Summary

Link Neal is transferred from his low profile human intelligence agency to Los Angeles, home to one of the most respected and dangerous agencies in the United States. This is where he meets his handler; a mysterious and alluring man who goes by "H". Link soon realizes not all is what it seems, and his relationship with H might just be in the center of it all.

Notes

**Story Title Translation:** Opération Clandestin - Clandestine Operation (An intelligence operation designed to remain secret)

**Works inspired by this one:** Transpose by Officialstevenstone (Mamaburnie)

**This work is also available as a podfic:** Here by acatalepsy
Opération Clandestine; Clandestine Operation

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It had been raining for days and didn't look like it would be letting up any time soon. One of the worst hurricanes in years, the news had said. Droplets of rain, some the size of one's fist, clattered on a window pane adjacent to a group of secret agents. The sound made their ears ring like someone had began playing drums in the middle of the stairwell. The weather provided a fortuitous distraction for the men infiltrating the building; the sounds of their hurried steps were hushed by the downpour outside. Puddles which were formed on the floor from rain falling through an open window were stomped on and made the base of Link's trousers wet, his feet becoming damp and uncomfortable. Even through his combat boots and two layers of socks, his feet still managed to get wet. Just his luck. Three men accompanied Link; one in front and two at his rear, acting as protection from whomever they may encounter inside the condemned building.

There had been copious amounts of men in the floors below, but the gross number seemed to have thinned out as they ascended the stairs. It was troubling. It felt like they were walking into a trap. Stealthy movements and accurately timed stun gun charges allowed the men to rid the trouble in the lower floors, making Link feel regretfully under dressed. He wore an entirety of black—a thick, woolen sweater and combat pants—and he carried a small but heavy briefcase in his right hand, wire rope attached to his belt loop and a stun gun hidden in his left boot. The other men, however, were armed to the teeth with body armor and machine guns, along with their stun batons. Strictly zero bullets had been fired upon Link's request. There was no need for fatalities that could be avoided, and they had enough hand ties to go around. Minimal fatalities was always Link's number one priority.

The man in front of him—Eddie—used the torch light attached to his helmet as a guide to get the group up the stairwell and toward their impending doom—at least, that's what it felt like. Thunder rumbled outside and echoed through the walls as they reached their target floor. Lightning illuminated the otherwise pitch black stairwell for a long second as the number nineteen became visible, painted on the wall in thick, yellow numerals to indicate the floor number. An old office building, the report had said, but Link didn't know of any office building that required a hidden 19th floor. The men had to take two separate stairways to reach it, both of which had been suspiciously absent of human resistance. A blessing, perhaps, but Link didn't omit enthusiasm about the accessibility of the building.
An abrupt hand signal from Eddie, who was positioned in front of Link, indicated that they were pushing through. Without hesitation and in absence of noise, the door to the nineteenth floor was barged open using Eddie's broad shoulder. Guns were raised. Link stayed behind Eddie for protection, as per his orders. He didn't feel like being filled with holes, either. They braced for a firefight that didn't come, and after a few agonizingly long seconds, the three armored men cleared the floor. Link stole a chance to look around.

The building was in a poor state of decay but it was felicitous considering the report said it had been vacant for an entire year now. Surprisingly enough, the government had not issued a demolition contract in the time it had been unoccupied. That's where Link and his team came into play. The building was harboring some pretty clandestine information inside its walls.

No graffiti decorated the walls of the building, but there was obvious wear and tear from the weather and who knows what else. Pillars were scattered across the empty floor, cylindrical concrete marking where the structure was at its strongest. Link circled a few of them until he located the pillar he was looking for—the one that had the data buried deep within it's concrete. Link knelt down next to it. Wordlessly, as the armored men marked his position and remained on guard, he laid his briefcase on the ground beside him and opened it, small locks clicking out of place as he did so.

"You got three minutes, Neal." Eddie barked from somewhere behind Link, voice stern and distant.

"Yeah." Link grunted. Inside the briefcase was a small drill designed for this mission and this mission alone. A tedious one it was turning out to be, if Link could admit. Delicate fingers maneuvered the drill out of the case and attached it to a battery source, then placed it into position on the pillar. Link felt around the concrete for instabilities, and after finding none he drilled a hole slowly but deliberately, knowing how careful he had to be. Behind him, a pair of eyes were drilling their own hole into the back of his skull—no doubt from one of his guards. A new kid on the job, he recalled, but Link barely had time to remember the guy’s name before the mission had been thrust upon them. Eddie was the only one he could identify by name and stance, having known him for years. And Eddie didn't seem too confident in his teammates abilities, which wasn't exactly a confidence booster for Link.

It didn't take long for the drill to break through into a small hollow in the pillar.

“Jackpot.” Link withdrew the tool and placed it back in the briefcase, then reached for a pair of extraction tools similar to tweezers. He positioned them carefully inside the newly drilled hole in the concrete and retrieved the item in question—a small electronic chip of some sort, similar to an SD card. Link could understand the urgency of this mission as he inspected the chip in his hand before placing it safely into the briefcase beside him. Some kind of encrypted file, he assumed. Encrypted files typically contained some of the most compelling information to date; it was what led Link to specialize in this kind of mission in the first place. He could decrypt almost anything, given the right tools and time. It was his specialty.

That's when he heard small movement. A shadow passed in his peripheral. It slithered by one of the guards and just as Link rose to his feet in warning, the shadow figure reached around the guard's neck and easily—almost professionally—snapped his neck through three thick layers of armor.

There was a short second where no one moved whilst the men's brains registered what had happened. Then the gunfire began, and Link wasn't about to go down without a fight. As the dark figure—a shadowy image of a man—ran past the dead body on his left, Link made a break for the now unoccupied firearm laying on the ground, one arm raising to cover his head from gunfire. He had made it halfway across the floor when a sharp pain hit him like a brick and he tripped over his own feet before collapsing face first onto the floor below him. His cheek scraped along the concrete
it as he skidded to a stop just short of the deceased soldier he had been aiming for.

It felt like a knife wound, sharp and pricking at his skin, but Link knew better. He had been shot in the crossfire, but by whom, he didn’t know and he didn’t care. It wasn’t important. Friendly fire was expected and the pain wasn’t excruciating enough to hold a grudge. A brief tension of his arm confirmed that it was through-and-through. It would be good news if he could move his bicep, which he could not. A stretch of his uninjured arm was all it took to grasp at the firearm next to the deceased guard before Link rolled onto his back with a pained groan and blinked up at the scene before him. Flashes of gunfire assaulted his vision nothing like action movies lead people to believe; it was much, much worse than that. And much more frightening. Link had been under fire before, sure, but he had never been shot and left helpless on the ground. Bullets flew from left to right. There was shouting. He heard his name, but he was unable to respond. He heard his name once more, this time in his ear piece but he felt his throat seizing up in fright. He was panicking; probably going against rule number one in the guide book Secret Agents 101: How To Act During A Firefight.

Gunfire from multiple weapons; more than two, which meant their attacker had brought armed back-up. Link propped himself up on his elbow, hair and face soaked from the spray of rain entering through bullet holes in a broken window to his right. Using both hands to steady the machine gun, Link open fired on the offending men to his left who had yet to spot him. Or so he thought. Another sharp pain hit him in his side, right in his rib cage. He fumbled the gun in his hands to grip at the wound. He saw stars and his hearing began to fade, the ringing in his ears overwhelming him. Someone shouted his name in the distance but he was unable to respond before the darkness overcame him and he went under.

MAY 23RD 2007, one month later, present day

"You're being transferred."

The room suddenly seemed too bright for Link's adjusting eyes. He barely had a moment to gather himself as he sat down before the news was thrust upon him. "What?"

"I'm sorry, Neal," Eddie's voice sounded sincere, “But this is how it is."

Link blinked in frustration, gritting his teeth. He had to ask; "Why?"

Eddie hesitated. "Given your recent achievements, the boss thinks it would be best for you if you were to be transferred to Los Angeles. M.Y.T.H.U.M.I.N.T. unit, otherwise known as Mythical Intelligence. Your decryption skills would be best suited there.” He paused, then added, “Y’know, buddy, this is a great opportunity."

Link shook his head, knowing damn well that he did not deserve the commendation he had received after being in the hospital for a month after what had happened in that office building. One fatality; the soldier whom Link had learned was named David, neck broken by at the hands of an enemy intelligence agency which had picked up on their case file and had planned to arrive before Link and his team to retrieve the data chip with deadly force. Eddie and the remainder of his team had managed to subdue the gunmen and yet, somehow, Link was the one to receive praise.

"L.A.?" Link asked.

Eddie nodded, a small grin on his face as he clasped his hand around Link's shoulder in a friendly,
encouraging gesture. "Yeah, man. You're going to be working with the bigwigs, looking down on the likes of us."

Link shook his head but returned the grin. "I'm glad you're so pleased about this, Eddie. Sounds like you're ready to get rid of me."

Eddie laughed shortly, then moved around his desk and took a seat in front of Link, the desk positioned between them. It was sunny then; the storm had passed and the world had moved on from it. No more devastation and no more constant days of rain. Maybe things were looking up.

"How long do I got?" Link asked, unable to keep the disappointment out of his voice. Los Angeles was a great opportunity, but he couldn’t help but feel his transfer was in bad taste.

"Leavin' tomorrow, Neal." Eddie said simply, double checking the transfer sheet in front of himself before confirming. Truthfully, Link would miss working with these guys. He had worked with them for around seven years now, and damn did it feel like home. Los Angeles was on the other side of the United States and Link had barely even left the state before. The furthest he had been from North Carolina was a week long field trip to New York for an engineering convention back when he was in college.

Eddie scratched at his beard absentmindedly, looking out of the window to his left and up at the blue sky neither of them had seen for a long time. "You better empty out your locker and say goodbye to the guys. No doubt they'll wanna go out tonight for a farewell."

Link bit his upper lip, drawing it between his teeth in thought. Saying goodbye to friends of so many years would be difficult, but he figured with the advancement in technology nowadays, maintaining contact wouldn't be too difficult.

Clearing out his locker was the first thing on the list and it was pretty easy given that Link didn't keep much at work. Nothing like clearing out his old high school locker and having to rip off stickers, tear down posters and whatever the hell else he had tacked to his locker door in the years he attended there. His locker at the agency was much more dark and grey; painfully generic. But Link didn't mind; if he had minded he wouldn't have stuck around for so long. He packed his things into a cardboard box like in the movies, and braced himself for the goodbyes to follow him.

Everyone was happy for him, and it warmed Link's from head to toe. Awkward, one armed hugs turned into emotional embraces once he had discarded his things onto Jen's desk to wrap his arms around her properly. He and Jen were partners for a few years until recently, working together during missions and such. That sort of trust could never be broken; he had a bond with Jen that no one else would understand.

"I'm gonna miss you, buddy," Jen admitted, her Canadian accent thick with emotion, "You take care of yourself, y'hear? No heroics without me."

Link smiled wholeheartedly. "Yes, ma'am."

Jason and James gave Link strong handshakes, with cheerful good lucks and goodbyes, until Eddie chirped in, leaning on the door frame which led into his office. "Drinks tonight?"

"You betcha." Link responded.
The drive home was easier than Link thought it would be. Saying goodbye to the town he lived in his entire life would be the hardest part. When he arrived at his apartment he kicked his door closed with his right foot and threw his keys into a bowl next to the coat rack. He fed his fish and mentioned that they'd be moving in with Jen from now on, and that she would be taking care of them. He then repeated this process with the plants that he kept. Link had always spoken to his pets, and this included his plants. And science did prove that talking to your plants helped them grow with the increase of carbon dioxide his breath offered, so he never bothered to stop himself. It was a conversation starter when ever had dates or friends over.

He threw out a lot of old clothes, decidedly hanging onto his uniforms and a great deal of tactical shoes. No doubt he would need them—the assigned boots were always hard and uncomfortable on the soles of his feet. Agencies tended to supply the clothing for tasks, so Link did not need to pack much outside of his shoes. He had been in the business almost a decade now and he knew the score. He squeezed his entire life into one suitcase and a duffel bag, before shifting them from his empty bed to the floor. He then packed a bag to take to Jen's which consisted of things she would want; books and old records mostly, along with some family photo albums. Afterwards, he took a shower and decided to cut his hair. It had grown out a lot over the past few years, and Link had neglected to tame it. But given his new start he figured it was time. He shaped it around his face, just coming short of his ears, just enough that he could see without having to flick it out of his eyes. His stubble seemed darker once he had finished.

"You cut your hair." Jen noted the moment she opened the door to her apartment an hour later and saw Link standing there.

"Yeah." Link stepped inside once she had welcomed him and made his way to her coffee table to place the packed bag down for her. Her stare was making him feel self conscious. "That bad, huh?"

"No, you just..." Jen hesitated, eyes wide and voice quiet, "You look like you did when you first started working at the agency."

Link nodded at this, not wanting to push the matter further. He had been hired during a dark time in his life, full of regret and self loathing. It was not something he wished either of them to relive. Though, his self-deprecating personality is what drew he and Jen so close in the first place. Her unwavering determination to be there for him, and her insistence that he could be so much better than what he was, created a bond between them that they could never break. She was like a sister and he was admittedly more close to Jen than he was his real sister, whom he hadn't spoken to in years.

"You're giving me these?" Jen asked once they had settled and were waiting to leave for the bar. She pulled out two family photo albums from the bag packed for her, seeming shocked.

"Yeah."

"Neal..."

"They'll be better here," Link cleared the lump in his throat, "Besides, I kept a few pictures for the road. I'll find a frame or something when I'm over there."

Jen seemed to mull over his statement for a long moment, before placing the albums back inside the bag. They shared some quiet, pleasant conversation over some iced tea whilst waiting for it to get late enough that they could meet the guys at the bar. Jen gushed about how much she would miss him, and how he had to keep in contact via phone calls or emails. Link had agreed; he would miss her too.

Around eight thirty they headed out to the bar to meet the guys, who were cheerful and once again wishing Link their best. They reminisced about the good old times, when Link was still a rookie and
Jason knew so much more than him. Or the times where Link made a fool of himself in front of Eddie before they had become friends. It made Link feel like this was his retirement party and not his going away get together.

Three rounds of drinks later, Link having bought nothing whatsoever aside from a pack of peanuts for Jen, he excused himself for the evening. The men exchanged one armed hugs and pats on the back, best wishes for the future and some tell me about the California women’s. Eddie gave Link’s shoulder a quick squeeze. Jen gushed at him and shed a few tears, hugging him a couple of times before letting him go. Link was thankful for the break; he wanted to be alone. He would miss his friends, but he had to mentally prepare himself too. He had never gone anywhere alone before, never mind to the other side of the country. The thought was all kinds of intimidating, but only time would tell.

MAY 24th 2007, present day

Link had to change flights twice to get to Los Angeles. The initial changeover was from North Carolina to New York, where he caught his connecting flight for Kansas. He called Jen in between flights, supplying her with brief updates and to ask if she had gotten into his apartment okay, if she had taken care of his fish and plants. She seemed cheery, talking about something Eddie had done at work, laughing away and already Link felt like an outsider. He fell asleep on the way to Kansas and thankfully didn’t wake up drooling on the shoulder of the person he shared a row with. The man beside him gave Link a peculiar look before returning to his reading.

Link had to run to his connecting flight for Los Angeles, his gate being on the other side of Kansas City International. He made it with seconds to spare, the attendant at the desk having just given the order to seal the gate. He was thankful to her and she smiled and let him board, having taken pity due to him sweating like an ape from the run there with a duffel bag. The seat beside him was not occupied on the way to L.A. and he willingly put his feet up and rested his head against the plane window, watching the clouds fade past.

He must have fallen asleep because when he awoke it was dark and the plane was stationary. A flight attendant informed him that they had arrived at LAX. Link scrambled to his feet, momentarily forgetting he had put in earphones before falling asleep, and immediately fell backwards from still being attached to the seat. The attendant did her best not to laugh, but when she did, Link laughed too.

He caught a cab to his new apartment, the address written by Link's messy, rushed hand that morning before leaving North Carolina. Somewhere in Santa Monica, adjacent to a museum. It was a decent area and far from what Link had expected. He tipped the cab driver generously, the hour and a half long drive to his place having done a number on his backside, and legs leading him to pity the poor guy having to drive all that distance. The walk to his apartment consisted of a staircase which led up to a single door which he opened with his key and stumbled inside. There were people living beneath him; a Hispanic couple he had spotted before he had entered. They hadn't stopped to say hello or welcome Link to the neighborhood, and he was okay with that.

The apartment was roomier than Link’s old place, and much more modern. It felt like a beach apartment Link had seen on TV. He locked the door behind him and discarded his bags onto the floor at his feet to explore his new home.
Immediately to his right were two doors next to one another, the one closest to the entrance led into a small foyer where the room separated into a small bathroom and bedroom. The second door led into what was presumably the master bedroom, which had a view of the car park next to his apartment across the street. It was too dark to pick out any passersby aside from a few nomads who were illuminated in the street light.

To Link’s left, the room opened into a living room and kitchen area, the two rooms separated by a concrete archway and bar area. From where he stood at the front door, Link noticed the balcony. He actually had a balcony, he thought, mouth agape as he approached the sliding doors and opened them, roughly pushing one aside so he could step out and breathe in the cool night air. Los Angeles was not what he had expected; it sounded much like New York had when he had landed—loud and busy—but now that he was farther away from the city and next to the beach, it was quieter. Still the occasional chatter and drunken babble from down the ways, and some soft club music coming from the pier, but other than that it was peaceful. Link could still taste the salt from the sea on his tongue when he retired for the night.

