you honestly believe you did that much harm?"

Colin, who'd been staring at his shoes in embarrassment, jerked his head back up at Link's words. "But Link, I sold you and your friends out to Ganondorf! I stopped the police from invading-"

"No," Link said flatly, cutting the spluttering boy off once more. "Think about it logically for a second, Colin. Ganondorf had that entire attack planned out methodically. His goal from the beginning was to get me and make me pay for ratting him out and getting him sent off to Juvy."

He carefully skirted around the bit about the Triforce and the predestined battle between the Hero of Time and the King of Thieves.

"Do you really think he needed information from you for his plan to succeed? And honestly, Colin, that information didn't even have any value. When the attack started everyone bolted out of their classrooms and those who couldn't escape were rounded up and put into other classrooms. Nobody was where they were supposed to be. You telling him where we were was completely pointless, and he knew that."

Colin's face had gone completely pale, his eyes wide with this newfound revelation. "He didn't… I
wasn't… but then why ask? Why make me give him answers and agree to the deal in the first place?"

"Because he was playing you, Colin," Link explained gently. "He was playing you because he knew you were Rusl's son, because he knew you were dating my little sister. When you came to get her, he was never actually going to let you go. He probably had some ambush set up for the two of you before you got out."

"But why?" Colin gasped, his hands tearing maddeningly through his hair.

"Because he's was sick and twisted. Because your pain gave him pleasure. So stop giving it to him. Just let it go."

"But… But the police scanner, I still-"

"No, Colin," Rusl said, finally speaking up, casting his son a sorrowful look. "You didn't do any harm there either. The decision of when to invade the school was entirely my call, and the fault for us coming so late belongs to me. If anything, you helped us save the day. The radio you gave them allowed us to trick them into thinking we were coming through the kitchen rather than the gymnasium. True, you didn't plan that, but honestly… Son, no harm came to any of the students because of your actions. Listen to Link. You need to forgive yourself and move on."

Colin was quiet for a moment before sinking onto the bed beside Link's feet, his arms slumped forward on his knees, his head in his hands.

"It doesn't matter," he whispered softly. "Aryll still hates me…"

Link rolled his eyes. "Aryll's an idiot. And she doesn't hate you."

Colin scoffed. "You say that now. You didn't hear her and Sheik after they found out what I'd done."

"No, but I did hear her defend you after you confessed to your dad," Link pointed out, and Colin blinked. "Besides, Aryll and Sheik… You need to give them the benefit of the doubt there."

"What do you mean?" Colin asked, shooting Link a confused look.

"Well, take Sheik for example. Sheik's the kind of guy who blames himself for everything and judges himself too harshly besides. That's just who he is as a person. I honestly think most of his anger towards you was anger he was really deflecting from himself. You were both in similar situations, committing similar crimes… But you know, if he really hated you he wouldn't have stood up for you to your dad and Officer Shiro. I'm not sure if he'll ever fess up and apologize, but… Well, that's Sheik too."

Colin was staring down at his hands now, laying absently on his lap, drinking in Link's words.

"And… Aryll?"

"Aryll's anger is a little more justified… but her feelings of betrayal and hurt are compounded by our own family history. Aryll and I… we're all that's left of our family, aside from Granny. She's already had to deal with so much loss in her life, I'm sure in that moment, when she found out about your deal with Ganondorf, she felt like you, her boyfriend, a person she's supposed to be able to trust and rely on, had just broken that bond in the worst of ways and threw away the last piece of her family. So, she was hurt, yeah. It's understandable. And it may take a while for you to be able to rebuild that trust… But don't give up hope, Colin. She cares about you, you care about her, and Din burn me if another guy exists in the world who I'm ok with dating my baby sister."
Link laughed at that, half expecting the other two to do the same. He was surprised, however, when Colin remained silent for a moment before unsteadily wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand. Clearing his throat gruffly, he stood from the bed and fixed Link with a watery stare, slowly extending his hand.

"Thanks, Link," he said quietly, his eyes swimming with unshed tears.

"Anytime, Colin," Link replied, taken aback at how emotional his little impromptu speech had made the boy. He reached out and accepted Colin's handshake bracingly, hoping he was right about Aryll. He could be wrong, she may not ever forgive him, but he just had this feeling…

Rusl stood then, hooking his arm around Colin's shoulders and bringing him in for a brief one-armed hug. Then with a nod and a grateful smile, he shook Link's hand as well and with a warm farewell, shepherded his son out the door, leaving Link to his thoughts for the night.

Thankfully, the rest of his stay at Ordon Hospital was less emotionally jarring.

His family, true to their word, visited him for a couple of hours every day, usually around lunchtime. Link was hard-pressed to decide if he enjoyed these visits or not, because while he was grateful for the company, he loathed how his sister and grandmother seemed to always bring in delicious take-out from various restaurants when they came to see him to tease and dangle tantalizingly before him, unknowingly mocking him for the strict clear-liquids diet the hospital staff had placed him on upon waking; apparently, they'd performed complex reconstructive surgery on sections of his intestines that were damaged by Ganondorf's stabbing, and until his digestive tract was up for the challenge he wasn't allowed to eat real food.

Honestly, the inability to ingest anything other than juice, popsicles, and gelatin was probably his biggest inconvenience, other than being unable to move. The collective pain of his injuries were rapidly abating as the days went on, and the doctors and nurses were baffled, unable to explain the phenomenon that was his incredibly rapid healing. He still had the sutures in his abdomen, yes, and it was likely he'd have permanent scarring, but that didn't really bother him. The accursed itchiness of his casts, however…

His limbs were healing just as rapidly as the rest of his body, but his leg and arm had taken the worst of the impact after he'd toppled out of the building. His leg had snapped in three places, and he didn't even want to consider what he'd been told about his arm and shoulder. Still, the doctors refused to believe that bones as damaged as his could be knitting together so quickly and were insistent that his casts remain on full-term. So far, his attempts to dissuade them were falling on deaf ears. He yearned to be able to flex his limbs once more, unused as he was to being confined in a single place for so long.

His reprieve came in the form of his visitors, the only real dent in the never-ending void of boredom that had become his stay at Ordon Hospital (he'd forsaken even the thought of turning on the television after Darunia and Ruto's visit in fear of bringing on another panic attack).

His family, of course, was a given; Aryll's cheerful humor and Granny's snide remarks were always enough to brighten up his gloomy room. Sheik and Midna also made frequent visits, filling him in on their many wacky misadventures in the magical land of community service. Whether they were assisting the elderly at an old folks’ home or picking up trash on the side of the road, somehow, they managed to get themselves into bizarre situations that were guaranteed to make Link laugh until he cried… which wasn't very difficult, considering how painful laughing still was.

Zelda also visited him daily, although the two never got time alone together. She always seemed to show up whenever someone else was visiting, or else had her visit cut short by the doctors and their
incessant testing. As annoyed as he was that they couldn't get any one-on-one time, he was still always happiest when she was around. She made it a point during her visits to sit in the same chair she'd been in when he awoke, their hands interlocked, their respective Triforce marks glowing a little brighter at the close contact. They were forced to angle their hands awkwardly so the others didn't notice this little oddity, but neither of them cared much. It was worth it.

Kafei would visit occasionally, and although the two would exchange witticisms and banter like old friends, Link could never fight off the lingering shadow of despair that came with him; the kind that settled like a mantle over the room when he would announce that Anju still hadn't come around yet. And try as he might, Link still couldn't help but feel slightly guilty that the Goddesses had blessed him with such incredible healing power, yet he couldn't do a thing for Anju…

Link still had plenty of other more cheerful visitors to help prevent him from ruminating constantly over his still-suffering friend, however.

