

“So I owe you what—two-hundred-and-fifty rupees?”

The Hylian cart-driver began counting out the money—two shimmering silver crystals, two reds, and a yellow. He was an attractive young man, well-built in the way that just about everyone was after the Calamity. The defeat of Calamity Ganon and re-emergence of the princess hadn't dampened his build at all, but it had given him a fresh new happiness and a skip to his step that was noticeable whenever you saw him. His skin was well-tanned from a life outdoors, and he had a curtain of autumn-leaf-orange hair that framed his face. His name was Malcolm.

Across from him stood K'hyss the Rito. Like many of his tribe, K'hyss was a tall avian fellow with a lithe build and pointed beak. His feathers were maroon, with pale white-grey trim, and he had been appointed Rito Village's liaison with traveling caravans.

“Thank you,” K'hyss said, holding out his wing. Long feather-fingers collected the rupees as he forked over bales of rice and grain. “You'll be coming around next week?”

“Same day, same time,” Malcolm said with an easy flick of his bridles. The motion spurred his mule into action and his cart trundled off. “Unless bokos get me, that is.”

His hand moved towards the spear he carried with easy grace, and K'hyss was impressed. As the Hylian drove away, not looking back, K'hyss found himself wondering—wishing, even—that the Hylian would turn and bid him farewell. But he didn't, and that was fine too. After all, it gave K'hyss more opportunity to study him as he left.

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“You’re doing well, little brother,” teased Leandha. The female Rito was about half a decade older than K’hyss, with willowy lavender feathers and a knowing smile. “Look at you, being the best liaison ever!”

K’hyss tried not preen at the praise; despite their long-fallen Champion having been proud beyond belief, the Rito thought too much pride sign of weakness. “Just working hard to help the tribe,” he said, keeping his head down. He was focused on whittling a bow, the carving knife peeling small, curled shaves of wood from the structure.

“Mmm. And I bet the Hylians appreciate it too.”

“They do enjoy their rice and spices,” K’hyss said.

A pause before Leandha continued: “What about that one you fancy? Malcolm, I think? He seemed pretty appreciative.”

K’hyss bristled. “Fancy? I don’t—it’s not—” His words fumbled over one another and he cut off, sullen, as his sister sighed.

“I know that after the Calamity, we Rito—and the Hylians too—ended up a little... unappreciative of folk who pursued same-gender partners,” she said delicately. K’hyss sullenly kept at the bow, refusing to look up. She was right; it wasn’t outright hostility, but there was a quiet sense that you let the tribe down if you didn’t marry someone you could have kids with. The Calamity had hit everyone hard and the tribe

needed to rebuild. A century had passed since then and most societies had rebounded, but the attitude remained.

K'hyss had never really found girls that attractive, but he'd always just assumed that he needed to find the right one. But then on his first day in his new job, meeting Malcolm... the Hylian's rich laugh, the way the sun played about his muscles... his good humor and quiet confidence, they all spoke to K'hyss in a way he had never imagined. That night, alone in his feather-down bed, he had realized that for the first time in his life, he had a *crush* on someone.

And it was a man—something his tribe couldn't abide.

He focused his energy into the woodcarving. *Fwip fwip fwip* went the knife, gliding across the wood, teasing the shape of a bow out from within. If he focused on the bow, he didn't have to focus on his feelings.

"They're wrong, you know," Leandha said quietly. His parents had fallen afoul of a Guardian when they were young and she had all but raised him. She was so perceptive when it came to her brother... "They were wrong then, too. No one should tell you how to love."

No response. *Fwip fwip* went the blade.

"Will you ever say it to him?"

Steel bit against the wood. He worked on delicate patterns, carving them into the bow's flesh.

“Are you afraid?”

The scraping of knife against wood paused momentarily. Afraid? Afraid that his people would deny him, that Malcolm would deny him, that he would be isolated and alone?

“It’s just a silly crush,” he muttered, still not turning around. “I’ll get over it.”

There was no response from Leandha and the knife started up again—but K’hyss could feel her gaze on his neckfeathers. He didn’t have to see her to know she was wearing a sad mask on her face.

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The next week, when Malcolm didn’t arrive on time, K’hyss grew worried. What if his bravado had come around to bite him? What if he *had* fallen afoul of monsters?

Taking wing to the sky, the Rito soared along the roads leading south. It wasn’t long before he spotted the lonely wooden cart with a mule and Hylan standing forlornly beside it.