**MAY 25TH 2007, present day**

Link was awoken abruptly by a persistent knocking at his door that didn't seem to subside despite his obvious attempts to ignore it. Scrambling to his feet, he hadn’t bothered to fetch a robe before he threw open the door angrily, dressed only in an overnight shirt and boxers. Greeting him was the harsh light from the sun and he had to squint and raise an arm to see the man standing at his door. He wore some sort of uniform and had a stern look on his face.

“Charles Neal?” The man asked, voice deep and rough. He had raised a brow at Link's appearance, and surveyed his undeniable bed head.

“Who’s asking?” Link responded groggily, raising an eyebrow back at the guy before a package was thrust into his arms with unnecessary force. True enough, the package was for a Charles Lincoln Neal III in Santa Monica. But he hadn't registered his address with anyone yet, and getting mail was peculiar.

“Sign here.” The delivery guy almost barked at him, holding out something for Link to write on. Link juggled the package, shifting it under his left arm as he took the electronic device from the delivery guy's hand and signed his name on the screen. His hand was still asleep it seemed, as a small child could have forged a better signature. The man who had delivered the package was halfway down the staircase before Link called out to him, half hanging over the railing to see him, and demanded to know where the package had come from.

“Dunno, pal. I just deliver 'em.” was the response he received.

“Charming.” Link muttered as he closed the door behind him and locked it once more, before giving his eyes time to readjust to the lighting inside his home. He spun the package around in his hands and felt its weight. It was relatively heavy, and it only fueled Link's curiosity. He took it into the living room and held it in his arm as he opened the drapes, readying himself for the day ahead. He managed to rip open the package with his hands and peer inside, eyes narrowing at the contents. The package contained two separate boxes; one contained a hand held device, presumably a cell phone, and the second contained a small laptop, smaller than Link had seen before. Underneath the two boxes was a
YOU WILL RECEIVE A TEXT MESSAGE WITH INSTRUCTIONS.

“Specific,” Link thought aloud, re-reading the note in his hands a couple of times. Eddie had mentioned to him that the dealings with the new agency would be primarily cellular, which was an extremely new thing for Link. He was used to dealing with people face-to-face and not through a screen. Maybe he wouldn't need to make new friends at this rate, not if everything was going to be handled virtually. He powered up the phone and waited for a text, but after ten minutes of biting his nails and daydreaming out the balcony window, Link gave up and went to get dressed for the day. He still had to gather supplies for his home, most importantly food. His stomach chose that moment to announce that he had not eaten since breakfast the day prior, having been too exhausted from a day of travelling to prepare anything. He glanced at his watch then made the necessary adjustments to it, having almost forgotten about the change in time from North Carolina to L.A.. Three hours was nothing, really. The length of a nap or the time it took to write up a report. He would cope.

Link was in the middle of writing out a few essential items to purchase on the back of the note from the package when the cell phone vibrated on his coffee table a couple of meters away. Link regarded it for a second before rising to his feet from his position at the bar and making his way to the device. The screen had lit up a dark green color and it alerted him to a new message. He swiped the screen to unlock the device and then selected the message.

Good morning. You will receive a phone call in a few minutes. -H

Link stared at the phone, unsure of how to proceed. Was he to text back in confirmation? Or just wait to be called? He re-read the text a couple more times, taking a seat on the sofa next to the coffee table where he had left the laptop and earpiece prior. At least whoever had contacted him had enough manners to say good morning, Link thought, unlike the grumpy-looking couple beneath him. What did the H stand for? A name, or a code name? Link wasn't sure; this was entirely new to him. He scratched at his week old stubble in thought and peered out of the balcony doors at the boardwalk across the street. It seemed peaceful enough. A few women and men would pass every now and then in their swim suits; it felt like Miami, Link thought. Or at least how Miami looked on TV.

The phone buzzed in his hands and startled Link. He collected himself and answered on the first ring. “Hello?”

“Please state your name for identification purposes.” Another man's voice said from the other side of the phone, deep and raspy.

Link hesitated, glancing around himself, suddenly paranoid, “...Neal.”

“Your full name, please.” The voice replied, the whisper of a southern accent in Link's ear.

“Charles Lincoln Neal III.” Link grunted, feeling like a child having to state his name on the first day of class. Which, essentially, was what he was doing.

“Please state your date of birth for identification purposes.” The voice replied, sounding more and more like a machine as the questioning continued. Link felt himself get physically irritated by the questions, but he knew he should comply.

“June 1st, 1978.”
There was a short pause compared to the previous responses from the other male on the line. Link assumed he was double checking his file with his answers. After a moment, the voice spoke again, “That would make your age twenty-eight. Correct?”

“Yes.”

Another pause, shorter this time. “Alright. Transfer #021295, North Carolina to Los Angeles?”

“Yeah.” Link replied, sitting on the edge of the sofa with his elbows on his knees as he held the phone to his ear. “That's me.”

There was another pause, this time longer. It felt like an eternity. The other man’s voice sounded similar to Link's when it came to accents. Was this guy from the south too? Maybe he was just another transfer like Link was. It would be comforting to not feel so alone in all this.

When the other man did not respond for a few minutes, Link spoke up. “What's going on? You gonna question me and then not say anything?”

Link was met with a short, breathy laugh on the other end of the line which made his lips quirk up into a slight smile.

“I had to check you were who you said you were. Standard procedure.” The man on the other line replied.

Link snorted, “Right.”

“You're going to need a lot more patience if you're going to get ahead in this job.”

Link raised an eyebrow at that, feeling a challenge in the words. But before he could respond, the man spoke again, “In order to skip the tedious task of taking you through this questioning process every time you answer a call, I'm going to assign you a security question. Next time you get a call, pick up and answer the question. Got it?”

“Yep,” Link responded, a little tired of phone guy already. This would be a hell of a long trip if everyone at the agency was like this guy.

“First grade teacher?”

“Ms. Locklear.” Link stated factually. There was another long pause, but this time Link didn't pry further. His curiosity bubbled, wondering what the other man was doing on the other side of the line. After a while, the man spoke once more.

“Alright. You're all set,” He confirmed, voice rougher and louder than before, “so save this number under “H” in your phone. You’ve been given this receiver for tasks and potential mission assignments. The laptop and earpiece are to aid you during those assignments. However,” the voice trailed off, then came back, sounding a little mischievous, “you can use it for recreation, too.”

Link felt himself roll his eyes, but refrained from saying anything. If he was going to be given orders he'd rather get them sooner rather than later. Outside, there was a small noise of cats fighting, and Link stood up and made his way to the balcony doors to peer outside into the alleyway next to his house. He saw nothing. The voice in his ear spoke again. “Any questions?”

Link paused, then asked, “Yeah, who are you?”

There was a deliberate pause. “You can address me as H.”
Link grunted down the line at that and he swore he could hear the other man grinning on the other end. Must be truly wonderful to hold all the power in a phone call. “Well, H, any idea when I'll get an assignment?”

“Tomorrow. 0900 hours.”

That was soon, Link thought. His old department gave them weeks of preparation, classes and cooperation tests before putting him out on the field. L.A. sure seemed to do things a hell of a lot differently than a little town like Buies Creek. Uncertainty crept into his brain and gave him goosebumps on his neck. He'd better get prepared.

“Consider it your initiation into the company. You will be debriefed beforehand. I recommend getting used to the tech you have been provided with.” H stated, his voice echoing in Link's head, “Settle in, get used to the area. You'll be there a while.”

Link opened his mouth to respond but heard a small beep from the device in his hand. He pulled it away from his ear to see that H had disconnected the call. Typical. Link figured H was his case officer then, having not been in contact with anyone else. That meant Link was part of an agent network, working alongside other agents without actually coming into contact with them.

He did some digging on the agency before leaving his apartment, using the laptop like H had suggested he do. M.Y.T.H.U.M.I.N.T. pulled up few search results, which was expected, however the internal database built into the laptop had much more interesting information on the agency.

The Mythical Human Intelligence Agency (MYTHUMINT) was a high ranking government agency which operated in the shadows across the United States, having agents placed throughout the states and across the globe. Spies and diplomats gathered information and stole technology from enemy states and reported back to those in charge. The database did not list anything about case officers or about any other agents, though it didn't stop Link from digging into this H guy to see if he could outsmart him during their next exchange, but he came up empty and got frustrated enough to close the laptop and leave the apartment.

It was a fifteen minute walk to the nearest food market, and Link decided to take the scenic route along the boardwalk to admire the beach. There hadn't been many beaches in North Carolina, save from a few creeks and lakes to explore when he was younger. He would go on hikes, mostly by himself, to explore without having anyone to disturb him. He enjoyed the solitude but truthfully, he could admit, it might have been more entertaining to take someone along with him. He didn't feel the same now, walking along the boardwalk. He didn't want company.

The food market was expensive compared to North Carolina, so Link only purchased what was necessary. Some eggs, apples, bread and butter. He picked up some milk and cereal on his way to the cash register, too. Link could live on cereal alone, and had for some weeks on the job before. He would probably do it again soon; this was the kind of job that needed his entire attention. Like being a doctor, but a doctor for the state. The job came first, not his own health or personal life. The cashier smiled at him politely as she packed his bag and he gave a fleeting smile back, offering her his thanks.

“You new here?” The cashier asked whilst she scanned his half-gallon of milk with a smile.

Link hesitated before answering, masking his uncertainty by fumbling with his wallet, “Yeah, just moved here yesterday.”

The cashier smiled at him and packed the milk into a brown paper bag as she spoke, “I could tell you weren't from around here. Southern?”
Link laughed, momentarily forgetting that his accent would be significantly different from those in Los Angeles. “That noticeable, huh?”

“I didn't say it was a bad thing.” The cashier laughed and punched in a few numbers into the till. “That'll be thirty-six fifty, sir.”

“Neal.” He responded, handing her two twenty dollar bills. “My name is Neal.”

The cashier's cheeks turned a light maroon, partially hidden behind her brunette hair as she accepted the money from him and placed it into the extended drawer of the till, seemingly having trouble working out his change, “I'm Jessie.”

“Nice to meetcha, Jessie.” Link replied as she handed him his change. She had given him two dollars too much for change, which he politely handed back to her, only embarrassing her further. “See you around.”

Jessie nodded and offered a small smile, before turning her attention to the customer behind Link and chatting away to them.

The walk back to his apartment was considerably longer as he took his time admiring the view of the pier. The Ferris wheel hadn't become illuminated yet, but it was still relatively early. He would be able to squint at it from his little apartment balcony in the evening, he thought. A man jogging stopped him to ask what time it was, sweat decorating his features as he jogged from foot to foot, but otherwise Link made it home without any disturbances.

It was around four o'clock in the afternoon when he reached his apartment, having taken longer than he originally intended to on his waltz home. Fearing his milk would be overheating, he was quick to place it inside the refrigerator before putting away the other items he had bought. He placed the apples into a bowl and put them on display on the bar-top. As he assumed so, he poured himself a bowl of cereal and milk for dinner and sat down on the sofa to watch some light television whilst he ate. Los Angeles television was acutely different from what Link was accustomed to, being bombarded with non-stop commercials in between reality shows. Naturally, his eyes wandered to the laptop in front of him, mind not being able to focus on the soap opera he had decided to put on. Placing his bowl down on top of the coffee table, only half finished, he picked up the laptop and placed it onto his lap and opened it. It was still sitting on the page of the database he had left open a fit of irritation. Wordlessly, he scrolled through the database and began reading. After a while, he maneuvered to pick up his bowl again and finish the rest of his cereal, despite it being slightly soggy.

All agents must complete a series of security questions before being able to converse with a handler. The handler may assign a single security question to speed up this process.

Link grunted around a mouthful of cereal at that; it seemed H was his case officer after all. He was correct in assuming so. Something about that fact seemed to sit strange in Link's stomach, but he pushed it down and dismissed it as hunger.

A handler (also known as a case officer) is not permitted to reveal their identity to an agent in an agent network, nor a singleton of variation. Handler's may, however, use code names or code words to converse with an agent, should the handler so wish to do so. A handler is strictly prohibited from forming companionship with an agent, in all
senses of the term. They must remain a platonic third party and maintain complete control of situations.

Link stopped chewing for a moment in thought. It seemed like H had a pretty tough job; to not be able to form friendships with his co-workers must be a difficult thing to do. He sort of felt bad for the guy, then wondered if a basic agent had similar rules. He scrolled through the database and located the agent files and pulled up an article to skim through.

Agents are permitted to form bonds of friendship and/or companionship with fellow agents. Such relationships must not interfere with the workforce or workplace.

Link snorted at this. H definitely had a rough type of job, but from their conversation earlier, his handler didn't give off the impression he minded being alone. Link remained on the laptop until the power cut out on it and he realized that the time had reached almost midnight. Time to retire for the evening. He placed the laptop on charge and picked up the cell phone to take it into his room. Putting his empty cereal bowl into the sink, he dragged his feet to the master room, both brain and body drained from the day's events. He climbed into the bed, which seemed extremely empty with only one body in it, creating a numbing feeling in Link's chest. He pushed it down and placed the cell phone on the bed side table and closed his eyes. He had to be well rested for the day ahead.

Chapter End Notes

A big thank y'all for reading and let me know if I should progress! Merci et prends soin de toi!
MAY 26TH 2007, present day

When Link awoke it was light outside and birds were chirping. The sun beamed into his bedroom and heated up the left side of his body as it shone on him. He was covered in a cold sweat, feeling pretty disgusting—he must have had a nightmare, one he couldn't remember. He was thankful for that despite feeling like he hadn't slept at all. A quick check of the cell phone confirmed that he was free to take a shower before being contacted. He glanced at himself in the bathroom mirror and noted how dark the circles under his eyes had become; it was a tad embarrassing, but he had no one to impress. The cell phone vibrated once he had washed and dressed and was drying his hair off with a towel.

_Rise and Shine. Prepare for assignment. -H_

Link had half a mind to text back, but he didn't and settled for drying off the rest of his hair before the cell phone rang and he picked it up on the last ring, having not heard it right away.

“Neal,” He grunted into the phone.

“Security question,” H's voice sounded in his ear, a familiar southern accent to talk to. H didn't sound tired at all. “First grade teacher?”

“Ms. Locklear.”

A short pause. “Very good.”

Link shifted his weight from foot to foot, watching himself in the bathroom mirror. “Yeah, yeah.”

The smile in H's tone was evident, but his deep voice sounded serious, “Reports of a drug trafficking operation around your area. Santa Monica food market.”

“The food market? I was just there.” Link said in surprise, staring at himself in the mirror in confusion, “Looked fine to me.”

“How would I make such a request?” Link asked, rubbing a hand over his face and exiting the bathroom to find his shoes and jacket. He felt nervous; first day on the job and he already missed the
trafficking operation the night before. It wasn't look too well.

“Send a text to this number. Agents will be dispatched momentarily.”

Link sighed to himself as he stumbled into his shoes, trying to do it one handed, holding the phone in his opposite hand. “Gotcha.” He heard the line disconnect and he sighed again, putting the phone in his jacket pocket once he had shrugged into it.

The walk to the food market felt longer than before; maybe Link was prolonging it. Maybe he wasn’t ready to admit that he had been wrong and missed something that should have been obvious. First day on the job and he already screwed up? The sky was a light shade of blue, and the sun was high in the sky above Link's head, heating up the side walk and Link's shoulders. He made a mental note to contact Jen in the next few days and update her on his situation, should this first assignment go well. The food market was surprisingly empty for it being the early morning, and when Link noticed the cashier was missing that's when he knew something was amiss. He called out once, pertaining to the presence of any other person. There was no response. Fidgeting, he put his hand into his jacket pocket and cupped his cell phone inside it, ready to send a text for help. He called out again, this time calling the cashier's name.

"Jessie?"

Nothing.

He meandered through the isles, not noticing anything amiss. No scattered food and nothing broken; no signs of struggle. Link bit his bottom lip in concentration as he sneaked around the corner of an isle and made his way to the back room, where the door was laying ajar. Link's breath hitched in his throat as all of his combat training came back to him. He paused before peering around the door to see a small group of men sitting around a circular table, seeming serious and completely enthralled in hushed discussion. A brief scan of the room alerted Link to Jessie who was slumped against the far corner, hands tied and feet bound. Her mouth was gagged and she didn't exhibit any signs of life. Link hoped she was simply unconscious.

None of the men noticed him for the longest of moments whilst Link surveyed the scene and considered his options. Outside, there was a sharp screech of tires skidding to a halt and car doors banging, but he paid it little mind until one of the men at the table snapped to attention and caught sight of Link peering around the door. There was a small moment where time stood still and the criminal at the table simply stared at Link, who stared back. The moment ended quickly as the man alerted the others and the entire table was then on their feet. Two of them pulled out hand guns and shouted in Spanish. Link remained silent and immobile, having no idea what they were saying to him. He did not speak Spanish, never could; he took French in high school but otherwise his only language was English.

