

Dark, ominous clouds loomed over the once jubilant fields of Hyrule. Strong gusts of wind bellowed the clouds further across the land and over a quaint, lone ranch. Inside the ranch, an irate man with a mustache stood outside, directing his gaze towards the darkness above. His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a brief flash of red in the corner of his eye followed by the sound of a slamming door. The man growled with irritation as he stormed angrily over to the source of the noise. He pressed his ear to the door and heard the sound of a faint feminine humming, something that further increased his irritation. Boiling with rage, he flung the door open.

"Malon, where's Epona?" Ingo inquired as he forced his way inside the stable.

"She's still outside," a farm girl with red hair replied, placing a bucket full of water down on the floor.

"Well, why is she still out there?" Ingo boomed angrily, creating a cloud of anxiety over the horses and cuccos that now restlessly sat in their pens. "It's clearly going to rain soon! That horse is my top gift to the Great Ganondorf as thanks for blessing me with rightful ownership of this ranch!

"I'm sorry, Mr. Ingo," Malon said, taken aback by the sudden raise in tone. "I'll get her now, I just need to finish—"

"I asked you to get her *now!*" Ingo demanded, causing more stress amongst the animals as the cuccos began flailing around in their cages.

"*I'll get her!* I'll get her now, just, please don't hurt the horses. I beg you," Malon desperately pleaded.

"As long as you *listen* to me, they will be fine, my dear," Ingo said in a tantalizingly gentle tone before screaming, "*now get to it!*"

Malon slightly jumped at the second spike in tone. Immediately she could feel her heart beginning to race and her breathing becoming heavier. Keeping herself as composed as she could despite the sudden adrenaline, she bowed in apology. "Yes, Mr. Ingo."

The moment she raised her head, she swiftly made for the stable door. Once outside, she pressed her back against the door and leaned her head back. She stood still for a few seconds, attempting to calm her heart before allowing a miserable sigh to escape her lips. Though she had fought hard to keep them in check, she soon felt the slight prickling sensation of tears beginning to swell.

"No... not now, Malon," she told herself, rubbing her eyes.

After taking a deep breath, Malon began to walk towards the ranch. Once she got closer, she felt her worries dissipate as she saw her favorite horse come into view. She let herself in through the gates and closed them behind her. Noticing her caretaker, Epona trotted towards Malon, neighing happily.

"There you are, Epona," Malon cooed, embracing the horse. "It's okay, I'm here now. The two of us together, just as we've always been."

She ran her fingers through the horse's white mane. The mare blew air through her nostrils in pleasure, allowing Malon to continue combing through until she stepped back and shook her mane for herself, only to return for more pets right after. Malon giggled before glancing up at the sky above, taking note of the darkening clouds.

"I have to take you back to the stable now. Ingo's orders," she explained gently, now stroking Epona's muzzle. At this, the horse again took a step away, yet this time she didn't come back. Malon frowned. "Not ready to come back, huh? Well... I guess it hasn't started raining yet, so why don't we take a little walk around the ranch first? We can consider it the long way." At this, Epona's ears twitched in amusement, allowing Malon to take her by the reins. As they strolled alongside the fencing, Malon began to hum a simple tune. This caused the horse's ears to twitch in curiosity. It was a tune that always piqued her interest, one that Malon had sung to her ever since the horse was just a filly. After a while, Malon suddenly stopped in her tracks, earning her a gentle nudge from the horse. Malon stared blankly into the distance, her gaze fixated on the ominous clouds in the sky.

"Those clouds...they never seem to go away. I can't remember the last time we saw a clear sky full of stars," Malon murmured as they resumed their walk.

She watched as the dark clouds soared above them before glancing over at the horse that stood next to her. At the sudden attention, Epona stopped nudging her, choosing to lock eyes with Malon's blue ones. After a pause, Malon averted her eyes, choosing best to resume their walk.

"I'm sorry that Mr. Ingo has been mean to you and the other horses," Malon said, lowering her head. "It's my fault for not obeying his orders. I'm trying to be strong for you, the ranch, and even myself... but lately it's been feeling more difficult. Dad wouldn't allow any of this to happen, but... he's not here. I miss him. Though I wonder, what do you think he's been up to? Do you think he's worried about me? That poor man. I feel guilty, as he shouldn't have to worry about his daughter. Things used to be so peaceful here, but when those monsters started to show up... everything changed. Mr. Ingo used to be such a nice man, but his demeanor has completely shifted, and it's as if he's a completely different person now. I try not to show it, but lately he scares me. I only listen to him because I can't risk you or any of the other animals getting abused. It's not right. It's just...it feels like there's no end in sight. It's so... *frustrating*."

Balling her free hand into a fist, she could feel the ever growing resentment in her chest beginning to overflow. Unsure of what else to do with this bitterness, she decided to release it all on a rock that sat on their path. With all her might, she kicked it away. She watched it fly upwards and over the fence into the fields of Hyrule. While this did give her temporary relief, her anger had only been replaced by jealousy of the rock's newfound freedom. Pausing their walk, she stepped over towards the large fence and looked outward into the darkened landscape.

"To tell you the truth, I'm tired of it all," she continued quietly. "But, at the same time, working here at the ranch gives me life and purpose to keep on going."

Sighing in defeat, she placed her hand on the fence and gripped one of its wooden boards. Confused, Epona took a step forward before looking beyond the fence herself. Malon glanced over at the horse. She was so strange; it was almost as if she could understand her. That was impossible though. Still, despite this, Malon bit her lip, contemplating something before finally deciding to speak.

"You know, I always had this silly dream," she said. "I've always hoped that someday a knight in shining armor would come save me from my troubles. I've always secretly wanted to be a damsel in distress, as ridiculous as that sounds. It's funny, isn't it?"

The horse didn't respond. In fact, it continued to look out into Hyrule Field, as if she herself was dreaming. Malon stared at her for a moment before chuckling sadly.

"Alas, it's only a dream. And besides, I shouldn't have to expect or depend on anyone to come save me. I have to be strong for Lon Lon Ranch, and you," she said, patting the horse on the side. "I promise things will change around here. I can't say when or how, but I just have this feeling of hope inside me."

Suddenly, the faint sound of rumbling from the sky could be heard, and a single drop of rain fell on Malon's head.

"Oh, it's beginning to rain. We should head back now. You must be tired, and I can't risk you getting sick out here because of me." Malon said, a hint of worry in her voice.

Malon gently guided Epona towards the ranch entrance gates as they swiftly made their way back towards the direction of the stable. Before opening the door, Malon peered through the window and noticed the lights inside were dim. The animals appeared to have calmed down from earlier and were now resting in their stalls.

"Phew! It looks like Mr. Ingo went to bed for the night, thank goodness," Malon breathed a sigh of relief, opening the door and leading Epona towards her respective stable.

"Hey, Epona? Thank you...for listening to me out there. I always feel better when I'm with you. You're my best friend," Malon smiled at the horse, before making her way towards the door.

When she got to the door, she paused, placing a hand on the knob.

“Goodnight, Epona, and sleep easy. Whatever tomorrow brings, we’ll face it together,” Malon whispered to herself as she left the stable, a faint smile on her lips. Little did she know, her dream was soon to become a reality the following day.