A couple days after waking, Aryll's friends Saria, Malon, and Mido had come fumbling into the room, looking a little unsure of themselves. Link knew why; while his and his sister's friends had occasionally hung out together in the past, and while he knew and liked most of them well enough, they weren't really all that close individually.

He was touched, however, by the concern in Saria's eyes when she asked how he was feeling, and chuckled earnestly when Malon brandished a silly cow plushy from her large purse, plopping the stuffed animal on the windowsill and claiming it was there to brighten up his drab room. Mido was still a bit of an idiot, but he didn't have to show up in the first place, so Link was pleased all the same. He decided to make it a priority to get to know Aryll's friends a little bit better. Who knew; maybe they'd become his friends too.

If seeing Aryll's friends was unexpected, they had nothing on his next visitor.

When Linebeck, the janitor, sidled awkwardly into the room the next day Link had merely stared at him in bewilderment. He hadn't stayed for long and had merely mumbled something about him 'promising to check up on the kid' and something about someone named 'Sparkles' before slinking back out the door.

Link had heard from Midna that Linebeck had actually come through in the clutch, helping to save her in the gym and driving the busload of kids to safety, so he assumed everything he had thought about the lazy janitor was wrong. If anything, coming to see him even though the two had never really interacted only further proved the point. Still, he remained staring at the door for a while after the janitor had departed, struggling in vain to understand what made the bizarre man tick.

The biggest surprise came from Shad and Ashei.

"You're not coming back to school?" Link blurted out in shock in the middle of their conversation. Shad, who'd seated himself in a chair beside Link's bed, casually adjusted his glasses and fixed Link with a bemused look.

"Honestly, it can't come as much of a surprise, Link. I imagine a significant portion of the students won't ever come back. They were afraid for a while the school would be shut down permanently. As it is, it's already been closed down for the next month while they perform the necessary repairs and search for anyone desperate enough to fill the vacancies in the faculty."

"Yeah, but still…" Link muttered, unable to imagine attending a class without the brainy Shad or the eternal tomboy Ashei. The two had been staples since kindergarten. True, they hadn't been
particularly close until the shooting, but even so… They were friends now, and he would miss them.

"Hey, cheer up, yeah?" Ashei said bracingly, lightly rapping Link's good leg with her knuckles from her spot beside Shad. "You'll still see me at the girls’ volleyball games when my new team shows up to thrash Ordon next year. As long as you show up, I mean. And you will show up."

Link sent her a small smile to show he was teasing, but he had to work to make it seem real. When she'd shown up at his room being pushed in a wheelchair like by Shad, he'd been stunned. He had no idea the two hadn't made it out of the building through the air vent when they'd split up. He couldn't help but feel slightly guilty for the bullet wound in her upper thigh that prevented her from walking and for Shad's newfound case of asthma. They had glossed over the details of what had happened; a run in with Vaati, shots were fired, random chemical spills, the usual for the dynamic duo. He assumed they hadn't wanted to dredge up the memories themselves, but they made the mistake of dropping Zelda's name, so he made a mental note to quiz her later.

When he realized he'd been quiet for too long, he asked, "So what brought up the idea of a private school?"

"My Ma," Ashei said, rolling her eyes dramatically. "She figured a fancy, classy place would be less prone to shootings. I can't say I care, really, it's only that we have to wear uniforms now, so…"

She shuttered comically, and he grinned. Even after taking a bullet, Ashei was still the same as ever. It was good to know not everything had changed.

"And you, Shad?" he asked, turning his attention to the bespectacled ginger.

"It's thanks to Ashei, actually," he replied, and Link once again had to stop himself from wincing at the sound of his voice. The doctors said they'd be able to treat his lungs, and even now he had to carry an oxygen tank around with him until he was officially discharged from the hospital. It wasn't the tubes in his nose that altered his voice, though; it was the slight scarring of his esophagus along with bits of his nasal cavity and lung tissue, the kind that wouldn't go away.

"My mother demanded that I be homeschooled. She's been wanting it for a while, but I've always been able to hold her off before now. In truth, I didn't think anything would be able to change her mind… until Ashei mentioned the private school she was being sent to. She went on for a bit, embellishing on their scholastic accolades and attention from the nation's premier universities and my mother was sold. I'm just glad I won't be trapped at home for the rest of my life."

Shad sent Ashei a smirk which resulted in an ungainly snort and a derisive comment about what a momma's boy he was, and in a flash the two were off exchanging quips and sarcastic remarks at lightning speed. Link was forced to settle back with a rueful shake of his head; at least the shooting of Ordon High had a few positive points. To think an uncanny friendship would spawn in the face of such sorrow…

The duo left not long after, Shad pushing Ashei, his oxygen tank propped up on the back of her chair, her shouting orders at him like he was her chauffeur while he rolled his eyes skyward, as if to say 'why me?'.

And then, of course, he received his most flamboyant guest.

When Ralph came strutting into the room a few days later, Link was in the middle of attempting to drink awkwardly from a tiny plastic cup of apple juice. The surprise of seeing him was so great that he choked, the juice going down the wrong pipe, and he was reduced to fit of coughing and splutters.
"Good Farore!" Ralph exclaimed with emphatic gusto, leaping forward and hammering Link on the back bracingly, sending shockwaves of pain throughout his body, worsening the situation immensely. "Breathe, man, breathe! It doesn't do to have our nations hero vanquished by a beverage! What would the press say!"

Still hacking, Link managed to choke out, "R-Ralph… What are… What are you doing here?"

"Why, I came to see you, of course! To think, that one so noble as I would not visit my dear friend Link on his death bed… I'm appalled at the very notion!"

"Er," Link said, hastily wiping his chin with a puzzled expression, "deathbed? I'm not dying, Ralph… actually, I feel a lot better now…"

Ralph ignored him.

"Of course, I would be remiss to pass up this magnanimous opportunity! You, Link, my greatest rival, my most worthy adversary, defeated and cast down to the earth in shame!"

"Rival? …Opportunity?"

"But alas! 'Tis I who am shamed by you, Link! Once again you have defeated me! Once again you have crept in and stolen the glory that was rightfully mine!"

"Are you talking about the sixth-grade spelling bee again? Because dude, it's not my fault you messed up on 'platitudinous'. You need to let that stuff go."

Stalking to the foot of Link's bed, Ralph turned and struck a dramatic pose. "This is not the end, Link Hero! Soon, my moment shall come, and I shall be the one praised and adored for my heroics! Until next we meet!"

And on that pontificating note, he turned with a flap of his odd blue jacket and strutted right back out the door, leaving Link feeling even more confused than normal in traditional Ralph fashion.

Finally, after approximately three weeks, the doctors were forced to conclude that as odd as Link's incredible healing prowess was, there was basically no reason to keep him any longer. They cut sections of his cast away, leaving the portion that stretched from his hand to his elbow as well as the part that encased his shin and ankle, the result being that he could walk provided he carry a crutch. The sutures had been removed from his stomach a week or so back leaving a ghastly puckered scar just above and slightly to the left of his belly button; a menacing two-and-a-half-inch reminder of the price of being the Hero.

It was on Link's last night in the hospital that he received his final group of visitors.

It was around seven in the evening and Link was lounging back in his bed, his free arm tucked behind his head as he stared languidly at the television (he'd caved in a week or so back on account of sheer boredom, but resolutely avoided the news stations).