A noise from inside the market echoed; Link recognized them as footsteps before two men, dressed entirely in black, burst through the door and into the room, bearing arms and speaking authoritatively. One of them held Link behind his body, shielding him, and the other used a karate move on the Hispanic who's gun had remained raised after numerous warnings. In response, the other Hispanics began to yell, to which the man in front of Link responded in the same tone. Whatever he said to the criminals seemed to shut them up and then the bulkier of the men dressed in black made a phone call. The man standing in front of Link, presumably to protect him from gunfire turned to face him with a grimace.

“We got a request for back up,” He said simply, “Yours?”

Link shook his head, dumbfounded. He hadn't had a chance to text for backup, but he wasn't
complaining. The two men surely just saved his life without knowing it.

He had found out they were also agents from Mythical Intelligence, but they did not discuss their handlers and Link didn't bring it up. Maybe it was an unspoken rule, he wondered, as he watched the criminals being loaded into a prison van.

“Whoever placed that request sure saved your life, man,” One of the agents said; Link had learned his name was Benjamin. He looked a lot smaller compared to the other guy who had saved him, who wasn't as chatty.

Link nodded, patting Benjamin on the shoulder in thanks, having towered over him a couple of inches. “Yeah, really, thanks.”

“Don't mention it,” Benjamin huffed, a grin decorating his face as he climbed into the front of the van. He closed the door behind himself, but then proceeded to roll the window down and lean his arm over the edge, “Someone in the agency must be watching over you.”

Link furrowed his brow, mind thinking of H. Maybe he had called for the backup. “Yeah, maybe.”

He thanked Benjamin again with a handshake through the window, and watched them go. Jessie had been seemingly unfazed by the entire ordeal, which was both odd and admirable to Link. She sat with a cup of coffee outside of the market, watching the sun retreat behind a cover of clouds. She smiled up at Link as he approached her and took a seat on the slab to her left. “How ya holding up?”

Jessie was quiet for a short moment, eyes returning to the sky and Link's joining her. Her long brown hair blew slightly in the wind, forming a curtain over her face. “Thanks for saving my life.”

“It wasn't me,” Link noted.

Jessie breathed out a short laugh, her long hair falling over her face as she looked down at the coffee cup between her knees. An espresso, and one she looked like she sure as hell needed. Her slim fingers fidgeted with the rim of the paper cup as she spoke, “Really, if you guys hadn't...”

Link hushed her with a one armed hug, conscious of knocking the coffee and spilling it on them. Jessie tensed briefly in surprise before laying her head on Link's shoulder in thanks. He walked her home after a while, finding that she only lived a few blocks from the market. She hushed his offerings to get her a hotel for the night, refusing them politely and insisting that she would be fine. Link gave her his cell phone number before they parted ways in case she ran into trouble, and she had the same faint maroon on her cheeks when she closed the door behind him and audibly locked it.

Link made his own way home by the time the sun had just began to set, watching the pavement all the way. It had been an incredibly long day, and an even longer one to follow in order to write up a report on the incident. Link passed a lot of people as he walked, a few of them were walking their dogs or chatting on cell phones; nothing suspicious. Link was feeling paranoid as hell by the time he had climbed the staircase and entered his apartment. He didn't check his phone until he had discarded his shoes and jacket and poured himself a glass of milk.

Status report. -H

Link frowned slightly and text back. Tail between legs. -N

The text message response was almost instantaneous. Prepare for call. -H

He had just cracked open two eggs into a frying pan and began making himself an omelette when his phone began to vibrate. Pulling it out of his pocket, he answered it one-handed in one swift motion,
using the other hand to poke at his dinner. “Neal.”

There was an uncharacteristic pause from the other man, which made Link furrow his brow. Finally, when H decided to speak, his voice seemed distant. “Status report.”

“Found the drug ring,” Link responded, huffing out a breath as he poked at the eggs with a spatula, a little more aggressive than needed, “Or maybe they found me. Either way, I would'a got my ass kicked had some other agents not taken over.”

H let out a small breath of air which was audible through the phone. “You're welcome.”

Link paused, leaving the eggs to bubble on their own, “You sent them?”

“Affirmative.”

“Why?”

There was a long pause, one which Link found excruciating. What, was this guy psychic? Or just messing with him? The eggs spat at Link and he dropped the spatula in surprise, then embarrassingly picked it back up to return to tending to his food.

“I got a feeling. And I'm usually not wrong.”

Link snorted. “Y'know, for a second I was touched. Then you had to be an ass about it.”

H laughed, and it was the first time Link had heard him properly laugh. He had the urge to say something else, in hopes that the other man would laugh once more. But he couldn't think of anything; he couldn't think of anything to say at all. Luckily, H was the one to speak, “Get used to that. Not bad for your first assignment.”

“If you say so.”

“I say so,” H responded, then Link heard the familiar beep of the call disconnecting. He groaned and cautiously flipped over his omelette in the frying pan. The noise of the eggs crackling did nothing to ease Link's racing mind. H must have known there was an aspect of danger to the drug bust, one which he failed to elaborate on with Link on the phone. He had to have prior knowledge of the situation to know there was something wrong before Link did. Or maybe there was surveillance at the market which he had failed to mention? Link wasn't sure.

Once his omelette was ready, Link retired to the living room but didn't bother turning on the TV this time, going straight for the laptop. He sent an email to Jen detailing the day and his first assignment, but left out the predicament he found himself in where he almost walked into his own demise. Her response arrived within ten minutes after Link had sent the email, having timed the initial sending to coincide with her arriving home from the agency. He was feeling a little homesick, maybe.

She congratulated him on his efforts then gave a lecture on the things she would do to him if he let himself get hurt. This made Link smile to himself as he read the rest of the email; she gave details of how the team were coping without him and what was happening in Buies Creek. It hadn't rained since Link had left, which was a first; perhaps a sign that the people of North Carolina were better off without him. Eddie had met a girl called Sara and introduced her to Jen; another surprise. Eddie never seemed interested in women before, let alone introducing a woman to his friends. Hearing the news made Link realize how much he really missed back home; back at the office with the people he called his friends, instead of having phone calls with a mysterious guy who couldn't even give Link his real name. Link mentioned him fleetingly in the emails, knowing not to go into detail in fear of losing his job. He mentioned that the guy was cocky and arrogant, and done a number on Link's
patience. These facts alone were enough to entertain Jen into teasing him about it.

After a few more pleasant emails, Jen had excused herself to look over some paperwork for the evening. This left Link to his own devices, completely unsure of what to do. He tidied up his apartment a bit, rearranging some furniture to provide more work space and to make the place feel less empty. He fully unpacked his bags and placed some of his clothing into drawers, others he hung up inside the wardrobe, tucking his shoes under his bed. He came across something he'd forgotten he'd packed; photographs from a long, long time ago. Sighing, he placed them back into his bag and stuffed them back away in the back of the wardrobe. He didn't need any unnecessary distractions; he couldn't afford to have them anymore.

As the evening progressed, his thoughts eventually wandered to H. Or whatever his name really was. Maybe H was short for something? Link couldn't hazard a guess. Grunting, he collapsed onto his bed; moving furniture had taken the energy out of him, let alone the events of the day. Rolling over onto his side, he managed to find a comfortable position laying over the bed sheets, and promptly fell asleep.

MAY 27TH 2007, present day

Sunlight glittered across Link's face in the morning, warming him from his cheeks to his toes. It was bright; something that he had to get used to. No longer would he need to wake up to the dull overcast of Buies Creek weather in the morning; he shook his head at the thought of having to buy a face mask for sleeping in. Surely no one wore those things anymore. He wouldn't even know where to go to purchase one, so it was decidedly out of the question. Groaning, he rolled over onto his back and stretched his arms above his head, before the nagging need to urinate became too much to ignore.

When he was finished in the bathroom, having brushed his teeth and washed his face, he sauntered to the kitchen, still in his sleepwear. A fleeting glance at the cell phone supplied to him from the agency confirmed that H had not tried to get in contact with him. Perhaps it was paperwork day, or maybe H was running late. Link didn't give it much thought whilst he poured himself some cereal; his body craved coffee and coffee was something he had neglected to purchase whilst he was at the market. He told himself he could wait a couple of days to go back there, given its recent incident. He could maybe check out a local coffee shop later, he thought, all but inhaling his cereal as he flicked through some television stations for something interesting to watch. He settled on a nature documentary and leaned back on the sofa to watch it in peace.

That peace was short lived when, after around ten minutes, a small beeping noise came from the laptop laying on his coffee table. Quirking a brow, Link stared at the laptop until it made the noise again. Intrigued, he picked up the laptop and laid it on his thighs, opening up the screen and blinking his eyes at the brightness of it. A small dialogue box popped up in the middle of the screen which indicated that he had received multiple instant messages. Huh. Instant messaging was not something Link had assumed he had had on this laptop. Perhaps it was an agent only network.

*Hey, Neal. It's Ben. From the other day. -B*

Link blinked, briefly wondering how the other man had been able to message him. Another beep, and another message came through.

*Found your file number on the IM list. Guessing your handler put it there. -B*
Link raised an eyebrow, wondering why H had not informed him of such. Sniffing slightly, Link typed a response.

*Must have. Didn't tell me nothing about it.* Link paused, then typed again. *Do handlers usually do that?* -N

It took a short minute for Benjamin to respond, in which time Link had tidied up his bowl and placed it in the sink with the bowl from the day before, making the mental note to wash the dishes at some point during the day. When the laptop beeped once more, Link returned to it.

*Mine did, but I don't know about the others. We aren't supposed to talk about each other's case officers...* -B

Link felt like Ben was missing out something, *But?* -N

The reply was instant. *Ha. You catch on quick.* -B

Link just shook his head and gave a lopsided smile at that. Ben seemed a lot like someone he'd meet at his old agency; playful and willing to bend the rules. Maybe he and Link would get along. It made him feel a little bit better about the whole transfer thing. He was browsing through his list of contacts, which were all identified with single letters. Benjamin was B, and Link was N. A short scroll confirmed that there was indeed an H on his IM contact list, but Link didn't click it.

His laptop beeped again, and he moved to check the message. *Did you find out who put in the request for backup?* -B

*Yeah, it was my handler.* -N

There was an uncharacteristic pause in messages as if Ben had hesitated before responding, *Really?* -B

It was Link's turn to hesitate. *You sound surprised.* -N

*Typically case officers only have a handful of backups for a set day. They don't go assigning them willy-nilly.* -B

Link made a face at the way Benjamin had typed, feeling old in that moment. Maybe people younger than him had their own language that they text in nowadays. Link, being twenty-eight, felt like an old man compared to Ben who couldn't be older than twenty-one.

*Who'd ya get as your handler?* -B

Link smirked in response. *You first.* -N

*You're quick for an old man. I got a chick who goes by S.* -B

Link felt a soft twinge of disappointment that Ben hadn't gotten H; it would have been pleasing to be able to discuss the guy and learn about him from what Ben was able to tell him.

*I got H.* -N

Link learned that Benjamin's brother had also gotten H as his case officer, but they didn't talk a lot so he couldn't offer much information on the handler himself. Only that H seemed much more easy going than most, but was a real hard ass when people pissed him off. According to someone Benjamin had spoken to around a year ago, H had gotten into an argument with an agent over the phone and gotten that agent killed afterwards during a risky assignment. Nobody knew if it was intentional or not, and nobody wanted to ask. And it wasn't the only incident involving H that had
resulted in casualties. Ben had added that H's work ethics were shaky, at best. Link felt a little taken
back by the new information he had learned about his case officer, completely intimidated by the
guy. Would he really kill someone over a stupid argument? Surely someone's life was worth more
than being right.

Eventually, Benjamin had to go and work on some paperwork, and suggested that Link should do
the same. They said their goodbyes and Link rose from the sofa and made his way back into his
bedroom, dressing himself for the day. It was nearing one o’clock in the afternoon by the time he had
headed out of the apartment. He popped into a coffee shop not too far away from the Santa Monica
Pier and sipped it as he leisurely walked along the promenade. The air was both cool and calming; it
washed over Link and created a serene bubble around him. He found himself a small bench at the
edge of a side store along the front and he perched himself on it, momentarily enjoying the scene in
front of him. After his coffee supply became halved, he felt a soft vibration inside his jeans pocket. A
brief movement to fetch his cell phone confirmed that someone had indeed attempted to contact him.
Two unread messages; Link raised an eyebrow, not used to the popularity.

One message was from Benjamin, listed on his phone as simply B, inquiring further information on
Link’s account of the incident at the food market. Link cracked his neck in frustration; it was evident
he wouldn't be shaking off that embarrassment any time soon. The other message, to which Link got
round to after detailing his encounter to Benjamin, was from H. It contained only four words.

Don't work too hard. -H

Link offered a smirk at his cell phone. It was the first time H had contacted him outside of anything
work related, and Link felt a sense of satisfaction from it. But Benjamin's words from earlier crept up
on him like a disease plaguing his thoughts; H was dangerous. Dangerous and hot tempered; Link
didn't fancy stepping on his toes. Yet, that didn't stop him from texting his handler back.

I would say the same to you, but I don't actually know what you do all day. -N Link pressed send
and settled back against the bench he was still resting on. Another man had settled down next to him
and opened up a newspaper, offering nothing but a grunt when he made his presence known. The
people of L.A. seemed pretty much the same as the ones in North Carolina. Rude, but tolerable; as
were most people, Link thought. His phone buzzed in his hand.

What do you think I do? -H

An outlandish response, Link thought, coming from the other man. So much so that Link had to
actually give thought to his answer. One would assume H sat at a computer most of the day; one
hand on the keyboard and the other on a cellular device, eyes glued to screens all day. But, no.
Something about that didn't fit comfortably in Link's mind when he tried to picture it, partly due to
the fact that he had no idea what H might look like. He had only his voice to go on, which wasn't
exactly clear in Link’s mind. The sun began to hinder Link's vision, making his screen seem darker
than it actually was. But he still managed to reply.

Act like you're in charge. -N

Link had actually been proud of that one, until H's response came in almost instantly.

I don't walk straight into drug deals, if that's what you mean. -H

A pang of both regret and annoyance struck Link in the gut as he read over the response he had
received. H managed to become intimidating in the course of a few words over text—Link could
only imagine what he was like speaking to face-to-face. Suddenly, what Benjamin had said about
him didn't seem so far fetched after all. However, as Link hated himself to admit, H was right; Link
had gone straight into that market without a second thought. No preparation and not thinking of the consequences. He couldn't let something like that happen again; he would get himself killed if he remained reckless like that.

*Act like you're in charge, and be an asshole about it.* -N

There was a long pause in texts after that, Link's reply nagging at him in the mean time. Perhaps he had been too harsh. But no; he wanted to challenge the man on the other end of the exchange, wanted to get a better read on him and perhaps prove what Benjamin had said was wrong. Or something like that. He had discarded his now cold coffee into a nearby recycling can by the time H had responded to him.

*Brave words for an agent.* -H

Link clenched his fist, allowing it to relax again before he replied. *You didn't deny it.* -N

*You're right, I didn't.* -H

Link grinned victoriously at his phone screen, shaking his head and exhaling the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. His phone vibrated once more.

*I handle agents; you included. Issue assignments, offer down time, grant vacations. And no, you can't request vacation time.* -H

Link laughed briefly. H was witty and quick on his feet, it seemed. It was nearing the late hours of the afternoon by then and the sun had retreated to the west for the day, not quite ready to begin setting. During their conversation, Link had wandered off, up onto the pier and was leaning against the railing at the very far end of the board walk. Below him there was nothing but water, deep and pale blue. Where he was really felt like a vacation, anyway.

*How did you know I'd ask?* -N

*I know you.* -H

Link was made uneasy by H's response to him; of course H knew him. Not on a personal level, but a professional one. No doubt his case file had been transferred from agency to agency, then made its way to H directly. Much like the rest of the agents' that H controlled. Link, suddenly feeling self conscious, didn't respond for a couple of breaths.

*I can't say the same of you.* -N

*You're right. You can't.* -H

Link didn't know how to respond to that, and decidedly chose to end the conversation there. Something about H scratched at Link's brain and yanked on his optic nerves like a headache. Was it customary for handlers to converse with their agents? Didn't the database read that handlers were not permitted, under any circumstances, to form friendships with any agents? Link wasn't just an agent, he was an agent within H's network; that's what made it worse. If H was caught conversing with Link like he had been, then they could both wind up getting into a rather serious predicament.

H hadn't contacted him again after that, having seemingly accepted the abrupt end in conversation. For the life of him, Link couldn't figure H out. Couldn't figure out if the man he had exchanged some warped form of pleasantries with could really be the hot headed and dangerous agent that Benjamin had described. It kept Link on his toes on the job over the stretch of the next week and a half. In which time, he had continued his exchanges with H via text message, and of course, phone calls; but
phone calls were always business related. Another assignment or paperwork issue.

Link kept in touch with Ben, too; he had had a few work nights out (if he could call it that) with Ben and a few other agents from the network. None of which had H as their handler, Link quickly learned, but the fact he seemed to have H to himself didn't bother Link anymore. It made H a more interesting and popular conversation starter for him; truthfully, he had only bonded with the other agents due to the fact that they were intrigued to learn about the infamous case officer. They made him sound like a criminal mastermind sometimes.

“I heard his father plays baseball with the president,” Alex had said—another agent from the network whom Link had gotten to know over the past weeks. Link and a few other agents had gotten together for an evening of drinking and getting to know one another and he was lucky enough to be able to be introduced to co-workers. Alex was the tallest of the lot and actually made Link feel like he belonged when they stood up, no longer being the only unusually tall one.