He fluttered down and the noise and motion drew Malcolm’s gaze. The Hylan squinted, shading his eyes with one hand, and burst into a wide smile as he recognized his helper.

“K’hyss!” he exclaimed happily. The Rito was grateful for feathers hiding a blush as he touched down. Most of the merchants he met with didn’t bother to learn his name—he was simply ‘the Rito’ that they traded with. Hearing his name on Malcolm’s tongue, it was...

He shook the feelings off. “You’re late,” K’hyss said. “I got worried.”

Immediately after saying it he panicked. Worried? You didn’t get worried for mere acquaintances, right? What if he was being presumptuous? What if Malcolm was put off by his concern? What if he found out how he felt...

But Malcolm didn’t seem to notice or care. “Yeah, it’s a bum axle,” he said, morosely kicking his cart’s wheel. “Thought about running back to the stable for help, but I just know if I leave my cart here, all the stuff I’ve already picked up will be eaten or stolen when I get back...”

He sighed, looking at a cart brimming with palm fruit and fresh, crisp apples.

“I can go.” The words left K’hyss’s mouth before he was even aware of them. But it was an easy solution. Just fly over to the stable and fly back...

“Wow, you’d do that for me?” Malcolm sounded appreciative. The wind toyed with his hair and he idly tucked a strand behind his ear and K’hyss felt something stir inside him. Stupid, so stupid to be focused on something so small. “I really owe you one.”

“Yeah,” K’hyss said, flapping his wings to prepare for takeoff. “I mean... without you, whose money am I gonna pocket?”

Malcolm laughed at the joke, though it wasn’t that clever, and K’hyss took to the skies. The stable wasn’t that far away.

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That night, he was back to whittling. The day’s events played through his head. He’d led one of the stablefolk back to Malcolm’s cart and they’d fixed it up. Grinning, Malcolm had wrapped one arm around his Rito buddy, laying it over his shoulders like they were at a game. K’hyss had been struck speechless — but hadn’t minded the gesture, not at all. In fact, he’d tried to lean into Malcolm’s embrace as best he could.

The touch still stayed with him.

“I thought that was cute, earlier.” The fluttering of wings heralded Leandha’s return to their little coop.

K’hyss scowled at the wood. “It’s rude to spy, you know.”

“But not to check on your little brother when he flies his post. The village was worried, that’s all.” She busied herself in the room for a few minutes. “You know,” she said quietly, “when you were helping him, and when he gave you that one-arm hug... he seemed happy. And so did you. I don’t think I’ve seen you that happy since... I can’t say how long,” she said.

"It's pointless," K'hyss said. "Even if I were to tell him how I feel, he wouldn't reciprocate."

"And how do you know that?" said his sister gently.

"Because that's not how that works," said K'hyss.

"You seem to know an awful lot about something you've never done before," she observed. He bristled and threw himself into the bow. He'd been working on it for several weeks now and was close to being finished.

"I'll get over it," he snapped. "Over *him*."

"You say that," his sister observed, "but I'm not so sure. In fact, I think that you're gathering the courage to talk about him."

Setting down his tools, K'hyss turned to look at her. "What makes you say that?" he asked.

She nodded knowingly at his work. "Because," she said, "that bow's too small for a Rito of your stature — but it's just the right size for a Hylian."

Silence reigned in the house; K'hyss had no rebuttal. When she was right, she was right.

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“—and then the princess’s knight, no lie, climbed up the rock monster and started swinging at that ore — with a *tree branch* of all things!”

Malcolm guffawed as he finished his story, leaning back against his cart. The weekly transaction had long since been completed, but he and K’hyss had been swapping stories for a while now.

“That’s nothing,” K’hyss said. “I heard he once ran around Hebra in nothing but his underwear.”

“Pull the other one! How’d he live?”

“I think he just stuffed his face with spicy peppers the whole time,” he said. “He also threw a butterfly and an eyeball into a pot and drank the resulting slurry...”

Malcolm shuddered but never lost his smile. “He’s insane. Absolutely insane. There’s no story about him I wouldn’t believe.”

As they commiserated over the wackiness of the hero of Hyrule, the setting sun peeked behind a cloud; the glint caught Malcolm’s eye. “...getting late,” he said. “Should probably head out.”

“I’ll see you next week?” K’hyss asked as usual.