To say he was excited to be getting out of the stuffy hospital after nearly a month was an understatement; as if the prospect of wearing pants again wasn't enough, Granny had decided to throw a party in honor of his recovery. Sure, it was a little odd to be having a party in the wake of such horror, but as his grandmother put it, they couldn't sit and mourn forever. Life moved on, and they had to move with it.

Link was just starting to get teary-eyed over the climactic ending of 'A Walk to Remember' (they didn't get the greatest variety of channels at Ordon Hospital. Or at least, that was his excuse if anyone
asked to save his manly pride) when he heard the now familiar click of the doorknob.

Quickly straightening up and wiping his eyes, he fumbled for the remote and hastened to change the channel before who he presumed was the nurse walked in and witnessed his shameful moment of insecurity.

To his surprise, however, it was not the nurse.

"Mr. Oshus?"

"Ah, Mr. Hero! Good, you are awake," the elderly man beamed beneath his thick white eyebrows, stroking his bushy mustache with gusto. Behind him walked two more surprises; Coach Nabooru and Link's favorite teacher, Mr. Auru.

The commercial suddenly ended on whatever station he had changed it to, and the theme song for the next show suddenly began to play.

'My Little Pony, My Little Pony, Ahhh ahhh ahhh ahhh-

Link practically leaped out of his skin, nearly dropping the remote again in mortification. Hurriedly mashing his fingers against the buttons, he managed to increase the volume, adjust the brightness to maximum, and turn on the Spanish subtitles before succeeding in finding the power button.

"I, uh," Link panted, his face flushed scarlet under the bemused and slightly disturbed gazes of his teachers, "th-that's not… I wasn't watching… You- You startled me when you came in, and- and the remote slipped, and…"

There was an awkward pause, during which Auru coughed discretely into his hand.

"Right. Of course," Mr. Oshus said finally, in a tone that said he clearly didn't believe that for a second. Nabooru snickered unabashedly, her golden eyes gleaming with mirth.

"Link, how are you feeling?" Auru asked a touch too loudly, settling himself in Sheik's preferred chair on Link's right, beside the side-table with the now-dead vase of flowers.

"Fine!" he replied a little too eagerly, happy to change the subject to anything but the children's cartoon that he was sure would now single-handedly ruin his reputation. "Just great, actually. Yeah, the doctor says they're gonna release me tomorrow, so…"

"Well, that's terrific news!" Auru replied, beaming in a genuine sort of way. "Good Farore, that was fast! Were there any complications in surgery? Anything at all?"

"Not really, no," Link said, shrugging. "The surgeon said it was a cakewalk. The first time he's ever seen someone get part of their intestines split open that didn't result in instant widespread infection. He just sewed me up, bandaged up my limbs and sent me on my way. I mean I was in a coma for a bit, but…"

"Incredible… I've never heard of such a thing…” The older man murmured, and Link made a mental note to tone it down a bit; he didn't want any more awkward questions that he couldn't answer, like with Rusl… Or did he? Would telling Auru be such a big deal? He was the history teacher, after all, and he knew all about the old legends… And most importantly Link felt like he could trust him…

"Indeed," Oshus intoned gravely, finally rejoining the conversation though he didn't take a seat like Auru had. Nabooru was still chortling in the background. "Truly a miracle. What happened that day was an unheard-of catastrophe, but never let it be said that the Goddesses forsook us. We have much
Link was a little unsure how to deal with Mr. Oshus, admittedly. Nabooru and Auru he at least knew on a more personal level; Auru having taught him last year and he took gym as a freshman under Coach Nabooru and Darmani's duel teachings, as all freshmen did, but he'd never taken Marine Biology. He'd had a hard enough time with regular biology. Science just wasn't his forte.

"Now, Mr. Hero, I'm sure you're wondering why we're here," Oshus began again, and Link refrained from agreeing aloud; he didn't want to come across as rude, after all. "Have you had any news on the state of the school since you awoke?"

"Not really," Link said slowly, not sure where this was going. "I mean, I heard it had shut down for the month, but other than that…"

Oshus nodded as if he had expected as much.

"Yes indeed. Ordon High was shut down after that ghastly incident, and the remaining students were given two weeks reprieve for psychological reasons. Classes have since resumed, though on the campus of the local community college until the work on the building is completed, however many of our students have instead transferred to other area high schools. Our number of students has greatly dwindled, but I cannot begrudge them their decisions. It has been a trying time for us all."

"Have they already decided on a new Principal?" Link asked curiously.

Oshus smiled. "In fact, they have."

"Really? Who is it?"

"Me," Oshus replied simply.

Link stared at him for a moment, slightly taken aback, then grinned.

"Congratulations. Who's the vice?"

"That would be me," Nabooru chimed in, stepping up beside Oshus and smirking down at Link. Link tried to hide his grimace.

Great… the new vice principal thinks I watch My Little Pony…

"In any case, Link," Oshus continued, bringing them back on topic, "we didn't come here to tell you that. We came to discuss a certain matter with you, and when Auru heard we were coming, he asked to tag along."

"Oh. Um, ok. What is it?" he replied, feeling baffled and slightly on edge. Whenever the principal asked to discuss something with you, it was never good… which was an odd way to view the situation, considering Link hadn't been to school since Oshus got the job, but some instincts were simply hard to kill.

"Many members of the community requested that we construct a memorial at the high school; something dedicated in honor of those who lost their lives, to preserve their memory. The mayor approved the idea immediately, and after several generous donations from many prominent members of our society, construction began."

"Great…" Link said slowly. And it was; he just wasn't sure what this had to do with him.
Oshus seemed to sense his confusion and plowed on. "It going to be a flower garden, out on the side of the school. One flower planted for every student, teacher, or police officer who died. Their names will be inscribed on a stone wall fixture just behind it. They predict it should be ready in about a week, just in time for the school to reopen its doors as an institution for learning. We're planning on having a dedication ceremony… and we would like you to speak."

Link felt his stomach drop out.

"Speak?" he repeated in a strangled sort of way, his voice sounding far too high and squeaky for his liking.

"Yes," Oshus replied, studying Link through wizened sea-green eyes. "I will also be speaking, as will Mayor Dotour and the Chief of Police, Rusl Smith. But we feel it would be best if you were to speak as well, Link."

"Why me?" Link asked, a little too quickly. Public speaking was definitely not something he was comfortable with. He was already feeling faint…

"Well, you're the hero of the whole country," Nabooru said, rolling her eyes. "The people want to hear from you."

"What? I'm not a hero!" Link blurted out hastily, scowling up at his one-time coach.

Her words had touched a sore point; yes, he was a hero. The Hero, in fact, but for a reason they would never know. They wanted to parade him not for stopping Ganondorf, but for putting an end to the senseless slaughter of their children. Sure, it was also a heroic task… but to him, it was a discordant nightmare he knew he'd be fighting his entire life to forget. Things in his life had already become weird enough what with the whole Triforce thing. He just wanted things to go back to normal… or at least as close to normal as they could possibly be.

"Coach, Oshus… I did what I did because it needed to be done and for no other reason. If you put me up there and parade me around like I'm some sort of hero, people are gonna start treating me differently. I don't want special treatment for something that I'd honestly rather forget entirely."

"Look, kid," Nabooru growled, starting to showcase her trademark impatience, but Link cut her off.