“No, it's that his father plays baseball with the head of Myth Int,” Chase had responded factually, chirping up for the first time during the evening. Chase was a quiet guy, and that suited Link just fine. He could settle into a comfortable silence with him whenever they were alone. Link was pretty sure Chase was the youngest in the group, too. Maybe that made him feel uncomfortable, which would account for his quietness.

“Really? The big guy?” Benjamin had grinned and nudged Chase with his bulky shoulder. The smaller man offered a timid smile in response to the playful gesture. Benjamin had brought his glass to his lips with a shake of his head in disbelief, “Man, this guy seems like bundles of fun.”

“Feel sorry for Neal,” Alex had laughed, bringing his large hand down onto Link's shoulder, “He's stuck with him.”

“Thanks for your sympathy, Alex,” Link replied, smirking and shrugging the other man's hand off of him.

Needless to say, Link had began to feel like he was fitting into the swing of things. L.A. was sure as hell different from North Carolina, but he sort of liked it that way. A change of pace, or a change of scenery, was good every once in a while. And he was no longer plagued with memories he couldn't erase when he closed his eyes; his mind was always occupied, unless there was down time. During which he would watch something on television or go for a walk along the promenade. Occasionally, he and Jessie would go out for dinner, but nothing would happen. They simply conversed as friends, laughed like friends, acted like friends; Link would walk her home and she would thank him with a hug before they would both return to their own lives. Not that she wasn't an attractive girl, no; Link just didn't have enough time on his hands to sustain a relationship. And maybe it was too soon. Maybe.

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MAY 31ST 2007, present day

Thunder had woken Link in the early hours of the Tuesday morning, his bedroom was a dark shade of grey from the cloud cover seeping in through the small window at the far side of the room. The rain was hitting Link's window violently, much like it had the night he got shot. Weather like this brought back unpleasant images in Link's mind; of bullets flying across his vision and stabbing pains in his side. With a small grunt of complaint in light of the stiffness in Link's muscles, he rolled over
onto his side, sheets bunching around his legs, and faced the window to watch the rain batter against
the pane. As a child, Link had enjoyed falling asleep to the sound of rain; thunder storms were
another story. He and his sister had created numerous pillow forts to shelter themselves from storms.
Not that he was frightened of them now, a grown man, no. They still unsettled him, at least. Like
they did most people.

The cloud cover just above Link's apartment was a light shade of grey; nothing major, though the
darker clouds were notable in the distance, making their way straight for the pier, and soon enough
Link's apartment. It was hurricane season. Maybe L.A. would get another weather warning and he
would have to sleep in his bathtub for the night. He had watched that in a documentary a few nights
back.

He was just over thinking. Over thinking and making himself paranoid. He sighed and leaned briefly
onto his back to grab his phone off of the night stand and bring it around to use. He read through
some of his old messages with Ben, trying to remember when they were next going out. He had had
a feeling it was soon, and he was right. They had plans in a couple of nights to go out for a meal
again; something Link could look forward to. Hanging out with the guys, or whatever, provided
Link with a reality check he desperately needed. In the past week and a bit he had done nothing but
work, work, work. Consumed in tasks given to him made things a lot easier, but it wrecked havoc on
his mental state; he'd barely been social outside a few get-togethers and dates or whatever he and
Jessie were doing. Then there was H, whom he had been in near daily contact with. Benjamin
assured him it was a good thing to have H fond of Link; he was less likely to harm him that way. It
had been intended as a cold joke, of course, but afterwards Link couldn't stop thinking about it. H
was dangerous—or so he had been led to believe—and yet Link did not feel threatened or
endangered whenever they spoke. H created a sense of security for Link, similar to a safety blanket.

Without thinking, or in regard of the early hour, Link sent the man a text commenting on the
weather. It had just turned five am and the sun was yet to rise, if it was able to break through the
dense cloud cover in the intense thunderstorm. He hadn't really expected a response, but he got one a
few minutes later.

*Hell of a storm, huh? -H*

*I didn't think you'd be awake. -N*

There was a break in the speed of responses, and Link had began to assume he had woken H with
his text and perhaps he had fallen back asleep. But, after a moment, Link's cell phone buzzed again.

*I don't sleep well. -H*

Link's eyebrows furrowed at that, a small tinge of sympathy clenching his stomach. *Insomnia? -N*

*Something like that. -H*

Lightning flashed outside Link's window, momentarily illuminating the room and startling him when
the thunder to follow sounded. It was definitely getting closer. He had felt the vibrations in his chest,
which radiated a feeling of dread through his body, similar to being inside a dance club with way too
much bass in his ears.

*I don't think you'd be getting much sleep anyway. Not with the thunder. -N*

As if on cue, the thunder sounded again, coinciding with his phone vibrating.

*I sleep like a log, when I can. Probably sleep right through it. -H*
I hope you sleep through your alarm. -N

That's not very nice, Link. -H

Link grinned at his screen in the darkness, finding amusement in their conversation and H's response. The other man had called him Link. Link? -N

No one ever called you that before? -H

Not since middle school. -N And it was true; he hadn't heard someone call him that since his buddy Greg did back in the day. Seeing H call him it made his ears feel hotter than before.

You must have some unimaginative friends, then. -H

Link had half the mind to tell H that he had called himself unimaginative, but then the database information flashed in his mind. They had to keep this professional; handlers and agents were prohibited to have anything but a professional relationship. They shouldn't even be exchanging texts like they were, but Link wasn't about to bring it up if H didn't. After all, H was the one who had initiated it. Ben's words rang in Link's mind. Word is he got a guy killed. Third degree. Link shook his head to will the thoughts out of his brain. More than once. Dude's seriously messed up, Link. Watch your back.

Thunder echoed outside of his building and tore Link from his near-hallucination with a start. He could swear he felt the floor beneath his feet shake; the walls seemed unsteady. There was a shout from outside in the distance; someone, panicked. Then another, until there were multiple voices in unison. In a hurry, Link fumbled to his feet and looked out the window with worry plastered over his face. That's when he felt it; he wasn't wrong before, the floor beneath his feet did begin to shake. Now it was shuddering beneath his bare feet, making him lose his footing and grab onto the window sill for support. There were muffled shouts from the apartment below him. An earthquake.

“Damnit,” Link swore as he scraped his fingers along the sill and cut his hand open on the loose wood. He steadied himself and looked around for something to shelter himself with. Grabbing the first thing he could use, the duvet cover of his bed, he yanked it forward towards himself and caught a glimpse of his cell phone being launched across to the other side of the room and skidding to a stop when it collided with the wardrobe. Without a second thought, Link ducked under his bed and surrounded himself with his duvet for protection. He could hear things smashing in his kitchen area, just outside his door—presumably the plates he had left out from the night before. He cursed himself for being lazy and leaving them there.

In North Carolina there weren't many earthquakes; or at least, none whilst Link had lived there. Sure, they would get the occasional tremor but no one thought anything of it. He had forgotten that L.A. was incredibly different when it came to weather. Outside, he heard thunder surrounding the area, which was now the least of Link's problems. The tremors continued and all Link could do was huddle underneath a duvet cover under his bed like a wounded animal; it was too dark to see anything but he could feel the blood pool around his palm where he had slit it open. Nothing serious, but it still hurt like hell. The tremors did finally ease off and become few and far between after a few excruciating minutes. Alarms were sounding outside, beeping and buzzing and ringing in Link's ears. Of course his own apartment's fire alarm had sounded too. Luckily, there were no sprinklers and he had avoided getting soaked. With a soft groan he emerged from underneath his bed, crawling out and momentarily splaying on his stomach on the hard, wooden floor, exhausted. He had left blood hand prints on the flooring when he climbed out from under his hiding spot.

Sighing, Link rose to his feet and assessed the damage. The cut was kind of dirty, but manageable; under his bed was probably needing a decent scrub now. He fumbled around his home until he
located the fire alarm, and struggled to turn the damn thing off. After a while, it appeared to reset itself and Link could finally think clearly in the absence of piercing beeps plaguing his eardrums. Another noise irritated his senses, making him spin around in shock. A loud vibration echoed from inside his bedroom and the memory of his cell phone being thrown around the room came back to him. *Shit, H.*

Link jogged back into his bedroom, hopping over the fallen and now fragmentized plates on his way. He located the cell phone; it being propped up on its side against the wardrobe appeared to have emphasized the vibrations coming from it. It rattled against the wardrobe door for attention which Link was all but willing to grant. Once Link had the device in his hands it stopped vibrating, having just missed a call. A quick check of the screen indicated that he actually had three missed calls. In a hurry, Link called the first person he thought of. The phone picked up on the first ring.

“Link,” H answered, sounding distressed, “Link, status report.”

“I'm fine, kind of scratched up,” Link replied, anxiety creeping up on him at the tone of H's voice, “Are you okay?”

“Are you hurt?” H responded, seemingly ignoring Link's question. Link hesitated, wondering if he should even let the other man know; it was embarrassing enough.

“Cut my hand on the windowsill, nothing big,” Link told him.

H's exhale was audible, and it made Link's stomach flip. The stress was evident in H's voice; perhaps he had been afraid during the quake. Or maybe he had been worried for Link, which seemed like the most popular option. The handler didn't respond, and after a long minute of silence, Link spoke up, “H. You okay?”

H didn't respond right away, but Link heard a quiet shuffle on the other side of the line, “Yeah, yeah, I'm fine.”

Link didn't buy that at all. He made his way to the kitchen, phone in his uninjured hand so he could tend to his other. His living room wasn't as destroyed as he would have thought; the earthquake must have felt a lot more severe than it really was. A few books had lost their places and were now occupying the floor, but that was about it. Aside from the broken plates surrounding his feet in the kitchen, the apartment looked intact. He turned on the faucet and allowed the hot water to heat up before submerging his hand under the stream. “Man, what a mess.”

H laughed in his ear, but it was shaky at best, “Four point six on the Richter scale will do that.”

Link raised a brow, leaning his phone to his shoulder so he could clean both of his hands, “You know the magnitude already?”

H seemed to hesitate on the other side of the call, “I've got connections.”

Link rolled his eyes, not really appreciating the double oh seven that H was trying to pull on him. “All right, Bond.”

H laughed again, sounding brighter this time, and it made Link falter. Something about H laughing in his ear made him feel jubilant; he wanted to keep hearing it. “If I'm Bond, which Bond girl are you?”

Link felt his cell phone slip from his shoulder and fumbled to catch it, successfully soaking himself in the process, having momentarily forgotten that his hands were wet. Once he had collected himself, he put the phone to his ear to hear H chuckle, obviously having overheard his fumbling. “Uh. Actually, since you're in charge, that'd make you M. And I'm James Bond.”
“In your dreams, Link.”

“Would you prefer I was a Bond girl, H?” Link responded, a little annoyed but mostly warmhearted. Hearing H call him Link over the phone was completely different than via text. It was better; he kind of liked it. H had given him a nickname; that's the sort of thing friends did, wasn't it? The idea left Link feeling a little unsettled. Surprisingly, H did not reciprocate instantly as Link had expected, and he began to rethink his semi-flirtatious remark. However, there was suddenly a shuffle on the other side of the line.

“That would definitely make working here more compelling,” H said. Link allowed himself a short laugh, seemingly a little out of breath and unsure of what to say next. He was drying himself with a hand towel when H spoke again. “I have to go. Clean yourself up for work tomorrow.”

And with that, the cell phone beeped indicated that H had hung up, and Link was left to his own thoughts.

Chapter End Notes

A speedy update as this chapter was already half written when the first one was uploaded. I'm really happy people seem to be enjoying this story! This chapter contains a small time skip to advance the plot, but nothing important is overlooked, don't worry. The ending to this is a little abrupt but this story is still in the setting up stages. I am still working in some characters and developing H & Link’s relationship before the main plot comes into play, please bare with me. I am also aware that IRL Jessie is Rhett's wife, and not Link’s, but all will become clear soon! I hope readers are enjoying this story! All feedback is welcomed.
Preuve de Prudence

Chapter by vanderloo

Chapter Notes

**Story Title Translation:** Opération Clandestin - Clandestine Operation (An intelligence operation designed to remain secret)

**Chapter Title Translation:** Preuve de Prudence - Tread Carefully (lit. Exercise Caution)

MAY 31ST 2007, present day

"I'm just happy nothing in the store was destroyed, I'll tell ya," Jessie said, grinning as she walked alongside Link across the beach, the sun shining down on them. At some point during the day she had removed her shoes and was now holding them at her side, letting the sea wash over her exposed toes. She reminded Link of a little girl; so carefree and full of energy, and it was truly admirable. He had decided to join her after a while; his feet would get soaked regardless given that he had chosen only to wear flip flops.

"Major clean up in isle 3," Link joked with her, and Jessie laughed, the midday sun catching the light in her eyes. They had been out since the early hours of the morning; Link had contacted her to see if she was okay after the earthquake. To Link's surprise, she hadn't seemed dismayed in the slightest. *It happens all the time in L.A.*, she had told him.

The beach seemed to stretch along forever, and Link was perfectly okay with that. He enjoyed Jessie's company, paired with the sun and the water; it was a perfect picture, and one that Link seemed to fit right into. Yet something at the back of his mind nagged at him, pushed and pulled at his thoughts and made his stomach churn. He thought of H and their exchange that morning; Link was worried about the other man and how offbeat he had sounded during their panicked phone call. H had actually sounded concerned for Link's well-being; that went against protocol. He had to be imagining things. H would not risk his career for someone like Link; he just had to protect his assets. That was what it had to be.

"You okay, Neal?" Jessie's voice shook him out of his own mind. He felt a soft pang of guilt for not giving her his full attention.

"Yeah, sorry," He responded, flashing her a small smile. They had slowed their pace and were now leisurely strolling along the beach front, "I'm just tired."

"You okay, Neal?" Jessie's voice shook him out of his own mind. He felt a soft pang of guilt for not giving her his full attention.

"Yeah, sorry," He responded, flashing her a small smile. They had slowed their pace and were now leisurely strolling along the beach front, "I'm just tired."

"I am, too," Jessie nodded, seemingly buying Link's deplorable excuse. He was tired, it was true, but his mind was just somewhere else. Somewhere it wanted to be, it seemed. Link tried not to kick himself. He and Jessie soaked in as much sun as they could before rain plagued the skies with cloud cover and they had to run to shelter. They laughed as Link slid in his flip-flops, scraping his feet on the side walk as they jogged their way to a nearby store. Jessie had Link's jacket over her head to shelter her hair as they made their way into a nearby convenience store to wait for the cruel weather to pass, laughing and joking along the way. Link was grateful to have her as a distraction.
The rest of the day continued without any other disasters. Link and Jessie had dined at a small café and discussed the events of the earthquake, then continued onto their jobs and aspirations, which Link skimmed over to avoid scrutiny. He hadn't wanted to lie to the woman so he had simply stated that he worked from home for someone, which was partly true. Jessie had soaked in his story and believed him, but Link still felt a twinge of guilt in his stomach. At the end of the day Link had walked Jessie home; it had become a habit, a routine that they followed whenever they were together. He would walk her home and she would thank him with a customary hug and then lock the door behind her. However, once she was safe inside her apartment, Link's mind was free to wander without distractions and his thoughts led him straight to H.

Once Link got to his apartment, he went straight for his agency laptop and opened up the database. His eyes skimmed through the categories until, again, he found the topic of fraternization.

A handler is strictly prohibited from forming companionship with an agent, in all senses of the term. They must remain a platonic third party and maintain complete control of situations. Such violations of contract can and will lead to termination of employment for all parties involved.

Link's heart rate increased at the thought of being terminated over some friendly exchanges. H had been in the game for years; that much was evident from the way most agents had already heard of the guy before Link brought him up. So shouldn't he know better? Or was this his plan all along; to get close to Link and destroy him like he had many others? Link kicked off his flip flops and brought the laptop onto his lap for further reading. The sun had begun to set outside the balcony windows, and Link could observe it in some peace and quiet whilst his mind raced from scenario to scenario. Surely the agency had some kind of incident case file database or something, Link thought. Furrowing his brow in concentration, Link searched the laptop in his hands for more information; he stripped it bare and didn't stop until he'd gotten to what seemed like the last file on there. Typically, the initial database of information is a decoy to hide another. Whether it was stored directly on the laptop itself, or on an external network for the agency, was another story entirely. For the sake of accessibility, Link hoped in this case it would be the former.

An hour later, and it was easy to see that the database was not installed on the laptop, but there was a back-door installed which Link had uncovered in the registry files. More than once had the device in his hands requested authorization from a rank above Link himself, to which he successfully managed to override. At some point during the evening he had gotten up to make himself some coffee; he had remembered to buy some whilst he was with Jessie earlier that day. But, other than the occasional bathroom break, Link remained glued to the laptop for the remainder of the evening and late into the night. It gave his brain something to focus on instead of contacting H. In fact, he hadn't had the chance to check the cell phone provided for him, and he didn't want to; he was far too enthralled in his work.