But the expected affirmation never came. Malcolm smiled apologetically. “No, you won’t see me for a couple. I’m not going back this time, I’m pushing up into the snowfields. Hebra awaits.” His neck craned towards the horizon; he pursed his lips. “Not looking forward to the cold, though.”

Shock flashed through K’hyss. Malcolm was going to Hebra? He wouldn’t return for several weeks? That... that wasn’t what he expected to hear at all. Tension snapped through him — worry for Malcolm’s safety and distress that he wouldn’t see his friend.

(Friend? Was Malcolm a friend? K’hyss supposed he was; but he found himself dissatisfied with merely counting him a friend. He... he wanted to be closer. He wanted to be something *more* than a friend.)

“You have insulated clothes?” he asked.

Malcolm shrugged. “A doublet. Should be enough.”

Perhaps in the day, but...

“By the time you make it there it’ll be sundown,” K’hyss said. “The cold there’s miserable even for Rito after dark. You should leave tomorrow.”

Malcolm didn’t look like he needed convincing save for one thing: “Where in town’ll I stay?”

K’hyss didn’t hesitate.

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“Really is a tremendous charm to meet you!” Leandha said as the three of them ate. K’hyss had been afraid that she’d blab out something like ‘my brother *always* talks about you’ but she was keeping any impish streaks to herself. “I work in the village fields. I’m glad *somebody* wants our rice!”

They made small talk throughout the evening, Leadha at ease and K’hyss feeling troubled. Internally, he rocked with turmoil. Something told him, something innate and primal, that if he didn’t confess to Malcolm tonight, he never would—that, perhaps, his feelings would stay bottled up forever. Despite his doubts, despite the tribe, he didn’t want that... so he had to work up the courage.

But by the goddesses, it was hard.

After dinner, Leandha excused herself to go back into the village, citing an errand she’d promised a neighbor. Her eyes met her brother’s as she left; he got the sense she was begging him to take action, to just *do* it already. They were sparking with love and encouragement.

And as she left them alone, K’hyss found himself grateful for it.

“Your sister’s nice!” Malcolm said. “Reminds me of my own. A nice, headstrong woman...”

“She’s amazing,” K’hyss agreed. He breathed. Focus. *Focus*. He could do this. He had to—for himself, if no one else.

“Hey... you alright?”

Malcolm’s concern touched something in him. He had to do it. No looking back—yes or no, this was the real K’hyss.

“Yeah. Listen, I’ve been making something for you. And since you’re about to head off to Hebra, it just seems right to give it.”

With the Hylian looking attentively, K’hyss moved as if in a trance, picking up the bow’s case: a simple, unadorned wooden box with bright brass clasps. “Here,” he said.

Malcolm’s eyes widened as he opened the box. “This is—whoa, the craftsmanship is insane!” He glanced at his friend. “You made this?”

K’hyss nodded—yes, he had.

“I’ll take it,” Malcolm said. “How much do I owe ya?”

“It’s not meant for selling,” K’hyss said, reaching his feathers over to quiet his friend’s hands. “It’s for *you*. Take it, please.”

Silence reigned in the chamber for a moment before Malcolm shut the box. “I... thank you. Really. I don’t know what to say.”

*That makes two of us*, K'hyss thought.

"What made you make this?" Malcolm said. "It couldn't have just been *me*, could it? I'm nobody..."

"No," K'hyss responded fervently. "That's not right. You're hardworking and clever, handsome and optimistic... you're amazing. I've... thought you were amazing since I first met you."

"...gosh," Malcolm said after a quiet moment. "That's a lot to live up to. Especially since, well, I thought you were pretty amazing yourself." His gaze was uncharacteristically shy; he smiled at K'hyss. "Assuming we're both talking about the same *kind* of, uh, 'amazing.'"

K'hyss could barely feel his heart, it was beating so fast. "I think we are." He reached for Malcolm's hand and didn't withdraw when Malcolm took his fingers.

"You know," said the trader, rubbing his thumb lightly over K'hyss's feathers, "I'm not a great shot with a bow. I could use someone to help show me how to use it. Maybe up there in Hebra?"

"...I bet the tribe can find someone else to wrangle with traders for a few weeks," K'hyss said.

"I think you're right." And Malcolm pulled him in close and they leaned into one another again, like they did back with the cart and the axle, except this time it was closer and warmer and far more intimate—and K'hyss didn't feel like he had to hide anything.

Perhaps the Rito, or Malcolm's people, would look askew at them. Perhaps so. But perhaps they wouldn't. And even if they did, there were far more important things to worry about.