"No, you look! You want a 'hero' to speak for you? Get Sheik. Or Midna. Or Zelda, or Aryll, or Colin, or Kafei, or Ralph. They were all there; they all helped as much as me. Or better yet, leave us alone! Haven't we done enough already?"

Link didn't even realize he'd started yelling until Auru reached out and grasped his shoulder gently.

"It can't be them, Link. It has to be you." Auru said softly.

Link turned on him, feeling stung; the one person he expected to be on his side…

"Why?" He shot back, his tone scathing.

"Because the students are scared," Oshus intoned sadly, finally deigning to sit in the chair opposite Auru, bringing his gaze level with Link's. "They are frightened, my boy, and I cannot blame them. For many, it will be a serious trial to even venture near a school building again, let alone enter one on a daily basis. They have suffered a great deal, been held captive, wounded, lost loved ones and friends. Any illusion of safety that being at school once afforded them was destroyed utterly, perhaps never to return."
"But in you, Link, they see something else. They see a boy like them who did the impossible, who in
the face of grave peril stood up against the rising threat in their defense. A boy who was willing to
accept any pain, even death itself, to save them. You carried within yourself that day a light that cast
off the seemingly endless darkness of despair and hopelessness that Ganondorf and his accomplices
used to subjugate them, and they can never forget that.

"You carry that light with you still, Link. You, and your friends as well. The school saw it when you
broke into their classrooms and delivered them from their captors. The city saw it when you and your
friends helped rally the police and lead the students to safety. And the nation saw it when you tackled
Ganondorf out of that window, heedless of your own safety. Like it or not, Mr. Hero, you have
become Hyrule's light of hope, and they need you now more than ever."

Link swallowed thickly, struggling to piece together a plausible defense against the wise old man's
words, yearning with all his heart to dismiss everything Oshus was saying... and yet in spite of his
better judgment he found himself asking, "What do you mean?"

Oshus sighed heavily, his bulky mustache fluttering in despondency. "If enough students do not
return to Ordon High, they will close the school down. They have agreed to finish out the year with
however many do come back, but I must confess I fear the worst. If they tear down Ordon High,
think of the negative result it will have on our city. How many teenagers will drop out rather than
transfer? How many families will move to escape the painful memories? The students are too afraid
to return on their own... They need someone to look to for renewed hope in the future, and that
person, Link, is you."

"But why!" Link blurted out, his throat uncomfortably tight. "Why would they listen to me? They
already have you, Oshus, and Rusl and Kafei's dad! If they can't convince the kids and their parents
to stay, why in Din's name would I be any different?"

"Because you're one of them, Link," Auru said, sighing softly as he ran his hand distractedly through
his unkempt graying hair. "Think about it. Teenagers don't want to listen to some faceless
government official. Chief Smith? Most of the students think the police are failures for making them
wait so long to be rescued. And us? Link, what words could Oshus or any of the teachers say that
wouldn't sound hollow and empty to their ears? During the attack, we were just as helpless as them,
and they know that. They don't need some adult telling them what to do. What they need is one of
their own being an example."

"But that's just it," Link growled angrily, "I'm not one of them. I never have been. Ordon High has
been plagued with cliques and social classes since long before I ever became a freshman. Most of the
students there either hate me or have never given me the time of day because they judge you before
they even have a chance to get to know you. Why would my words make any difference? And you
know what, I hated that school. I hated everything about it. Maybe it's a good thing that it's getting
closed down. No more cliques, no more social pariahs, no more bullying..."

"None of that will change if the school shuts down. The students will go off, scattered to different
schools where they'll be absorbed into their cliques and castes and the cycle will continue. But you
have a chance to break it here, Link."

"How?" Link scoffed. "I can't break down those walls, Auru."

"The walls are already broken, Link. Ganondorf saw to that. He knew the flaws of the system and
used them against us. He gathered under his wing the outcasts, turned their hurt and loneliness into
rage and hate, whispered evil, cruel things into their ears and then set them free on the school. And
we broke, Link. The fragile teenage society shattered, and the pieces lay scattered on the ground,
waiting for someone to put them back together. They're waiting for you. Because you know the
truth, you know what it feels like to be the outcast and you know what needs to be done to set things right. And because of what happened, because you and your friends saved everyone, you're the link that connects all the factions… er, pun not intended."

Nabooru snorted, but Link just scowled bitterly. He wanted to rant and complain more, but he could already feel the bitter tang of defeat sinking in. He hated it when his teachers were right.

Link sighed, closing his eyes and sinking back into his bed.

"Fine," He muttered sulkily. "I'll do it. Happy?"

"Overjoyed." Nabooru drawled.

Auru smiled in relief. "Great. Thank you, Link. And don't worry; it doesn't have to be long at all, just as long as it's from you."

They got up to leave not long after and Link had to force himself not to sigh with relief. He shook Oshus's hand firmly and struggled not to wince too openly at Nabooru's vice grip. It was with Auru, however, that he made his mistake.

"Link, what is that on the back of your hand?"

Link froze, his blood running cold. He'd forgotten he was supposed to be hiding the Triforce insignia on the back of his hand, and of course, the one person guaranteed to know what it meant would be the one to see it.

He tried to snatch his hand back, but Auru had a firm grip on it, studying the golden trio of triangles intensely.

"What is it?" Nabooru asked, her curiosity piqued as she strode quickly back from where she'd stalked a moment earlier towards the door.

"My word…" Oshus said in a hushed tone, leaning forward across Link's hospital bed to get a better look.

"It's- Ah, it's nothing!" Link gasped, struggling to reclaim his captured appendage from Auru, who said nothing in response, his eyebrows slowly climbing towards his hair.

"I still don't know what it is," Nabooru stated flatly, looking bored and unimpressed as the two older men continued to stare at Link's hand in awe.

"That's because it's nothing!"

"Link, my dear boy… do you know what this means?" Oshus asked, gazing at Link's mark as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Um… nothing?"

"Link," Auru said calmly. "Where did this mark come from?"

"Uh…” he said blankly, wracking his brains for a plausible lie. "It, uh… it… Ganondorf?"

The trio of adults turned simultaneous to stare at Link. He inwardly cringed. He'd spluttered out the first thing that came to mind, which was, of course, Ganondorf. Stupid Triforce…

"Ganondorf," Auru stated bluntly, and Link gave a weak not-at-all convincing nod.
"He gave you a weird tattoo?" Nabooru asked, puzzled. "Well, that's stupid. And we care because…?"

"Nabooru, have you no idea the significance of this mark?" Oshus cried in shock.

Nabooru merely shrugged.

"It's-" Auru began to explain, but Link cut him off.

"No! No, it's a tattoo! Definitely a tattoo!" No matter what, he couldn't let them know what it actually meant. Otherwise, people would never leave him or Zelda alone.

Auru and Oshus fixed him with identical looks of disbelief.

Nabooru frowned. "Why did Ganondorf bring a tattoo kit to shoot up the school?"

"Uh, it's because he… Because he…” All three adults were staring at him intently now, and he felt himself breaking out in a panicked sweat. He would need to come up with a really good lie to get out of this one. But what could he say that wouldn't bring up any awkward questions?

"He… uh…”

"Whatever," Nabooru said, losing her patience. "Will someone please tell me why we care that Hero got a tattoo?"

"Nabooru, we care because it's the Triforce of Courage," Auru exclaimed, sounding irritated at his colleague’s naivety.

"The who of what?"

"The Triforce of Courage! The mark of the Hero, the blessing of Farore, one-third of the Golden Power! Have you no knowledge of your nation's history?" Oshus demanded, flabbergasted.