Of course, an agency like Myth Int had encrypted every file they had on their system. Link didn't have the interest nor the patience to explore all of them; nor did he have the intellect. He settled for the one he was looking for—any mention of agent case files, or handler names, or incident reports. In the end, he only found one section of code which seemed different from the rest, and set about attempting a decryption. When Link was in college he had excelled in Mathematics and further gone on to study cryptography; a dated practice, but a practice in which Link was incredibly skilled in. This was what led him to studying encryption and decryption, and by the time he had joined his old agency he had pretty much mastered it to the point where he could not improve. At least, not on his own, but there wasn't any classes on decryption that he knew of. His skills were the reason he had gotten transferred in the first place, or so Eddie had mentioned to him. It all felt like a lifetime ago. North Carolina seemed further and further way with every aching breath, with every conversation he shared with his handler.
Three cups of coffee later and Link had made a breakthrough, having worked out the decryption key. He couldn't risk installing software to aid him in the task, so it had taken a lot longer than it would have usually without aid. Or maybe not. Breaking into a government agencies private files would probably be this severely difficult any time he tried, with or without the correct software. The sun assaulted his eyes and caused him to squint at the screen in front of him; this is when he realized just how long he had been at it. He sighed heavily, eyes fluttering with exhaustion as he rubbed a hand over his face and neck. His stomach announced itself with a loud rumble in light of not being fed anything since the afternoon before. Link had always been poor at recalling to eat when he was concentrating; late nights spent awake studying for finals resulted in him losing a lot of his baby fat as a young adult.

After preparing himself some food; nothing extravagant, simply some cereal and eggs, Link sat back down in front of his laptop and started cycling through any unlocked information he could see. Mostly just agent identities, agent numbers and private files; Link avoided them, feeling uncomfortable slithering into other people's private lives. But when he came across a folder titled Employee Incident Reports, Link had to check it out. Immediately, at the top of the page, were incidents ranked in level of severity, from one to twenty-four. Curious, Link skipped through to level twenty-four and skimmed through the reports. Admittedly, there weren't many; he could only see this as a good thing. Too many level twenty-four incidents would make the agency look bad if they had ever gone public. None of them caught his eye and in the end, he result to searching the key character "H".

It displayed a copious amount of results, of course, having naturally detected the letter H in every single report. Huffing in frustration, and probably tiredness, Link tried searching again, this time also defining "handler" on top of "H". Eight results; four of which ranked level three in severity, another three at level eight, and finally the one which caught Link's attention was level twenty-one. Brow furrowing, he placed his cereal to the side and settled with the laptop between his knees and attempted to open the file. Surprisingly, the file was heavily encrypted and Link didn't feel keen on decrypting anything else for the day. He settled for opening up a lower level severity report and skimming through it, assigning the level twenty-one for another time.

Incident #19051320:

Agents involved: K, R, H

Full names of agents involved: James, Kevin; Banner, Riley; H (information withheld)

Link shook his head with a smirk on his lips. Of course H had refused to reveal his identity on paperwork. Which begged the question; did anyone really know who this guy was?

Incidental notes: Argument overheard between H and agents K, R day prior to incident. Witnesses: #3. Agent H to be placed in front of view board; possible foul play. Hearing to determine the status of H required in coming months.
Result/Finalization: H cleared. Deceased agents laid to rest.

All of it seemed a little too...convenient for H. He was just cleared? Simple as that? Something else had to be going on; there were witness testimonies which Link skimmed over detailing the same argument overheard between the three agents. Enough evidence to deem the incident as intentional; but lack of motive on H's part had cleared his name and returned him for active duty. Link had a hard time wrapping his brain around it. The agency seemed to be pulling a fast one to secure a valuable agent, cleaning up after him respectively. Was this really the same guy who Link spoke to on the phone? Could H really be dangerous? And what the hell was that level twenty-one incident regarding H?

There was suddenly a banging at Link's door that made him jump, the laptop sliding off of his lap and clashing onto the hardwood flooring. He scrambled to pick it up and slammed the lid down to cover his tracks. He flattened out the base of his hair and attempted to look semi-presentable before answering the door to presumably the package guy again. Instead, as Link swung open the door lazily, two bulky men in suits greeted him. One held up a sheet of paper and spoke in a calm voice, “Charles Lincoln Neal?”

Link didn't respond for a moment, gaze falling onto the sheet of paper the man was dangling in the air, then managed to stutter, “Uh...yeah. Yeah, that's me.”

“I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to come with us,” the agent responded sternly, thrusting the paperwork into Link's hands.

“What?” Link gaped as he read through the paper. Oh, oh. Panic washed over him like a wave of ice cold water, whisking him away in the current and drowning him. The paper before him detailed the events of an intruder in the Myth Int network none other than Link himself. His IP address was listed there, too. He had trespassed into their private files and was to report to the head quarters in the city for a conference. A conference regarding his fate, he had no doubt.

The two men had hauled him out of his apartment without a second thought, and Link was escorted into the back of a black sedan. He clasped his hands in his lap and dug his nails into his thumb to stop himself from shaking; from what, he wasn't sure. What he was sure of was that he had totally and royally screwed himself over.

The Mythical Intelligence stood out from the surrounding buildings, and towered so high into the sky that Link felt himself lose his footing as he gazed up at it. The entire side of the building was decorated in glass windows which reflected the clouds in the sky and made the building look grey. Link was guided by the elbow up a few short steps and around a concrete balcony before entering through glass double doors into the Myth Int head quarters. The foyer was lit up immaculately for it being the early hours of the morning, and the lights reflected perfectly from the marble flooring. Link could see his reflection at his feet and shook his head in defeat. He had to squint at the receptionist as the three men were buzzed in and entered the elevator for an awkwardly silent ascend to the floors above.

They arrived at floor thirteen and Link was half dragged out of the elevator by his arm; a fitting floor, he thought, just when his luck was at its worst. The floor looked like some kind of law firm office; very brightly lit and spacious, with numerous cubicles decorating the floor in rows. Each was occupied with a person in a well tailored suit or skirt, presumably agents, but Link couldn't really be
sure. He was guided into a rather large supply closet and one of the men remained outside, guarding the door.

“Change into this,” one of the agents grunted at Link, and after rummaging around inside a small closet he pulled out a navy suit inside a plastic wrap. Link stared at him, mouth agape in surprise. The agent thrust the suit at Link who had no choice but to grab it and stutter his confusion. The agent shushed him with a wave of hand, “Just do it.”

The agent left Link alone inside the closet to change his clothes, but for a minute Link stood still, completely frozen and unsure of how to proceed. What was going on? He had been summoned to Mythical Intelligence Headquarters and now...he was playing dress up? The suit did not match the other agents'; navy pants and a light grey shirt, with a black tie and navy jacket. Way out of Link's budget. Maybe he would get to keep the suit afterwards, if he survived his encounter.

Once he had dressed himself and tried to pat down his hair for lack of a mirror, he decided it was a losing battle and that his all-night-er hair would have to do. He opened the door to the supply closet slowly, and then was escorted by the agents back into the elevator. Once inside, Link spoke up, “What's happening? Where are you taking me?”

The agent gripping Link's elbow turned to him. “You're going upstairs. Someone in charge would like a word.”

“A word?”

“Stop talking,” The other agent finally spoke up, voice stern. The elevator binged and the doors opened hastily; Link was thankful for the distraction. Floor eighteen was similarly decorated to thirteen, aside for a few more side rooms, and a corridor which stretched down the right hand side of the floor. The agents led Link down it, and he could feel eyes on him; hushed whispers of discussion making his ears burn. Who is that? What's he doing here? Link began to feel sick. A group of agents who had gathered around a water cooler watched as Link made his way down the narrow corridor, having to step around the group of men. He felt like he had been sent to the principals office and this was the walk of shame; he supposed he was in fact in a similar predicament now.

He was led into a room at the end of the corridor which felt like some sort of interrogation room. Like he was a suspect in a murder investigation about to be questioned by detectives. There was a small table in the middle of the room with two chairs at either end, and a hanging light above the furniture. A mirror was curiously placed along one side of wall. Link was sat down on one of the chairs and was left to his own devices.

“What?” He asked, rising to his feet, “You're just leaving me here?”

“Someone'll be with you in a second.” The agent had said, then disappeared through the door.

Link sank back down and sat with his back to the mirror; he got the sinking feeling that it was perhaps a two way, and that he was being watched from the other side. The hair on his neck stood up on its own and Link had to slacken his tie to cool himself down. He was truly screwed; he had stepped too far over the line by breaking into private company files. All to dig up some information about his handler; Link felt so stupid over it. What did it matter, anyway? H was definitely bad news.

Suddenly the door opened and a slim woman carrying a company laptop emerged and closed the door behind her. She wore slim fitting beige work pants and a white blouse tucked into the waist of them, complimented by blond hair which shaped her face, shorter than Link's. Link eyed her with scrutiny, suddenly feeling self conscious and defensive by the authority the woman seemed to radiate with. The woman watched Link as she took a seat in front of him and spared a glance behind his
head toward the mirror, confirming Link's suspicion that it was indeed a two-way. People were watching them; this was an interrogation after all. He briefly wondered who it could be behind the glass.

“Mr. Neal,” The woman said, sounding polite as she placed the laptop in front of them both and opened the lid, “My name is Shannon. I understand you've been brought here against your will.”

“Some...something like that.” Link replied, bringing his hands onto the table and clasping them in front of him. His suit had started to make him itch uncomfortably.

“I hope our agents weren't too rough with you,” Shannon said politely as she typed quickly into the laptop without looking at Link. She stopped to push up her glasses with a single finger. “The suit is to your liking?”

Link shot her a look. “I'm sure all this formality has nothing to do with whether I like the suit or not.”

Shannon seemed to falter, and she halted her fingers on the laptop to look at Link and observed his outburst. After a short moment, she gracefully removed her glasses and placed them onto the table to her left, suddenly seeming much more intimidating without them. She spoke with authority. “It has come to our attention that you have breached security and accessed restricted files that you are prohibited to view as an agent.”

Link fell silent, whatever confidence he once had now shattered and gathering in fragments at his feet. The room grew cold and bitter, and it chilled Link's fingers to the bone. Scraping at his index finger with his thumb nail, Link gave a solemn nod in confirmation that yes, he had broken the rules. He had been naïve enough to assume he wouldn't get caught, and therefore wouldn't get punished. But Shannon did not display any signs of offence; in fact, she seemed optimistic, if anything.

“I know I speak for the rest of the company when I say I am impressed.”

A slap to the face would have been less surprising. “What?”

“You broke into some of the most complicated and perplexing government encrypted files.” Shannon explained, “It must have been an arduous task, I imagine.”

Link hesitated visibly, completely taken back by the praise he had been given; by the reverence Shannon had displayed for him. He glanced toward the door and ached to escape, but remained relatively still. “It, uh, took me all night.”

“I suspected as much.” Shannon replied with a small smile, then gracefully and delicately slid the laptop around until the screen faced Link. He was presented with a small puzzle on screen; an intricate design of numbers and characters. When the woman read the confusion in his face, she said, “I would like you to carry out these tasks involving encryption and decryption. I understand you're somewhat of an expert in this kind of thing.”

Link raised an eyebrow, then proceeded to roll up his coat sleeves, “You're testing me?”

“I am analyzing your abilities, Mr. Neal.” Shannon explained as she rose to her feet and slid her chair back under the desk. She seemed taller than before, now that Link had found her intimidating enough to make him shrink back into his chair. The woman made her way around the desk until she was next to Link and bent down next to him to talk him through the task at hand. Five different decryption activities; the more he progressed the more difficult they got. He would be monitored and observed during such activities.

“We had been informed of your skills before your transfer, Mr. Neal,” Shannon mentioned, as she
rose to her feet once more and flattened out her blouse, “However, we were...not aware of the extent of your abilities. So we want to be sure.”

“Right.” Link responded, for lack of anything else to say. He would play along; of course he would. If the company wasn't going to fire him yet then he would do what they said; he needed the job, and the opportunity to show off a little bit was appealing.

Once the woman had vacated the room, Link got to work. The first decryption was simple; it had even included a decryption key hidden within its code. Perhaps miss-able by some, but not by Link. He figured his old file had not done his ability justice during the transfer process; maybe now, if he was recognized, he could rub it in H's face. Or better, be assigned a new handler from a new department. The thought occurred to him around half way through the second task that Link could have passed H in the building somewhere; maybe the other man had saw him and not said a word. Or perhaps Link had caught a glimpse of his handler and not realized it. It didn't seem likely; Link figured H would have some kind of striking appearance. Or at least memorable or noticeable. He seemed like that kind of guy.

The woman, Shannon, entered the room a few times to check in on Link and log his progress. He had progressed onto the fourth task around an hour and a half in when Shannon had greeted him with a coffee, acknowledging his lack of sleeping. He remembered how much of a zombie he must have looked; disheveled, chaotic hair and half a beard, dark rings decorating his eyes. He rubbed a hand over his face and tried not to dwell on it.

The fifth and final challenge was the most disorganized and heinous set of data Link could imagine; he couldn't dream up anything worse. It took him an hour alone to decipher the content of the data, in which time he had removed his suit jacket and tie and draped them lazily over the back of his chair. Three cups of coffee later and four bathroom breaks and he had made some headway into working out a key – but this is when Shannon had stopped him. He squinted up at her and her coffee mug which had a small squirrel-like creature on it, presumably the Myth Int logo, but Link didn't pry.

“I have to say I'm incredibly impressed with you, Mr. Neal,” Shannon had said, a tad breathless when she had taken her seat across from him and removed the laptop from his grasp. He was thankful for her tearing it away from him; if she hadn't he would have been at it for days. “You're being transferred departments. The decryption crew will be pleased to get another member of their team.”

Link blinked at her, stammering, “You—I'm no longer doing field work?”

“You are,” Shannon said as she closed the laptop and looked up at Link, “But your assignments will revolve around areas more...befitting to your skills. And you'll be attending weekly classes here at HQ for encryption and decryption.”

Link cleared his throat and settled for nodding his head, feeling like a deer caught in headlights. Did that mean he could keep H as his handler? Or was that changing too?

“Now, typically, such a promotion would require a raise,” Shannon began, but grimaced slightly as she rose to her feet, “But given that you did breach government security, you are not being granted that raise. I'm sure securing your job here at this company is payment enough.”

“Yeah,” Link said as he, too, rose to his feet and grabbed his jacket along the way. He draped it over his arm along with his tie, finally feeling relief after stretching his legs. He had been trapped inside that interrogation room for hours, but it felt like days. He needed to go home and shower and sleep and eat, but maybe not in that order. The office floor was a ton brighter than Link had recalled and he had to rub his hand over his eyes to allow them to focus; being trapped in that room really had
done a number on him.

“I expect to see you here tomorrow morning,” Shannon said as the two of them walked toward the elevators. Link did not appreciate the stares they attracted as they walked together; it led him to believe that Shannon was a woman of a great deal of power and Link should not mess with her. “You'll require another debrief, and another suit. You can keep that one.”

“Free suit, free coffee,” Link smirked a little, attempting to lighten not only his own mood but the mood of the conversation, “It's too good to be true.”

“Indeed. You should be thankful, Mr. Neal,” Shannon smiled politely back at him, but Link could tell it was more of a formality than an actual smile as she pressed the button for the elevator, “You have proven yourself to be a valuable asset to Mythical Intelligence.”

Link remained quiet for the moment, then asked, “How did you know what I'd done? Do you track the agents' laptops?”

“No, we do not,” was the instantaneous response from Shannon. She turned to him as the elevator arrived, “We do, however, monitor breaches in security systems, Mr. Neal. The safety of our agents is a priority.”

“Yeah,” Link offered as he took a step into the elevator, pushed the button for the lobby and turned to face Shannon, who was decidedly remaining on this floor, “I'm sure it is.”

The elevator doors slid closed and Link was finally alone to gather himself. Sure, Myth Int was one for the safety and security of its agents. That's why agents' lives could be discarded to protect valuable assets; or so it seemed. H had a lot of questions to answer to.

JUNE 1ST 2007, present day

Link barely had time to turn off the hot water once he stepped out of the shower and his phone had buzzed. The bathroom had steamed up remarkably, given that Link had fallen asleep standing up multiple times under the calming spray of water. It had been an extremely long day, followed by a presumably longer one the next day; Link counted his blessings and soaked up all the time he could standing in the tub. Fresh, clean water did nothing to cleanse his mind, regrettably; nor rid his thoughts of H. This whole mess had been because of his handler, anyway. Link had broken into Myth Int restricted databases to find out more about H; and as a result had been recognized as some kind of prodigy in the art of decryption.

On top of that, it was his birthday. Turning twenty-nine was nothing to celebrate. None the less, Jen had called him once he had arrived home to wish him a lovely day, and promising him that she would make it up to him for missing his first birthday in years. Link smiled a little, admittedly, but otherwise he planned to ignore the day entirely. Celebrations were the least of his priorities.

Link's fingers were still wet when he had picked up the phone, it almost slipping out of his hands in the process.

Heard you've been causing trouble. -H

Link rolled his eyes. Word really gets around, huh? -N
Only if you travel in similar circles. -H

Link furrowed his brow at his phone screen. Similar circles, huh. Link and H certainly didn't share the same friends, that's for sure. Link dried his hair off with a towel and text back with one hand, making his way to his bedroom. We do that? -N

Link had pulled on a pair of old pants by the time his phone had buzzed once more, hair now relatively dry enough to sleep in.