"History wasn't really my thing…” She murmured absently, gazing at Link's mark with renewed interest. "And Ganondorf tattooed that on you? Why?"

"He… Because he's deranged!" He blurted out a little too loudly, decided if he was going to lie he might as well stick close to the truth. "He thought… He thought he was the King of Thieves reborn or something, and I guess that made me the Hero of Time since I'm his archrival or whatever. I dunno, he was pretty much nuts."

"Is that why he wanted to fight you alone after the police had basically already won?"

"Yes!" Link said, grateful Nabooru was keeping the conversation going. He couldn't tell if Oshus and Auru were buying it or not; their faces were unreadable masks. "Yeah, that's why he took Zelda too. He thought she was the Princess of Destiny. He slapped the marks on us when he had us imprisoned. Pretty weird, right? Haha… ha…"

"Zelda Nohansen has a mark as well?" Oshus asked, intrigued.

"Er, yes… sir."

"And Ganondorf; he had a mark?"

"Yeah…”
"Well, what does it matter? They're fakes, right? It's a shame, though; if Ganondorf wasn't so crazy he'd have had a good future as a tattoo artist. That thing doesn't look like a tattoo at all- it's like your skin is actually golden."

Link didn't exactly know how to respond to that. Oshus sent Auru a disconcerted look. "Well… I suppose… It must be fake. If the boy says it's a tattoo…"

Auru, who'd been staring blankly into space, his face slightly more pale than it had been before, started back into reality and said, "Yes… Yes. It's a hoax, Oshus. Ganondorf can't possibly have been… I mean he's dead, so it's irrelevant."

He shook his head lightly and stood, sending pointed looks at his colleagues. "Well. I think we've taken up enough of young Mr. Hero's time. We should be going."

The other two nodded, and after another round of handshakes, they set off. Link was left feeling a little odd about Auru's last statement. Just before he exited the room, Link called out for him to wait.

"Yes, Link?" Auru asked, looking perplexed.

"It's just… Well, you said Ganondorf couldn't have possibly been the King of Thieves because he was dead, right? Why would his being dead matter?"

Auru scratched at his arm absently, looking troubled. "It's nothing to worry about, Link. Don't let it bother you."

"Humor me."

Auru chuckled amusedly at his pupil. "Come now, Link. You're a better student than that. Ganondorf can't be the King of Thieves reborn because you defeated him. And even if you were the Hero of Time, you can't have defeated the King of Thieves all on your own."

"Right," Link said, feeling slightly relieved. "Because the pieces of the Triforce are equal in strength, so I'd have needed the Triforce of Wisdom on my side."

"Ah, well yes, I suppose that is true, but that's not what I was referring to. The Hero of Time is always the one who defeats the King of Thieves not because he teams up with the Princess of Destiny and together overpower him. The Hero of Time is the only person in history who can wield the Master Sword with impunity, the only weapon capable of striking down the Demon King, and seeing as the Master Sword is still sitting in its pedestal at the Temple of Time up in Castleton…"

He shrugged as if to say 'there you go!' and backed out the door, waving one final time. The door swung shut slowly behind him, leaving Link staring blankly after him, something dark and foreboding stirring in his chest.
The sun was perhaps a bit too bright and cheerful that morning, but that was the nature of April, Link decided. Spring had arrived hard and fast and no amount of human sorrow and melancholy would keep it at bay. Maybe the Goddesses were trying to tell them something; time never stopped moving, winter always gives way to spring, and it was time for them to move on.

A little too poetic for his tastes, perhaps, but he was in that sort of mood. Time was moving, and they needed to move with it. If only it'd move a little slower and give him some time to think.

A brief gust of wind caught him in the back, still a little chilly from the last vestiges of winter, ruffling through his neatly combed hair and fluttering the edges of his suit coat. Din, but he hated dressing like this… It was thick and stiff and constricted his movements, and his white collared shirt and appropriately black tie made him feel like he was being strangled. Worst of all, his shoes pinched his toes. All in all, he could never understand why lawyers and such chose to dress like this on a daily basis.

Then again, Zelda had remarked how warm the jacket was when he'd draped it around her shoulders earlier that morning (giving her his jacket was becoming a thing for them, though he'd been forced to take it back when he'd stepped up on the makeshift stand) and it did have a particularly nice smell to it… Maybe it wasn't all bad.

For the umpteenth time that morning, Link swept his gaze across the crowd and zeroed in on his girlfriend. Zelda, her hair straightened somberly and wearing a black dress that didn't suit her personality in the slightest, sat stoically between Midna and Aryll, her gaze fixated on Chief Smith as he spoke from the podium. As though sensing his gaze, her eyes flicked over to him briefly and she shot him yet another encouraging smile before returning her attention to Colin's father.

Link sighed heavily, refusing to do the same, adamantly blocking out the somber tones of Rusl Smith to whom the rest of the audience was directing their rapt attention.

Link felt trapped, being stuck up on the small, makeshift wooden stage that had been arrayed just to the side of Ordon High. The audience stretched out before him like a tiny black ocean, but Link, as one of the speakers, was one of the few unlucky enough to have to sit on the stand. There were only four chairs; one for each speaker and all of them made of ancient, rickety metal that squeaked every time he shifted his weight. Two seats occupied each side of the stage; Link and Oshus on the left, Mayor Dotour and Rusl Smith's now vacant seat at the right, with a gap in between so that they weren't obscured from the audience's view by the small, plain podium. Link regretted not being given even that small luxury.

Not wanting to think about what he was about to be forced to do, he turned away from Mr. Smith and his careful and somber speech and instead began examining the newest addition to the school grounds.

The flower bed was lovely. Admittedly, when he'd first heard the idea for the flower garden, he imagined something small, hushed-up and out of the way. What he'd found when he'd arrived for the memorial service that morning, however, was something much more.

It was a large, semi-circular plot of land directly beside one of the walls of the building, situated on the once-blank stretch of grass that made up the space between the school and the football field. A raised stone wall made up the border of the enclosure, approximately two feet tall. The dirt within was the rich chocolate brown of fresh fertilizer, dotted with a few artistically placed boulders covered
in dark moss, green and grey, and dozens of flowers of varying shades.

Link struggled for a moment to recall what Mayor Dotour had said about them in his speech earlier; the dark-red roses he recognized, of course, because who didn't know what a rose looked like? But the odd-looking flowers with the purplish-red centers and golden edges he thought were called zinnias, and the pale white and lavender flowers were called columbines. There were a few others and they all apparently had some sort of secret flower meaning, but Link didn't care about that, instead focusing on the way the colors blended and worked together in completely discordant tones that adequately reflected the natures of the people they symbolized. Yet even the beauty of the scene wasn't enough to distract him from focusing on the sheer number…

Forty-two flowers. One for every student, teacher, faculty member and police officer who lost their lives on the day of the Ordon High Massacre. Link hadn't been prepared for that number when Mayor Dotour had initially stated it in his opening remarks; somehow, during the attack and afterward he'd managed to avoid talking about the casualties. He knew there'd been a lot, he just never wanted to know how many, and somehow he never imagined in his wildest nightmares it would be so high.

Six police officers. Ten members of the faculty, including the principal and vice principal, the school resource officer, at least one janitor, a couple lunch ladies, and one of the secretaries he'd been imprisoned with. Fourteen teachers, including teaching aids and substitutes. Twelve students.