We work together, don't we? -H

Link huffed at his phone and shuffled into his bed, draping the duvet over his waist and holding his phone to his chest. He laid on his back and tucked his chin in to see the screen. I broke some rules and read something I shouldn't have. But it all worked out. -N

I heard. -H

You know Shannon? -N

I do. -H

Link felt himself grit his teeth, but at what, he couldn't be sure. His fingers faltered and all of a sudden he didn't know what to respond with. Maybe H and Shannon were friends, or maybe more. Which would explain why Link had been so intimidated by the woman when she had first entered the room – H would surely go for a girl like that. Something about it didn't feel right; something didn't settle well in Link's chest thinking about it. He felt his phone buzz again.

What'd you think of HQ? Scary, right? -H

Link blinked, then blinked again. It must have meant he worked at the head quarters; maybe Link really did pass him during the day without realizing. Or, more feasibly, H had spotted him and chosen to remain silent about it.

And intimidating. Kinda like you. -N Link frowned at his own response, instantly regretting admitting it to the other man, but the response he got was instant. H must have had his phone in his hand like Link did.

I'm not scary. Am I? -H

Link chose his response carefully. You could be. -N

Anybody could be, Link. -H

Link. The nickname caused Link to smile at his phone, regardless of the severity of the discussion. He could get used to having a nickname. Very true. -N

You should get some sleep. -H

Link appreciated that. H seemed to...something him, whether it was care or feel responsibility for him, it didn't matter. It made Link's insides feel a little warmer than before. So should you. -N

Tell me about it. Happy birthday, Link. -H

Link shook his head and typed his response, preparing to sleep. Goodnight, H. -N
Another relatively speedy update for this chapter. This time we see Link get a little more than he bargained for, and the mystery of H gets a whole lot more complicated. Hopefully this chapter was a little more fun for everyone! The plot should kick in next chapter, and perhaps Link will finally get to meet his mysterious handler. Thank you for reading and please let me know what you think. All feedback is welcomed.
JUNE 2nd, present day

The morning air sent a cool chill down Link's spine, the brisk pace of the city life causing him to feel overwhelmed as he stepped out of the back of another obnoxious black sedan. Three agents had turned up at his door dressed like the men in black; or something of the sort. More like government agents, Link thought, trying not to kick himself as he patted down his shirt and tie. Unlike their last encounter, Link had been prepared for their visit and was sipping his morning coffee by the time the agents had arrived. So maybe Link had one-upped them this time, but he was sure he would be surpassed as soon as he entered the Myth Int building.

Like the day before, the intimidating structure had towered above Link until it made him light-headed; it seemed like a continuous barricade of glass rising up into the clouds above and preventing Link from going forward. But the iron grip on his arm forcing him into the building disproved that. Snatching his hand away, he scoffed at the agent manhandling him before they were waved through the foyer and went into the elevator. The intense familiarity of the building made Link feel uncomfortable; he was so used to this life and this place already. He felt like he was betraying his old life. Like he was betraying his home. But the constant reminder that he could see H in person here kept him going. Link hadn't spoken to H since the night before when they had said their good-nights, after which Link couldn't sleep. His unexplained interest in the mysterious man had been keeping him up at night.

Like before, Link arrived on the eighteenth floor accompanied by three agents. He stood out like a sore thumb; his navy suit did not contrast well against three black ones worn by the agents accompanying him. When the elevator doors slid open, Shannon's face greeted him politely, evidently waiting for his arrival. She wore a similar attire to the previous day, save for a now more casual blouse. Perhaps the authoritative before look had intended to frighten Link into obeying her—it had worked, if that were so.

"Mr. Neal," Shannon greeted him, holding out her hand, "Right on time. How are you this morning?"

"Shannon," Link responded as he gingerly took the woman's hand in his own and allowed the three escorts to wander off, "You expected me to be late?"

"It was noted that you weren't the best organizer."

"Of course," Link huffed as they parted and shook his head. H was giving him a bad reputation around the department it seemed. Shannon smiled halfheartedly back at his outburst, seeming to
understand the inner turmoil. After all, H had said he knew her; but how intimately? A brief glance downward informed Link that Shannon was not married—no ring, and no tan line where a ring could previously been placed. The woman followed his gaze and proceeded to fold her arms in front of her, obscuring her hands from view.

"Shall we?" She asked, motioning with her head that they advance down the corridor. The floor seemed a lot less intimidating now than it had the day before; Link no longer felt a rush of adrenaline for the sake of his dying career, but instead felt on edge for the possibility of running into H at any moment. Or that the agents watching the two of them walk side by side could be H in disguise. Light shone through the glass windows and created shadows on the marble tiles, making the floor look like it was floating on a cloud, like a dream. Or a nightmare, Link couldn't decide.

Shannon led him with calm and calculated steps down the same corridor as before; agents no longer hovered around the water cooler and they were free to walk without obstruction. To his relief, Shannon did not lead him into the same crammed interrogation room but instead led him to the right and into a conference room. In the middle of the floor was a long, wooden table with numerous chairs gathered around it like something from a political debate on the television. Link glanced at Shannon in question to which she responded, "Take a seat."

Link chose a chair at the bottom end of the table, or at the top depending on the outlook. But Link was much more of a glass half empty sort of guy; that way he was either right in assuming his misfortunes, or pleasantly surprised. The tabletop was cool against Link's clammy palms as he pressed them against it in attempts to make himself more comfortable. Shannon took a seat adjacent to him after fishing out a few files from a drawer in the room.

"I'm working on the assumption that you are unaware of the situation in Boston," Shannon said as she placed the files onto the table in front of her to organize them. Link had heard some chatter from Ben and the others about a terrorist threat in the area during their group conversations on his laptop, but truthfully he did not know the entire story.

"The terrorist agency?" Link asked.

"Yes." Shannon replied, then proceeded to lay two pieces of paper in front of Link, who peered down at them, "Here are reports of more advancements in this terrorist group in North Carolina, Sydney, Washington, and now Seattle."

"Seattle's pretty far out from the others," Link noted mostly to himself as he read over the file. Multiple bombings and civilians killed, hostages taken and money demanded; pretty typical terrorist threats.

"It is. Now you understand our concern." Shannon replied, taking the papers from Link and replacing them with a photograph. "This was taken by one of our diplomats placed in Brooklyn. She has since gone quiet after we were wired this photograph; my best guess is that she was discovered and terminated."

Link peered at the photograph of a group of people, mostly middle aged men and women, who were rallying around a table similar to the one Link was sitting at. The lighting made it difficult to differentiate faces, but it certainly seemed like some kind of criminal organisation. No doubt it was organised. "Organised terrorism?"

"We believe as much," Shannon said, her voice turned solemn and her face grim, but the determination was evident in her eyes. Link could tell she cared about her job and it was incredibly admirable. Maybe he could understand what H saw in her. "We have received an anonymous tip from a reliable source that their next strike will be in Salt Lake City two days from now. They're
calling it a bomb scare."

Link turned pale. "What do they want? Demands?"

"Always money, sometimes intelligence," Shannon responded, eyeing Link carefully, "However, the intelligence demands were extremely calculated and organised in such a way that it would seem coincidence, but I know better. They are planning something. And we know they must have some way of communicating across the states; this is where you come in."

"Decryption of their communications?" Link asked, pushing the photograph away from himself and giving her an incredulous look, "In Salt Lake?"

"You are best fitted for the job," The woman gathered the photograph and placed it back into the file folder with the other information, "And given your records," her voice softened, "I thought you might want to take this one."

Link froze, images flooding his mind like a rush of water he couldn't contain. "It's the same group?"

"Yes, it is."

"Oh." Link responded, not really knowing what to say. He had a past; a pretty dark one, and it wasn't one he was aching to relive any time soon. Everyone has a past but Link would rather run from his than deal with it, and it had been that way for years. He didn't feel like reopening old wounds, but he did feel a sense of responsibility which led him to agree with Shannon, "Yeah. Yeah, you're right. I'll do it."

"Excellent." Shannon replied, back into business mode and no longer revealing her sympathy for the man before her. "You will be accompanied by an agent for additional protection."

"Come with me and I'll introduce you to the decryption team." Shannon smiled at Link before she put the file back into the drawer and allowed him to shadow her out of the room. The decryption department was on the other side of the floor with its room door ajar. Shannon had accompanied him to the door and no more, wishing him well before he entered. Link felt his nerves reinstate themselves at that moment, settling in knots in his gut and making him light headed; like the first day of class meeting your classmates. The people he would spend the next years of his life with. This situation was the same concept.

Once inside the room, Link noted the row of lockers dead ahead of him, a dark green color with white labels detailing the names of agents. Code letters only, of course. He had his own locker already and traced his fingers along the N there.

"Hey, new guy," A voice said to his right, and a quick spin on his heel revealed a tall and slim man around the same height as Link greeting him, "So, you're the new prodigy, huh?"

"Something like that," Link responded before welcoming the other man's firm handshake, "Neal."
"Noah." The other man said, grinning at Link. "Come meet the others."

The decryption team consisted of six members, four males and two females, all of them friendly and welcoming to Link. They seemed relieved to have another skilled body on their team; just like Shannon had mentioned the day before. Their room was relatively large and square shaped, wanted posters and mathematical graphs lining the walls. There were eight desks positioned in the middle of the room in two rows, facing each other. Link already had his own desk at the far end of the room stationed next to an open window, facing a girl called Candace's desk. On each desk were extremely advanced computers which were specifically constructed for decryption and encryption, Link assumed.

It wasn't long before Link had gotten comfortable and removed his suit jacket, laughing at a joke from Candace. She seemed a little loopy, but Link figured you kind of had to be in this kind of job. She had challenged him to a decryption competition; whoever could decrypt the same set of data the fastest and most efficiently won. Of course, Link was victorious and it wasn't long before he had defeated his entire squad in what felt like some kind of gaming championship. One of the other guys from his team, whose name he'd learned was Morgan—a taller guy with brown hair and a permanent irritated expression—was the most serious competitor Link faced, using the opposite tactics from Link and taking him off guard; but Link was victorious in the end. Noah had been poking fun at Link's skills, the others laughing, when a voice was heard from across the room at the door way.

"This contest still accepting participants?"

The team grew silent as they turned toward the voice that had disturbed them. Link had to peer over Noah's head to see the man that had spoken; his mouth dropped open slightly in surprise. The women of the team seemed to turn pink in the cheeks at the presence of the man that had entered who was now advancing into the room. He wore a white dress shirt tucked into suit pants and skinny black tie, complimenting his thin frame and ridiculous height. He looked like he was well groomed; a thick but tamed beard shaped his chin and mouth, and his auburn hair was gelled upwards. Link's heart skipped a couple times inside his chest before he had to avert his gaze; it was H. Standing there like it was nothing.

The voice had given it away, but the appearance of his mysterious handler had made Link feel self conscious. This guy was on a whole other wavelength. Nowhere near his league to even consider him a friend; it made Link's heart race in his chest as he watched H be greeted by Noah in what could only be described as a secret handshake. The other members of the team, however, did not seem as pleased by his presence. The other three men had retreated to their own desks like kicked puppies when H had emerged; both interested and frightened. The women, however, remained focused on H's every move and breath, completely infatuated with the taller man. Link could understand why. Intimidation and admiration; H seemed to have it all.

"I gotta say, Neal is a pro," Noah said as he patted Link on the shoulder from where he stood next to H. H was now observing Link with a small, yet infuriating, smirk. "You might want to swallow your pride."

"Is that right?" H responded, voice cocky and raspy like it always was on the phone. Link could feel his face heating up and it made him want to sink down into his chair in defeat. "We'll see about that."

"Here," Candace said hurriedly, getting up from her chair across from Link to offer it to H. "Use my computer."

"Thanks," H offered the woman a small smile as he took a seat and worked on unbuttoning his sleeves to roll them up to his elbows. Candace moved to the far side of the room to observe the exchange between the two men, gathering next to the others and exchanging a quiet whisper that
"You don't stand a chance, brother," Link heard Noah say in H's direction.

"Think he's talking to you, Neal." H replied but he didn't look at Noah, instead focusing his eyes on Link's. Link noted the fact that H had avoided using his nickname; avoided acknowledging the fact that they were walking a thin line breaking the rules with their relationship. They watched each other for a short moment and Link could feel his palms becoming sweaty. H licked his lips and Link's eyes flickered down to track the motion before he caught himself.

"Not a chance," Link said. Noah observed the two for a short moment before assigning them identical sets of data to decrypt and beginning the timer. Link watched as H snapped to concentration and got to work, prompting Link to do the same. Was H also skilled in decryption? Perhaps they were more alike than Link had first assumed. But the way H held himself; something about it felt forced, like he was hiding something behind his meticulously constructed persona. Link ached to find out what. But for then, he focused his eyes on the task at hand.

It took H ten minutes to crack the decryption key and decipher the data; a record, Link was sure, as he had only just cracked the key when H announced he had completed the task. Noah offered him a shake of his hand in congratulation, and a small and quiet applause echoed throughout the room as Link's team clapped for H's victory.

"Maybe next time," H said with a smirk in Link's direction, leaning back in his seat and crossing his arms over his chest.

"Yeah, yeah," Link responded in a huff, exhaling his breath he didn't realize he'd been holding and going about the task of continuing to decipher the data whilst the others talked among themselves. Surprisingly, H did not instigate conversation with the others but simply responded when he was brought into discussion. Link would have thought the other man to be something of a social butterfly, but this didn't seem the case. Instead, Link could feel H's eyes on him, burning a hole into his skull and stripping him bare. After an achingly long ten minutes of loud conversation around him, H shifted in his chair to a more slouched position and stretched his legs out under the table. His right foot brushed Link's left, a seemingly accidental contact, but when H did not remove his foot from its position, Link looked up at him in question. H had a curious look in his eye as he observed Link, as if trying to calculate his reaction. What, was he trying to mess with him now? Proving he was better than Link at decryption wasn't enough? Link blinked slowly then offered H a roll of his eyes, to which H fought a smile. The other man did not move his foot, and Link could feel his leg begin to tingle.

"Why don't you join the team, H?" Noah asked suddenly, and Link was reminded that it wasn't only he and H in the room. H seemed indifferent to the question, leaning his head to the side.

"Being a handler is more challenging," He smirked, then added, "And it pays better."

"You know, you really are an asshole." Noah responded with a laugh, nudging H's leg with his foot. The action caused H's foot to jerk and his foot to move away from Link's under the cover of the desk. Link's fingers faltered on the keyboard before he resumed his typing.

"It's a gift," H responded with the same goodhearted humor that Noah had displayed. It was evident that handlers could be friends with those whom they did not have as assets, that much was clear from the two men's exchange. After some more small talk, H's foot once again found Link's under the table. This time, it was definitely no accident. Link's eyes wandered up to H, but the other man wasn't looking at him and instead was conversing with one of the women on his team. Link felt a pang of...something. Irritation, maybe. Confusion, too. What was H doing? Link didn't move his foot
away, and instead remained very still before joining in on the conversation easily.

The group chatted absentmindedly for a small while, and Link chirped in when he could, but he and H did not directly speak to one another. They simply interjected in group discussions all the while maintaining some form of bodily contact under their desks.

"This has been fun and all," H said after a while as he shifted in his chair and moved his foot away from Link's. Link immediately felt the loss, and felt like kicking himself for it. Or maybe kicking H for making him feel that way. "But some of us have to get some work done today."

As if on cue, a soft ringing sounded from H's pants pocket, which prompted him to check his phone with a furrow of his brow. The device was a far more advanced version compared to Link's.

"Yeah, I'll see you around." Noah said to H, also rising to his feet and showing the taller man out. H, however, faltered.

"Neal," H addressed Link with authority, causing the other man to gaze up at him from where he sat. The man seemed like a giant from a seating position, towering several feet above Link. H must have been at least six and a half feet tall, he thought. H looked at Link briefly before turning his attention to the phone in his hand. "Hate to break up the welcoming party, but you gotta come with me."

"Uh," Link said stupidly, then caught himself. He shrugged back into his suit jacket which he had draped over the back of his seat and stood up, "Yeah, okay."

The thought of being alone with H in person was nothing compared to the reality of it. The other man had this presence that Link couldn't comprehend; he held authority in his stance and in the way he walked with Link down the empty corridor. Naturally, a few agents stopped their work to stare at them through office windows as they passed, the absence of fingers on keyboards created a silence which made the walls feel like they were closing in on Link. Evidently, H had a reputation on this floor, given the shocked glances they were receiving. Maybe H had a reputation on every floor, which seemed more likely. Link wondered what it must be like to harbor such admiration and attention from others. It wasn't something Link wished for himself; he had no idea how H dealt with it, but he seemed to be doing alright.

"Where are we going?" Link broke the silence first as they made their way back toward the foyer area of the floor, nervously fidgeting with his sleeve. H's eyes were on his phone as he text someone back; Link didn't know who.

"Nowhere." H smirked a bit, but kept his eyes glued to his phone, "Thought you might want to escape from work for a while."

Link gaped at that; H was certainly one for bending the rules. He acted like a teenager in so many ways. "You're unreal."

H didn't respond to that, but settled for placing his phone back into his pocket with a slight frown. But it was gone from his face so quickly that Link wasn't even sure if he had saw it to begin with. Was the taller man having problems with work? With another agent or handler? Link felt a small sense of concern for the other man, and slowed his pace in order to prolong their time together. H paused short of the reception and turned to face Link, making him almost walk into H with the abrupt stop. H glanced to the side to seemingly assess their surroundings.
"Keep your voice down," H said in a hushed tone, returning his gaze toward Link and displaying some sort of twisted smile. At this distance, Link could see that H actually had a small speck of brown in his emerald eyes.

"Why?" Link asked, painfully aware of their proximity.

H gestured with his head toward the back corner of the corridor a couple of meters behind him. "This is a blind spot on the surveillance cameras. They can't see us talking here, but they'll hear us loud and clear if you don't keep quiet."

Link raised an eyebrow at the sudden secrecy. The corridor was empty around them; no agents passing by and no Shannon to disturb them. Only hushed discussions coming from the far end of the floor broke the silence between the two men, disregarding Link's hammering heartbeat. "What are we doing?"

H remained still for the moment and bit his lower lip, bringing it between his teeth and drawing Link's attention to it. The pinkness of the taller man's lips was enhanced by his darker beard shaping it. After a few painful seconds, H reached forward with both hands and delicately took Link's own hand and raised it up to his face. He turned Link's palm upwards and began inspecting the slit which ran from his thumb to his wrist; the conclusion to an unexpected tectonic plate shift. Link watched as H's eyes softened as he pressed his thumb against the growing scar, the contact sending a ripple of electricity through Link's wrist and along his arm, headed straight for his heart. An extremely intimate gesture from the other man, and one that Link didn't fight. First the intentional touching of feet under Link's desk, now this; what was to come next?

"It doesn't hurt," Link said quietly, watching H intently. This was H—his handler—tenderly holding his hand in the middle of Myth Int HQ. It sounded ridiculous in his head, but Link didn't question it, nor did he reject the contact. H's fingertips felt warm against his skin and Link welcomed the heat; both on his palm and gathering on his cheeks.

H hummed a little in response, but faltered. His fingers paused on Link's palm as he raised his eyes to look at the shorter man. He seemed to tower at least a head over Link. "What happened?"

"Uh," Link stopped and looked to his right, down the empty corridor in order to hide his embarrassment, "Lost my footing."

"Uh," Link stopped and looked to his right, down the empty corridor in order to hide his embarrassment, "Lost my footing."

H laughed a little, but it sounded forced. His thumb resumed its caress along Link's cut. "Didn't think you were that clumsy."

"I'm not." Link responded as he shifted his weight onto his right foot, gaze still anywhere but H. The close proximity of the other man's face was enough to cause Link's anxiety to flare; why, he didn't know. Or maybe he did.

"Looks that way from where I'm standing." H noted, his thumb tracing along Link's new scar and making the smaller man shiver. H's fingertips felt rough and worn, calluses decorating the used and abused skin of his palms; from holding weapons and doing field work, Link assumed, but the light bruise on his knuckle made Link question that. He had to remember that this was the guy who got numerous agents killed and walked away without so much as a slap on the wrist. H was dangerous.

The man who stood, holding his hand in the hallway, was dangerous.

Link exhaled relatively loudly; loud enough for H to notice, but not to be picked up on a nearby security camera. What was H doing? Was this another let's mess with Link thing, or was it something else?
Link swallowed his nerves and turned his head back towards H; the other man was not standing as close as he was before, but he seemed to be leaning toward Link. He could see each individual strand of hair on H's beard. Their hands were still interlocked. "And where exactly do you stand, H?"

H exhaled audibly through his nose, seeming both taken back but pleased with Link's challenging question. He still hadn't let Link's hand go and was instead holding it between both of his own as if somehow attempting to heal the wound there. Link took comfort in the contact, both on edge and at ease with this new advancement in he and his handlers relationship. Where it was heading, Link couldn't hazard a guess, but he was sure as hell enjoying the ride.

H looked at Link for a long and agonizing moment, seeming to be going through some kind of inner turmoil. He bit his bottom lip once more, and worry framed his brow before he opened his mouth to speak. "Link—"

That was when footsteps sounded from the far end of the corridor and a door opened from behind them. Immediately, H snatched his hands away from Link's and turned his eyes towards the offending sounds, whatever he had been about to say now hidden behind a professional mask. Link returned his hands to his sides and attempted to act natural, turning his body toward the agents emerging from a room a couple of doors down from him, chatting to themselves over a small, brown file. He cursed them silently for interrupting whatever H had been about to say; it felt like something important, and he ached to find out what.

Link turned back to speak to H, but the other man was gone and Link stood alone. He looked around himself but found no trace that H had ever been standing there; had he imagined it? No; the heat from H's touch still ghosted his palm and caused his stomach to clench at the thought. No, he hadn't imagined it. But the mysterious man had disappeared, leaving Link alone as he nodded politely to the agents who were now passing him in the corridor.

It was understandable for H to make the decision to flee when other agents were around. After all, an agent and a handler should not be seen conversing above a professional level. Nor should they be caught in an intimate gesture of care and concern like H and Link had just been part of. Regardless, the departure of the other man left Link feeling pretty alone as he stood in the now empty corridor. He had actually spent time with H in person; and H seemed to care about Link in a way that broke all sorts of rules set in place for them. And Link would know, having memorized the fraternization regulations from the database. And then there was Noah and his new team; H and Noah seemed to go way back. Handlers were able to converse with those who weren't their assets, and Noah and H seemed to be old friends. Perhaps his new team mate knew more about H than Link did, but there was only one way to find out.

Link made his way back to the decryption team room and offered a small wave to the remainder of his colleagues before finding Noah by the coffee machine at the far end of the room. The younger man seemed to be concentrating immensely on his choice of caffeinated water.

"Go with a latte," Link offered as he made his presence known, grabbing his own paper cup to fill it with coffee once Noah had finished. "I always do."

"Oh, hey Neal," Noah replied, a small smile on his lips as he pressed the button for a latte. "Glad to see you back in one piece."

"What do you mean?"

"We all thought H was gonna rip you a new one." Noah laughed as he picked up his cup, now full with coffee, and took a sip with a satisfactory hum, "Yeah, good call with the latte."
Link moved to place his own cup under the dispenser and push the button for a latte. "Rip me a new one?"

"Yeah," Noah said, "Usually when H leaves with someone they don't come back for an hour or two. Disciplinary."

Link chose not to respond to Noah and instead focused on pouring extra milk into his coffee. After a quiet moment, Noah spoke again, "What's up with you two, anyway?"

Link paused, trying not to seem too taken back, "What?"

"H and you." Noah raised a brow, "You seemed like you knew each other already."

"Yeah, we do. Not a lot, though."

"I thought so." Noah hummed into his coffee cup, deep in thought. Behind him, both of the girls on their team started laughing at a joke one of the others had told. Noah turned to them and smiled in response. "I'll tell you, Candace would've killed to have H look at her the way he looked at you."

Link heard the sound of his spoon hitting the hard floor before he realized he had dropped it. He scrambled to pick it up and replace it with a clean one to stir in his milk, clearing his throat. Noah watched him with a skeptical look on his face.

"What're you talking about, Noah?" Link asked, mildly annoyed. He didn't need H staring at him like that if it would attract attention; especially the attention of his colleagues.

"Just that you've definitely attracted H's attention." Noah responded, one hand up in defense, "Watch yourself. H and I don't travel in similar circles, but I know what kind of company he keeps; lemme tell you, you don't wanna get into that."

"I think I can handle myself," Link said as he lifted his coffee to his lips and took a sip, using the counter to lean on for support, "Besides, I already heard the stories about H from other people."

Noah realized a brow, "Oh really? Yeah, H is quite the topic of conversation here."

"Yeah, I got that."

"Yeah," Noah replied, before clearing his throat and changing the subject, "So, did you catch the Lakers game last night?"

Link was thankful for the change in topic, but also regretted that he hadn't caught the game since Noah proceeded to describe each quarter in depth throughout the day. The Lakers triumphed in the end and Link was forced to exchange celebratory high fives with a few of the guys from his team. But he didn't mind, not really; Noah was a good guy through and through and it eased Link's mind that not everybody was dangerous like his handler was. Or was accused of being. Regardless, Link had a lot of time to think about his situation; the state of his job and his relationship with H.

The terrorist agency that Shannon had mentioned seemed like a pretty severe and glorified threat to the country; if things didn't go as planned in Salt Lake City then the status of the U.S. could be in jeopardy. Which begged the question; what did they really want? Gathering Intel for what purpose and why? And where did H fit into all of it; into Link's ludicrously busy life with intent to scramble it all up and cause Link to reconsider what was right and what was wrong. The way H had acted with him was peculiar enough without Noah implanting more ideas into Link's fragile mind. One plausible assumption was that H cared for Link in such a way that would be inappropriate for their working conditions; friendship was forbidden. The second plausible assumption would be that H
was interested in something more than that; explaining the footsie and hand holding, but both actions could be the interaction from a close friend. Is that what they were? Close friends?

It dawned on Link that he didn't really know much about H at all, yet H knew everything there was to know about Link. He had read his case file after all. It was a one sided friendship at this stage, but Link was intent on changing that.

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I'm surprised you even survived the encounter. -B

Link huffed out a breath at his phone and leaned back on his sofa with a grunt. He had grabbed some take out pizza from a place down the street before he came home to his small apartment. It was dark out now, only street lights illuminated the road for those on the sidewalk to navigate themselves. Link had spent a good portion of the day working with his team, getting to know them and showing them a few new techniques. But when word got around that he had been spotted with H, his phone started blowing up with texts from Ben and a few others.

Grabbing a slice of his dinner, he text Ben back, amused. We were barely together five minutes. And there were too many witnesses. -N

What's he like? -B

Link had to pause and think about H; mysterious and handsome and no doubt feared by the agency itself. But he couldn't admit that to Ben, so he kept it simple. Really tall. -N

I heard he's like 6'7. -B

Sounds about right. -N

Now there's someone taller than you, Neal. Finally. -B

Link shook his head and didn't respond to that. True, Link seemed short standing next to H despite being an impressive six foot. H looked like he could be in a basketball league; maybe he was. He seemed too laid back for sports, or at least, that was the impression he gave.

Link looked out of his balcony window at the night sky in thought. Soft, flashing lights from the Ferris wheel a few blocks down disturbed the otherwise calming cloud cover that Link sought comfort in. It wasn't until he had consumed half of his pizza that he gathered the courage to message H.

Your methods of evanescence are remarkable. -N

As expected, Link didn't receive a response, and after ten minutes of waiting he cut his losses and got on with some other things. He emailed Jen for the first time in a while and detailed his semi-promotion and rule breaking, to which he received an equally worried and irritated response from her. He expected to be scolded; Jen was his sister in so many ways. And sibling rivalry was definitely on the list of traits they shared. She updated him on the local North Carolina news and spoke about his old workmates; it only made him feel homesick. He commented on the fact, and Jen gushed over him and how much she missed his company too. His fish were doing well, she said, having enjoyed their vacation to her apartment. He laughed at that; Jen never failed to cheer him up.

Link brushed up on some old decryption knowledge towards the end of the night, having wrapped
up pizza for a later date and retired to his bedroom to read articles on his phone. That was when it buzzed in his hands.

**Apologies. Had to deal with some things. But yes, my disappearance was necessary. -H**

Link frowned at the response, wondering what things H had been referred to. Related to the old bruise on H's knuckles, or something worse like the death of another agent; he didn't want to think about it.

*I know. But thanks for giving me that break from work. -N*

*Don't mention it. -H*

Link understood what H meant loud and clear; perhaps this marked the end of he and H's friendship or whatever the hell it was. They had almost been caught in a predicament which would have been embarrassing to explain, to say the least. Cutting their losses prematurely would be the smartest option, but Link knew that wasn't what he wanted. He didn't know what he wanted, but he certainly was not ready to distance himself from the other man. Not when he felt this way about him. With a frustrated sigh, Link threw his phone onto the bed side table and cursed H for even starting this whole situation to begin with.

Chapter End Notes

Link and H finally meet but it only leaves him with more questions about his handler and the agency. Hopefully everyone enjoyed this chapter! Updates will be slower currently as I am travelling within the United States with no laptop. Feel free to critique, comment and review. All are welcome. This story does not have a beta.
JUNE 11TH 2007, present day

Link was at home, pacing the perimeter of his small apartment as he bid his time before the call. He was headed to Salt Lake City via orders sent from high above him; the Myth Int Agency sure had a habit of keeping its agents in the dark. But perhaps it was for the better. Maybe the grim reality of the terrorist situation across the States was better hidden from view. But then, the agency had chosen Link to be a part of the troubling situation in light of his decryption capabilities. He only had himself to blame, really. H hadn't contacted Link again after their small affray; or whatever it was. All Link understood is that he was irked beyond belief at his handler. To treat Link in such a way, like a pet or a child—or worse, a lover—and then have the audacity to act natural about it. To pretend like nothing had happened; to completely shut Link out and halt their communications. He hadn't realized how accustomed he'd become to talking with H on a daily basis, to share pieces of his day with the other man. And in absence of it, Link could feel himself getting worked up. He only hoped the other man felt the same; out of spite, but also because his feelings were hurt. It made Link want to punch a hole in the drywall of his living room and envision H's face smack bang in the middle of his bruised fist.

Himself and his now friends—fellow agents—had gathered for their weekly get together the night prior. Link had fortunately had the day off to prepare for his trip to Utah and appreciated the distraction the other men offered. They had chosen a small booth at the corner of the room where they could freely discuss work without other patrons of the bar listening in. Link sat next to Chase whom he chatted away to, mostly about Chase and his copious amount of pets.

"Dude, do you really have a pet chinchilla?" Alex had asked, half joking and half not, with his hand firmly placed on Chase's shoulder. The smaller man tried to shrug him off.

"Yes," Chase replied, completely serious as he fiddled with the straw floating in his root beer, "He's the newest addition to my apartment."

"You gotta let us come over some time, man." Link laughed and shook his head. He had never really been a pet person, aside from his fish he kept back home.

"Sure," Chase said with a smile, seeming to appreciate Link's idea. His face fell suddenly, "But, Ben's allergic..."

All eyes looked at Ben, who looked a little like a deer in headlights. Finally, the bulky man shrugged and said, "I'd be willing to take one for the team."
The four men agreed that they would check their admittedly busy schedules and find a time to visit Chase's letting zoo, as Alex called it. It provided a timely distraction for Link as he attempted to circumvent the topic of H and himself spotted at HQ. But when the conversation began to dwindle, and the night carried on, Link could no longer avoid it.

"So, Neal," Alex began as he placed his now empty pint glass down onto the table before him and rested his elbows against the wood, "How'd it go at HQ?"

"I was scared as hell, man," Link said honestly. Alex and Chase both nodded in understanding, but Benjamin didn't seem fazed.

"But y'had H there with you, right?" Benjamin asked, raising a brow before finishing his beer. Alex looked shocked to hear it, as if the news hadn't spread fast enough that Link and H had been walking with one another. Chase, however, looked down at his half empty glass without a word. Benjamin shoved Alex in the shoulder, "I told you, man. They were seen in HQ together."

"When'd you tell me that?" Alex asked, propping himself back into a seated position and shoving Ben back.

"It was only two days ago." Link offered.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. You're telling me you met H two days ago and you didn't tell us about it?" Alex seemed offended.

"Is it really that big a deal?" Link asked, trying his best to shrug off this debilitating questioning.

Alex and Ben both said, in unison, as if it were obvious, "Yes."

Link offered an exasperated sigh and folded his arms over his chest, slouching back against the booth in defeat, "I don't know, man. He's real tall, and real intimidating. That's about it."

"Can't believe you break one of the biggest rules of the company, and you get to meet him," Benjamin said, kicking Link under the table. "Feels like only yesterday I was saving your ass down at that fruit store."

"It's a market," Link retorted, before realizing how pathetic his response was. The other men at the table chuckled and Link retreated further into his seat, fighting a grin. "One of the guys I work with, Noah, is an old friend of H."

"I know him," Chase said suddenly, joining in on the conversation for the first time, "He used to work with me in the medical unit before he got transferred. He's a good guy."

"Yeah, he is," Link said. "Did he ever mention H to you?"

Chase hesitated, before speaking quietly, "Not a lot. Just about the reports you know about. Those agents being killed under his order."

Alex shook his head, "How does that guy sleep at night?"

Not well, Link thought, recalling H's statement about his sort-of insomnia. Maybe Alex was right; maybe the thought of his kills kept H awake at night. But something about it didn't feel right. H didn't give off the intelligent, homicidal psychopath vibe. Not that Link could really identify such a vibe, anyway.

After the men had finished their drinks, Link had driven them home, having rented a car for the next
six months. Nothing fancy, just a black Volvo. He sat with Chase in the front, whilst Alex and Ben in the back. Link managed to drive them to their apartments safely, despite the car making a peculiar noise throughout the journey. Rentals were always acting up.

On his way back to his own apartment, Link stopped at Jessie's place to check in. She had seemed more than pleased to see him, and welcomed him inside for some coffee. Jessie's small, ginger cat had sat on Link's lap for the duration of his visit, purring quietly as it settled into his thighs. He and Jessie discussed the typical things: weather, work, books and television. She reminded him vaguely of Jen in the sense of how she held herself, full of self confidence and independent. After an hour or so, Link excused himself to return home, not wanting to keep Jessie from getting some rest for the night. Jessie's cat put up resistance but eventually leaped off of Link and sauntered away behind the sofa. Jessie hugged Link goodbye, but this time she kissed his cheek and thanked him for his company. Link left her apartment slightly star struck, feeling like somehow he was betraying himself by allowing her to do so. Betraying H, too, as much as he hated to admit it. Such thoughts kept him awake that night; on edge and irritable until morning. This was how Link found himself pacing in his home, already packed a duffel for his flight.