They didn't include the shooters on the list according to the general unspoken consensus, save for one; a boy named Byrne who Link had never met, but who Sheik, Midna, and Aryll’s friend Mido spoke of with some respect.

Link shivered again in spite of his warm, if stuffy, jacket, and let his eyes rake the wall above the flower bed. Into the aged russet brick wall had been set a façade of black marble that extended to either end of the semi-circular flower bed. On each end what looked like two-dimensional obsidian Doric pillars had been carved into the dark stone, reaching about eight feet in the air. Atop the pillars were carved the likeness of two long diagonal wooden beams that met in the middle and formed a large, angled archway set against the stone. It was a simple outline; so simple, in fact, that the meaning might have been lost to some, but Link understood immediately: the artist had carved it in the similitude of a home. The pillars the walls, the wooden beams the roof, and in center…

Beneath the arch, between the pillars, nestled within their makeshift home, inscribed forever in the shiny, reflective surface of the black marble was the Hyrulean crest, the stylized wings of a mythical bird in flight. Just below this was written the date of the attack and the words 'Gone But Not Forgotten'. The rest of the wall was occupied by the names of the victims.

Thankfully, at least in Link's opinion, the names weren't arranged in stuffy, orderly lines; rather, they were distributed seemingly at random and at evenly-spaced intervals all up and down the wall. There was no respecting of position, either; names of police officers were displayed between faculty members and teachers mingled with students. It was like their way of saying that the loss of any single one of them was every bit as painful and difficult to bear as the rest. It made Link's heart swell in spite of the sadness; they were equals.

Link suddenly became aware of the shuffling and quiet murmuring of the crowd, as well as the lack of the deep bass rumbling he'd associated with Rusl Smith's voice, whose speech he'd been carefully tuning out.

Turning his head quickly back towards the podium, he felt his stomach drop out. Chief Smith was returning to his chair. Mayor Dotour was sending him an expecting look. Principal Oshus, who was sitting directly on Link's left, placed a bracing hand on Link's shoulder and nodded towards the
microphone.

Oh, Goddesses.

It was time. Time to get up and speak. Farore above, why hadn't he been paying attention? For that matter, why hadn't he spent more of his free time in the last week preparing? Procrastination always did get the better of him. He'd never hated his lazy slacker tendencies more than he did now.

Swallowing gruffly, or at least trying to because his throat had gone completely dry, Link climbed unsteadily to his feet. The brightness of the sun was suddenly blinding, and his movements felt stiff and jerky within his uncomfortable suit.

Heart rate spiking, he suddenly felt like a laboratory specimen under a microscope as every head in the audience turned toward him with unnerving expectancy. In the back of the crowd, several news stations had sent camera crews to film the event, which he'd been told was being broadcast live across the entire country; apparently, his had become a national story and everyone was eager to hear what he had to say.

The problem was… he had no idea himself.

The palms of his hands were sweaty against the tepid wood of the podium. Swallowing again, he attempted to buy a handful of precious seconds by clearing his throat roughly and tugging at the collar of his shirt.

It was funny in a way; you'd think he'd become used to complete and utter abject terror after the events he'd been through, but there was just something about public speaking… Link was an action kinda guy, he expressed what he needed to through doing. He wasn't a speaker. This was a whole new level of fear.

He felt a horrible twisting sensation in his gut that had nothing to do with the grotesque scar on his naval and tried not to whimper, the sound of which would have been amplified via microphone to the entire nation. Nayru, help me… he begged silently, praying in his mind for some sort of divine intervention to get him through this nightmare.

As though in answer to his prayer, his gaze subconsciously searched out his girlfriend's. When his eyes met her startling red-violet irises, something inside him seemed to click into place. He felt calmer; not that he was relaxed, but he wasn't on the verge of passing out, either. It was as though his courage responded to her and he couldn't let her see him falter. Part of him supposed it might have something to do with her knowing he held the Triforce of Courage, but if he was being honest it was probably just because his pride couldn't take it if his girlfriend saw him chicken out.

She smiled at him softly, both encouraging and secretly amused at how uncomfortable he was up on the stage, then silently mouthed to him, 'It's only me.'

He grinned at her gratefully when he understood; of course, there was nothing to be afraid of, he just needed to pretend like he was talking to her and ignore the crowd of people around them. Yeah. Of course. That sounded easy, right? He could do this.

He realized a moment later that he'd been standing at the podium for nearly thirty seconds and hadn't said a word.

Coughing to hide his embarrassment, he gripped the wooden edges of the stand and said, hesitantly, "Good morning."

*Good morning? What kind of crap introduction was that? How cliché and unoriginal could he
possibly be? Besides, there wasn't anything even remotely good about this morning! Two words in
and already he would be known as the crappiest orator of all-time.

Two seats to the left of Zelda, Link saw Sheik snigger at his words, prompting Midna to elbow him
savagely in the gut. Zelda rolled her eyes ruefully at their friends before returning her gaze to him,
lifting her eyebrows imploringly, urging him to continue.

Something in his friends' stupid behavior helped put him at ease though, and Link sighed, wracking
his brains for something to say.

"I know that… a lot of you are expecting some great speech from me," he said uncertainly, letting his
eyes sweep the crowd briefly before jerking resolutely back to Zelda. In his one glance, however,
he'd seen the faces of the crowd; the broken teenagers, the unimpressed parents, the reporters in the
back with their flashing cameras…

"You're waiting here, now, for the same thing you've been waiting the past month for. Some of you
want to hear me talk about what happened inside this school that day; you want to hear me tell you
what went down between Ganondorf and me in the principal's office at the end of the attack. But I
have nothing to say to you. What happened that day is a tragedy; not something to parade around
and celebrate."

There was an unexpected level of bite to his words and you could tell by the look of surprise on the
audience's faces that they hadn't been expecting it. Link hadn't either, but he didn't really regret it.
From the look of reproach and annoyance on a few of the reporters' faces, he'd accomplished his
goal anyhow. From the moment he'd returned home from the hospital a week ago, he and Zelda and
their families had been dogged by reporters. It was beyond annoying. Maybe now it would stop…
but he wouldn't get his hopes up.

Zelda seemed a little taken aback as well, but she merely pursed her lips wryly and waited for him to
continue.

"Others," Link went on, turning his attention to all of the parents in the crowd, his eyes landing on
the first one he recognized; Shad's mother, "are waiting for me to do or say something to ease your
fears about sending your kids back to Ordon High when it opens up next week. But if I'm being
honest, I don't have anything to say to you either, because really… what could I say? What could
anyone say?

"Nothing, no amount of words or actions, could ever make what happened right again. And let's just
be realistic: none of you really expected me to come up with an answer in the first place. You've all
made up your minds already."

Link swallowed again before taking a deep, steadying breath through the nose as he hastened to
formulate his next sentence.

"No… Today, I'm not speaking to the reporters or the people across Hyrule who are listening in. I'm
not talking to the parents or the teachers, or to the families of those whose lives were lost; there isn't
anything I can add that hasn't already been said by the mayor, Chief Smith or Principal Oshus… No,
today I decided that… I wanted to speak to… my fellow students."

Zelda looked surprised, and Link didn't blame her. As far as his friends and family knew, he hadn't
planned on speaking about anything in particular; he'd merely said he was going to ramble off some
vague condolences and get down as soon as he could. But something about being up there, seeing
the memorial and the school and his classmates had caused something inside him to stir, and he
realized then and there that there was something that desperately needed to be said.
"Guys, look," he said bluntly, dropping all pretenses of polite, formal diction and reverting to his standard manner of speech, knowing that his classmates stood a greater chance of listening if he did. "Some of you know me from school and the rest of you know me from the news, but how many of you actually know me? Me, the person, Link Hero?"

There was a pause as the teenagers in the crowd shuffled awkwardly, giving him weird looks, unsure where Link was going.

"My point is, before the shooting, Ordon High was your typical high school. We had cliques and social ladders and all that garbage. When people don't conform, they get ostracized. It's a vicious circle that's present all over the world, and I'm proof. Today, pretty much everyone in the country knows my name; they've been talking about me on the news for weeks. But a month ago? I could count the number of friends I had on one hand… and one of them was my little sister."

He heard Sheik laugh and Aryll giggle, but the rest of the crowd was silent, still unclear where he was going with this.

"This was fine for me. The 'popular' people wanted nothing to do with me, and I wanted nothing to do with them. But the same can't be said for a lot of others in our classes who were overlooked or judged based upon what they looked like or how they dressed or who their parents were. Some of them weren't lucky, like me. They didn't have that small handful of friends to count on or a supportive family back home. They were alone, and depressed, and pushed around and ridiculed by their so-called peers. And do you know what happened to them?"

The audience was deathly quiet, though he could see a blank look on some of the student's faces. A number of cheerleaders and jocks had stopped listening entirely, writing him off just like they had in class.

"Ganondorf got to them," he said darkly, his voice grating. "He gathered them together under his wing, and it was easy. He made them feel like they had finally attained what you'd been denying them for years; friends. And then he took their feelings of hurt and mistrust and he turned them into hatred and rage, manipulated their pain, and used them as his disposable soldiers to attack us. And we have no one to blame but ourselves."

A number of people in the crowd began muttering angrily, but Link didn't care; at least now he knew he had their attention. Instead of backing down to deter their anger, he raised his voice to be heard over them, forgetting for a moment that he had a microphone to do that anyway.

"I'm to blame as well!" he shouted over the crowd, and they quieted down a bit. "We all are! All of us! Because we did this, we allowed things to get this bad. Ganondorf was the catalyst, but we laid the foundation, we gave him the tools. But we've been given a chance now to make it better! Now, I'm not saying we have to be all lovey-dovey and friendship is magic or whatever, but guys… We can't let this happen again. I know I said earlier that nothing could be done to prevent this sort of thing, and it's true. I mean, sometimes bad things just happen. But forty-two innocent people are dead now because we couldn't get over our petty differences and we gave Ganondorf the perfect opportunity to strike us.

"We've been given a chance to start over again, and I really, really suggest we take it. There's talk of shutting Ordon High down if not enough students come back, and then what? We'll all go off to other schools just as bad as we were, and the cycle will just start all over again. Ganondorf broke our walls down, so let's build them back up, the right way. Before the attack, I'd have said it wasn't possible, but now…"

He let his gaze sweep the crowd, focusing on the individual faces of his newfound friends.
"Now, after the attack, after having fought for, fought against, fought with, bled for, rescued, been rescued by, freed, cried, and nearly died for so many of you… You've become… well, important, I guess… I have pride in this school now, the kind I've never had before, because I know what we're actually made of, underneath all of our stupid schisms and drama.

"I know… that real friends do anything for each other." Midna and Sheik grinned at him proudly, Sheik nodding in assent, the shorter girl's head on her boyfriend's shoulder.

"That caring about someone means being willing to give up everything for them, even if it tears you apart." Colin dropped his head in embarrassment, his mother Uli smiling through her tears up at Link.

"That sometimes, heroes come from the most unexpected of places." Linebeck the janitor shuffled in his seat, looking awkward yet pleased. Next to him, Jolene, Coach Nabooru's old assistant, linked her arm with his and gazed up at the portly man in fervid admiration.

"That your enemies can become some of your greatest allies." Ralph's chest swelled like a bullfrog, his startling red hair still as perfectly coiffed as ever.

"That polar opposites can become the best of friends," Shad smirked, adjusting his glasses while Ashei, finally out of her wheelchair, placed her chin in her hands and leaned forward in her seat, grinning up at Link.

"That you shouldn't judge books by their covers." Darunia didn't react, because he clearly had no idea Link was talking about him and Ruto, but when their eyes met he nodded just the same, and Link flashed back briefly to the moment just before he'd saved the two most popular teens in school and how Darunia- ignorant, crass, self-centered Darunia- had been determined to take that bullet for his girlfriend.

"That when you love someone, you don't stop fighting for them, whatever the odds." Kafei, seated next to his mother on the left end of the front row, draped his arm around Anju's wheelchair-bound shoulders, drawing her closer. The red-head sent Link a tremulous smile.

"And that sometimes… sometimes fate can mess with your life in the most unexpected of ways." Zelda returned his gaze levelly, and he knew she was thinking the same thing he was.

"I don't know what's going to happen after today. I don't know how this tragedy is going to affect us in the long run, but I do know that the people and the friends that we've lost will stick with us forever. Ganondorf sought to destroy us, but inadvertently, I think he drove us closer together. Come Monday morning, I'll be walking into these doors at 8 am, and though I'll think no less of anyone who'd rather transfer… I hope to see all of my friends there with me."

Sighing, Link turned to step away from the podium, hoping to scurry back to his seat as quickly as possible. He wasn't sure where that entire monologue had come from or what had inspired him to say it; he wasn't a particularly deep or emotional kind of guy, but what he'd said had been true enough. He only hoped people would listen. But then, why would they? He may be popular now, but give it a few weeks and he'd be a nobody again… just the way he liked it, yes, but a nobody couldn't change anything…

He hadn't taken two steps when a sound from behind had him stopping in place.

Clapping. Someone was clapping. At a memorial service? Nobody had clapped for the other speakers; the overall atmosphere had been one of mourning and reverence, like a funeral, and nobody had wanted to break that. So why now?
Turning, Link glanced back over his shoulder into the crowd, searching out the offender. To his incredible shock, it was…

Darunia. The quarterback.

He stood alone in a sea of strangers, his face stoic, his shoulders set, clapping for Link. At that moment, Link understood; he was declaring his support for Link's speech, declaring to the rest of the student body without really saying a word that he was on Link's side.

After a moment, Kafei stood up and began clapping as well. Not the star athlete, but still one of the most popular and wealthiest guys at school. He nodded to Link briefly and let his applause merge with Darunia's.

The change was sudden. First Darunia and Kafei, then Sheik, Midna, Aryll and Zelda, then the rest of Link's newfound friends all began standing, clapping for all they were worth. Before Link could react, others began to stand as well; Coach Nabooru, with a look of grudging respect; Professor Ezlo, for once without a look of animosity; Linebeck, shrugging as if to say 'eh, why not, kid?' The rest of the teachers followed suit, quickly joined by the remainder of the students, the parents, the police, and even the reporters.

Link blinked in amazement, suddenly feeling very small; to think he had that sort of influence… He knew that actually uniting as a student body and putting an end to social classes and bullying and all that wouldn't be nearly that easy, but it was a start. It was a start.

The ceremony ended not long after, and Link found himself shaking nearly everybody's hand. He tried to keep up a polite face for most people, particularly his friends and those he recognized from around town, but quickly found his patience waning. Thankfully, he was able to escape the bustling crowd that had gathered by the makeshift stage and stood off by the memorial, awaiting his friends and family.

It wasn't long until he felt a small body slam into him from behind, wrapping their arms around his midsection.

"Link! That was so good!" Aryll squealed in traditional Aryll fashion.

"Uh, thanks," Link laughed nervously, face reddening slightly as he scratched the back of his head. He was a little unsure how his friends and family would react to his impromptu feel-good seminar, but he knew in a few days he'd be the butt of several jokes from his sister and Sheik.

"Really, Link, I was impressed!" Midna chimed in, giving Link a playful shove on the shoulder. "Who knew you had it in you?"

"Yeah. Real great, Link," Sheik muttered, sounding surprisingly bitter, his hands shoved into his pockets petulantly.

"What's wrong with you?" Link asked, baffled.

"Nothing..."

"He and Midna had a bet on whether or not you'd faint," Aryll answered airily.

"Hey!"

"What're you upset about? You cost me five rupees!"
"Really, guys? You're gonna fight about this now?" Midna cut in, lifting a solitary eyebrow in carefully executed disdain. Link decided to ignore that she was just as guilty as her boyfriend.

The group grew silent then, the four of them gazing up at the marble wall while the crowd behind them gradually began to disperse. Link found his eyes tracing the names, focusing on the ones he recognized (Salvatore, Byrne, etc.) and wishing he could say he'd known the others. After a few minutes, he felt a small, cold hand slide into his, and he turned to find Zelda standing at his side, gazing up at him.

"You ok?" she asked softly, and Link shrugged.

"No. But I know I will be."

She nodded in understanding, then turned to examine the wall as well, drawing closer to Link and wrapping her free hand around her midsection.

"You cold?" he asked, realizing for the first time that the memorial was almost entirely in the shade of the building and that without the bright rays of the April sun on them, it didn't feel much like springtime.

"I'm fine," she tried to say, but Link had already removed his suit coat for the second time that morning, draping it over her shoulders. She frowned at him like she always did, then stuck her arms through the sleeves and drew it closer around her body like a blanket. Link laughed.

"You kids ready to go?" Granny asked, coming up from behind them.

"Yeah."

"Uh-huh."

"Lead the way, oh wise one."

Granny shot Sheik a brief scathing look. "Alright, well then hurry on up. These old bones aren't meant to be out in the cold for so long…"

Zelda moved to follow her along with the others, but Link held her back for a moment.

"What's up?"

"It's just that… well, thanks. I mean, for earlier, when I was screwing up my speech. You really helped me there. I couldn't have done it without you."

She beamed at him for a moment, and Link couldn't resist sliding his arm around her waist and drawing her in close enough for a brief peck on the lips.

"Mmm…" Zelda murmured, smiling at him coyly. "But then, you can't do anything without me anyway."

"Ookay," Link moaned, rolling his eyes sarcastically, and Zelda laughed.

"Hey lovebirds! Can you have your little moment later? I'm starving over here!"

"Alright, alright, we're coming!" Link called back to his best friend with a cheeky grin. Sheik harrumphed loudly.

Taking Zelda's hand, he left the shaded flower garden behind him and stepped into the bright spring
sunshine, running off after his irate best friend, tugging his laughing girlfriend behind him.

They really were going to be ok, he decided. One day.
The moon rested high in the crisp, cold spring air. Full, its milky beams the only true source of illumination as they streamed in through the lab’s single window. All of the lights in the building were off, the doors locked, the employees long since returned to their homes.

All was calm and quiet in Ordon’s city morgue, the tranquil peace befitting of the dead contained within who awaited their eternal rest.

As the soft ticking of a clock mounted high on a wall struck two in the morning, a sudden sound broke the still silence of the morgue. It emanated from within its cold metal confines, angrily rattling the drawers that surrounded it, creating a dense cacophony of metallic noise that shattered the peace and silence of death.

The sound came again a moment later, a harsh bang that echoed sharply throughout the building, and as it came a third time, the face of one of the large drawers dented outward with a tortured screech, and the surrounding drawers rattled all the harder.

There was a pause then, and as the rattling of the metal slowly died away silence once again overtook the building. With a click and a groan, the air conditioning unit shuttered to life and a soft buzzing sound filled the air.

Without warning, a final bang crashed against the drawer from within, and with a loud snap the locking mechanism that had held the drawer in place broke free, spinning wildly across the room, and the drawer slowly slid a few inches open.

First one, then five, then ten; small shapes began to appear from within the confines of the drawer. The ten solid, thick knuckled digits rested lightly on the metal before pushing lightly against the cold, chrome surface. With a soft whisper, the drawer slid slowly open.

In the pale beams of moonlight, a dark figure was suddenly illuminated, resting supinely on the cold, metal drawer. The ghostly rays of light turned his hair blood red, and when his eyes slowly opened, they glowed golden with murderous intent.

Casting aside the thin white sheet that covered his naked body he moved to right himself and stand, but stopped with a pained gasp. Clutching his chest with agony he paused, squinting his eyes as a sharp pain stabbed throughout his body. Gingerly, he moved his hand and examined the wound.

It was bleeding now. He was unsure how long he’d been out, but the wound looked as fresh as when he’s first gotten it. Grimacing, he slid off of the drawer, ignorant of the icy cold floor tiles beneath his bare feet, and gathered up the sheet he’d discarded a moment earlier.

It was bleeding now. He was unsure how long he’d been out, but the wound looked as fresh as when he's first gotten it. Grimacing, he slid off of the drawer, ignorant of the icy cold floor tiles beneath his bare feet, and gathered up the sheet he'd discarded a moment earlier.

Cursing quietly to himself, he applied pressure to the wound and began to think. He'd need time… time to heal, time to plan, before he could seek his revenge on the ones who had wronged him. But for now…

The figure turned away from the now silent room, the pale shafts of moonlight and the vacated drawer. Even without clothing, his footsteps were heavy and his presence dominating. A small smile crept its way onto his face.
Hero may have won this round… but the fight was far from over.

It was never over.

And with that single, glorious thought to sustain him, Ganondorf, the King of Thieves, left the cold, silent morgue and vanished into the dark of the night.

Chapter End Notes

Hey hey! You've made it - this is the end! Thank you for sticking it out and reading all of 'Hit List', the cleaned-up and semi-revised version of my first-ever, full-length fanfiction! To everyone who left a comment or kudo, you have my eternal gratitude! And to everyone else... well, you're still pretty cool, I guess. Ha.

'Hit List' may now be over, but it's sequel story, 'From the Dust', will begin being posted tomorrow. I'll be handling that one one chapter at a time, just like I did with this story here. Unlike 'Hit List', however, 'From the Dust' is much more heavily revised, being significantly shortened and having certain characters have entire scenes retooled, condensed, combined, or rewritten from the ground up. There are also plotpoints from the ending that will be entirely different in this 'new' version of the story.

The bad news is, I'm not quite as far along with revising it as I had hoped to be. I had never intended to have it completely finished by the time I got here, as FtD is just a much longer story than HL, but I'm 10 chapters behind where I had hoped to be. Still, I have around 20 chapters already revised and ready to post, so at the very least, the next three weeks should have normal daily updates, and hopefully I'll be able to catch up in that time. There's only 36-ish chapters anyway, it shouldn't be a problem.

So yeah. If you enjoyed 'Hit List', leave me a note to let me know what you liked and what you thought could have been better. And if you would like to see more, stick around for the first chapter of 'From the Dust', which will be posted tomorrow. It's quite a bit different from HL in terms of setting, so prepare yourself.

Well, that's all for me for now. Thanks again for sticking this out with me.

Keep it Zesty,

ZC

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!