Thankfully, agents arrived within the hour to transport Link to LAX. He felt like he was going back home; wishful thinking, perhaps. Brief checks of his phone confirmed that H was still keeping quiet, making Link huff out a breath and tuck his phone back into his jeans. The agent accompanying him on the journey met him at the airport, and to Link's slight disappointment, it wasn't H. Instead, he was met by a slim female agent, with long blonde hair and long legs. She was a few feet shorter than Link, but what she lacked in height she made up for with confidence. The woman slid her loose pony tail to the side and held out her hand to greet Link.

"Mr. Neal," She said, "Nice to meet you. I'm Stevie and I'll be accompanying you during this assignment."

"Uh," Link said stupidly as he took her small hand in his own, feeling like a giant. Maybe that was how H felt all the time. "Nice to see a friendly face."

Stevie smiled sweetly and removed her hand from Link's grasp as they stepped into stride together. Her voice was timid and small, and Link got the impression she did not converse with people often. Most likely accustomed to dealing with things electronically compared to old fashioned face to face.

"I know some of the agents can seem distracted," She said, "But it's not personal. People don't tend to enjoy being stuck on transport duty."

"I could have driven here myself," Link offered.

"And have to pay the ridiculous fee for airport parking?"

Link laughed and shrugged in agreement. She had him there. Both of them made it to security and Stevie had to sweet talk a guard and flash her shiny, Myth Int badge to allow them to proceed without bag check. Link hadn't packed anything lethal, regardless, only some spare clothes and his laptop. He had been supplied with decryption gear, too, which he had also packed safely.

The wait for the flight was minimal, and for that Link was thankful. No awkward small talk between he and Stevie; he didn't need to heighten the anxiety level bubbling within him. It was a small aircraft holding up to thirty passengers at one time. Stevie and Link sat next to one another and unpacked themselves, readying for the two hour flight to Salt Lake City. During take off, Link observed as Stevie gripped the arm rest with her slim fingers, holding on for her life. Once they were airborne, she explained that she had a fear of flying.
"I know. Working for MIA and I hate flying." She laughed, easing up a little and looking at Link, "Ridiculous."

Link offered her a small smile, having been content flying from state to state without complaint. "Everyone's afraid of something."

Stevie paused, then asked, "What are you afraid of?"

Link paused, having not expected such a response. Which begged the question; what was he afraid of? Dying; no. Living; maybe. "I'm afraid that if we don't handle the situation today that things could get real bad, real fast."

"I noticed your deflection of my question, but I'll respect it." Stevie commented, and watched as Link looked away from her, "I read your file. I'm very sorry for your loss."

Link didn't respond verbally, instead tensing his shoulders and arms in attempts to stay calm. He had had more than his fair share of condolences at the time and hearing it then just conjured up bad memories that he had no intention of reliving.

"So, you know why I was the best choice for this assignment," Link said, voice distant as opposed to his racing mind, "Given my personal involvement."

"Yes. Although, typically our department does not allow personal and professional business to interlink." Stevie said, looking away also. She stared outside of the airplane window to her left as she spoke. "However, your file was placed on Shannon's desk and, well, here we are."

"Should I be thankful?" Link asked, irritation evident in his voice.

"I wouldn't be."

Link could appreciate that, and the fact that Stevie didn't bother to sugar coat his situation. Link had been chosen simply because he was fit for the job, nothing more. Nothing to do with sympathy or empathy. Surely not.

An hour into the flight, Link had fallen asleep next to Stevie and made a pointed effort to not allow his body to fall in her direction. Too many times he had woken, snoring on a stranger's shoulder. He had placed a pillow on his left side to stop himself moving in his sleep before drifting away. Stevie's in-flight cell phone had rang and woken him not long after, but he remained still and attempted to ignore it. Besides, wasn't it customary to turn all cellular devices off during flights?

"Stevie," She spoke quietly, and greeted whoever was on the other line, "Yes, I... Yes. Yes, he's here."

There was a pause, and Link kept his eyes closed, aware that Stevie was discussing him on the phone. If he remained acting natural, the woman was not likely to notice that he was paying attention to her every word.

"No, I don't think." A pause, "Yes, I know." Another pause, longer this time, "Just alike."

Just alike? Link twitched a little in response. Who was she talking to? And how was he similar to them?

"Okay. That's unfortunate," Stevie cleared her throat, and Link felt her shift in her seat, "I know, I'm sorry." She paused once more, whoever was talking on the other line must have been close to her; she spoke intimately, not in a business tone, but a gentler one. "Okay, let me know. Goodbye."
Link heard the sound of her flip phone closing and remained still, deciding not to bring it up. He wondered who she could have been talking to; who was important enough to interrupt the flight to converse with. It was obvious she assumed Link was asleep, and perhaps that was intentional. Perhaps the only reason she answered whilst he was presumably unconscious was to keep Link in the dark.

He didn't remember falling back asleep.

A gentle hand on his shoulder caused Link to stir and open his eyes. The plane was stationary, and Stevie was sitting beside him with an amused look on her face. They had landed in Salt Lake City International Airport at around ten thirty, making relatively good headway before they had to infiltrate communications. Luckily, as Stevie had pointed out to Link whilst they were disembarking the airplane, they could conduct the assignment from the safety of their hotel room. Link was relieved at that, but also disappointment washed over him. If they were to hide in their hotel, then how would they ever hope to rescue the agent that was missing? Shannon had mentioned she had thought the agent had been neutralized, but Link wasn't ready to give up on a life that easy. H and Shannon might be prepared to do that, with their close relationship or whatever they had together, but Link wasn't.

"Mr. Neal, are you even listening?"

Link snapped out of his reverie with a stutter, eyes focusing on Stevie who had evidently been trying to converse with him. He felt bad for a small moment. "Sorry, I guess I lost myself for a sec."

"Make sure you find yourself before it's time, Mr. Neal," Stevie said sternly, but Link could tell that she hadn't really been bothered by Link spacing out momentarily. Once they had hitched a cab to their hotel, Stevie spoke again, "I was asking how you planned on carrying out the decryption process."

"Uh," Link responded, then rubbed a hand over his face, "I have a laptop in my bag. Its primary function is encryption and decryption."

"I assumed as much," Stevie replied, ending the short and far from sweet conversation. In a small moment of anxiety, Link missed H. Missed the calming conversation he shared with the other man. Missed being able to look to H for a distraction. Missed being with H in the middle of HQ; but whether or not he missed the rough and raw contact of H's hands on his own was another story entirely.

The cab slamming on its breaks broke Link out of his thoughts as Stevie graciously paid the driver. Their hotel was nothing extravagant; simple, yet dignified. They shared a room on the fourth floor, occupied with two single beds and one desk in front of the window. Link was quick to place his laptop on it and open it to start it up for the day ahead. Stevie had pulled out her phone and was once again conversing with someone on the other line. This time, it was strictly business. She discussed their tactics and received advice, which she then shared with Link.

The plan was to intercept communications before the scheduled bomb scare; but hopefully it wouldn't come to that. There were a number of agents situated around the area, Stevie had explained, ready for the call; ready for coordinates of the communication signal.

"May as well get a head start," Link said once Stevie had ended her phone call, as he took a seat at
the desk and she came up behind him. She nodded in agreement.

"You're right." She said, fishing a small earpiece out of her pocket and fixing it around her ear, "Did you bring your earpiece?"

"Uh, yeah," Link said as he fished around in his duffel for the small piece of tech. He strapped it around his ear and pressed it on. It erupted in a sharp burst of static and caused Link to rip it back out of his ear.

Stevie snickered a bit, "First time you've used that thing, right? They do that. It's scanning for available frequencies."

Link huffed and put the blasted thing back around his ear, "Testing, testing."

"I read you." Stevie said, "I'll patch us into the other agents on stand-by." Stevie had brought her own, far more advanced laptop and laid it on the bed she had claimed as her own. She climbed onto it and crossed her legs like a child, but Link could only admire her for it. Young minds were the most perceptive, after all.

Brief chatter echoed in Link's ear from interference from Stevie patching her ear piece into an available agent network. She spoke to the fellow agents with authority, which led Link to believe that she was some sort of figure head.

"Are you a case officer?" He asked, not really thinking. Stevie did not falter and remained typing.

"I am in charge for this operation." She said.

"Oh." Link did not mention her deflection of his question.

Stevie spared him a curious glance and reminded him of the task at hand. Link felt like he'd been scolded by a teacher and worked on finding communication channels within the area. The constant typing behind him created a calming background noise for him to concentrate to. As presumed, there were multiple available channels to hack into, but Link would have to search harder to locate the one he wanted. Organised criminals are the smarter of two evils; their communications would be well hidden, compared to the chatter of everyday criminals.

It took him an hour to locate the desired signal, and a further two hours to hack into the channel per Stevie's orders. She had moved from her position on the bed to kneeling at Link's desk despite his numerous offers to give up his chair to her. The easy part was over; they had located their channel and were watching their screens carefully. Ahead of schedule; it was a good thing, but also a tedious thing. Link had to take two bathroom breaks. He felt sick, and Stevie seemed to sense that. She moved from her perch on the ground and Link shuffled in his seat until they shared the small piece of furniture.

It was weirder than weird to be sharing a chair with another grown adult; but Stevie didn't seem fazed, simply using her body contact as quiet comfort. She knew his story, she had read his file, and this was the only way she could help him. It didn't work, and Link felt himself yearning for the contact of another.

Who, he wasn't ready to admit.
It took another tense hour and a half of perching on half of a chair for the communication channel to crackle and come to life. Stevie sprung to attention and began speaking into her ear piece.

"Time to wake up, agents. We've got movement." She turned to Link and moved the earpiece away from her mouth, "Anything you can recognize?"

Link scanned the text carefully as Stevie spoke. It was the same line, repeated three times. "It's like a, uh," He paused, "A greeting. They're preparing."

"All right, keep at it," Stevie rose from where she was perched and allowed Link the full chair, "I'll deal with the agents."

Link hummed in acknowledgement, completely enthralled in the task at hand. Numerous lines of code were spat out over his screen and Link did his best to note down all of it; the more he understood and the faster he could decrypt it, the more likely it would be that they could prevent the bomb scare. All of it relied on Link succeeding. But no pressure. Link could have smashed the laptop right then and there out of anxiety alone, but he fought it. He fought himself and typed furiously until the communication line was severed and the message was completed.

He wasted no time working on a decryption key; it had to be hidden somewhere within the code, or the terrorist group had a shared key among groups. Luckily, it hadn't been that long a message; something like a debrief, maybe. Stevie paced behind him, speaking slowly into her cell phone to whoever she had spoken to on the plane. Her voice was calm and sweet; perhaps she was intimate with the person on the other end. Link didn't know, and it wasn't the time to think about it.

He cracked the key in a little under ten minutes; a personal record. But no time for boasting. After a further fifteen minutes, the message became legible English:


"Stevie," Link called the woman, who looked at him and shushed the person on her cell phone, "The attack is at one pm. Temple Square."

"That's an hour from now," Stevie noted, a slight sense of worry framing her brow as she looked at her watch. She grabbed her bag from the bed side table and tossed her cell phone at Link, who caught it one handed. "If that rings, answer it. Say I can't come to the phone right now. I have to go inform the Square."

Link blinked at her in slight panic, "You're leaving?"

"Keep working, Neal," Stevie said sternly, then smiled a little in attempts to empathize with the man before her as she fondled the door handle, "I'll be on the ear piece. Don't worry."

Link had no time to respond before Stevie disappeared out the hotel door. He listened to her quickening footsteps echo down the corridor and dissipate into silence until Link was alone. He placed the cell phone on the edge of his desk and remained glued to the laptop, watching for anomalies inside rows of code. What were they planning to do at Temple Square? If this terrorism agency—or cult, whatever they wanted to be called—were ready to discard innocent lives in such a way then they truly were monsters, and Link had no quarrels with taking them down.

The thought of losing to this scum distracted Link from the cell phone ringing until he realized upon its third ring. Scrambling to grab it, he flipped it open and opened his mouth to answer.

"Stevie," A familiar, and also distressed, male voice beat him to the punch, "There's a complication
with the transmission."

"Uh," Link responded in confusion, completely taken back by H being at the other end of the line. Did H know Stevie too? H seemed to know everybody. "It's Neal. Stevie can't come to the phone right now. What type of complication?"

There was a deliberate pause on the other line as the other man seemed to hesitate, "Neal, where's Stevie?"

"She can't come to the phone right now." Link repeated.

Link heard H's aggravated sigh on the other end, "Fine. You decrypted the message, right?"

"Yeah, a while ago," Link said as he typed one handed into the laptop before him, bringing up the decoded message to freshen his mind, "Temple Square, right?"

"Sounds like it. Rest of the message is questionable, at best."

"What makes you say that?" Link blinked, having actually thought the other parts of the message could lead them to possibly discovering more about the agency. Or perhaps terrorist agents within the agency. But of course, H had to disagree.

"They're messing with the agency." H suggested, voice stern. Link could hear the echo of traffic in his ear; H must have been outside somewhere. "The claim about Temple Square itself might be a hoax."

"Where are you?" Link asked suddenly, after hearing the commotion on the other line. A brief surge of worry assaulted his gut at the thought of H being in Salt Lake; being one of the agents on stand by that Stevie had mentioned. Could H have enough free time to do this mission on top of handling his agents? Maybe someone covered for him.

"I'm heading to Temple Square," H responded and confirmed Link's fears, "I'm close. Tell Stevie to take her damn phone with her next time she disappears, would you?"

Link ignored the slight insult that H had discarded at him and instead focused on not breaking the phone in his hand from the tensing in his knuckles. He could have smashed the device into pieces and let it cut into his palm; anything to distract himself from the worry. Worry that H would go to the Square and the bombing would happen after all. H would become just another casualty, just another deceased civilian, and not the man whom Link had grown fond over in the past months. The man who had held his hand in the middle of HQ. The man who had been giving him the silent treatment for weeks.

"Be careful." Link managed, voice small. H hesitated audibly on the other end of the call, perhaps winding through a crowd unable to comprehend Link. But when he responded, his voice was softer.

"I will, Link," H said, and Link could hear the same kindness in his voice that he did that day at HQ. The nickname sent a tingle down Link's spine. "Are you alright?"

"Concerned about Temple Square." Link replied honestly, leaving the part about fearing for H out. He clicked around on the laptop and pulled up a recent article about the Square; usually populated with tourists and businessmen. The loss would be unavoidable and catastrophic. They had to stop it before it was too late.

"I am, too," H said, but Link couldn't tell if he was just saying that for Link's sake or because he really did care. H was a killer, after all. Allegedly. He had to remember that; allegedly a killer. When
H spoke again, Link was reminded of why he was so peeved at his handler to begin with. "How's your hand?"

Link spared a glance at his scarred flesh. Pathetic, really. "It's fine."

H grunted in response, the commotion on the other line dissipating, "I'm inside the building. I gotta go."

Link braced his palm on the desk and spoke weakly, "Be careful." He repeated.

"You already said that."

"I know."

H paused on the other line, then spoke quietly, "There's surveillance cameras for the Temple hooked into the agency database. You can track myself and the other agents' movements from there." A pause, then, "Talk to you soon."

"Yeah," Link said, then heard the line go dead. He wasted no time getting into the surveillance camera link for Temple Square and scanned the areas. Five cameras in total; two outside the building and three within. Not a lot to work with. Link located two agents on camera three, walking together on high alert, and another agent on camera four, talking on his headset. Link heard the chatter, but it wasn't directed at him so he kept quiet and resumed his search.

It was nearing twelve thirty by the time he located H on surveillance camera five. He was dressed in dark jeans and a red dress shirt with no tie, with khaki high tops on his feet; an extremely casual look for the tall man, so much so that Link felt like he was intruding on him for being so under-dressed. He was jogging through a large corridor, one hand bracing his headset as he chatted into it. Link had to adjust his frequency to hear H properly. He was calling to Stevie.

Link changed camera to locate the woman in question, finding her just approaching the front steps of the building and jogging her way into the building, her long hair swaying in the wind.

She managed to locate H in no time, having him direct her to his location on the ear piece. He looked more than relieved to see her; enveloping her in his long arms as she skidded to a halt in front of him. She moved her earpiece away from her mouth to speak to him once he let her go; Link could not hear her or H converse. They remained in close proximity, anxiety evident in their expressions, and Link felt the hair on his arms raise. What were they doing? Was H involved with Stevie? What about Shannon? Perhaps Link was over-thinking things, but that made his bodily reaction no less real. He felt sick; like he had been betrayed. Jealousy, maybe. A sinking feeling formed in his gut as the two agents separated in different directions and Stevie's voice echoed in Link's ear.

"Agent Neal," She repeated it until Link responded, then said, "Have you located the other agents?"

"Five, including you."

"Five?" Stevie repeated in question, and once Link confirmed the number, her response became suspicious, "I issued a total of six agents. Check again."

Link checked the cameras once more. The two agents walking together had moved to camera five; the singular agent was still in camera four, remaining stationary; H was nowhere to be found, but Link was aware he was in the building; and Stevie was standing in camera three, looking up at Link.

"Make that four. H is gone."
"That's fine," Stevie said quickly, then shook her head and contacted the agents present on her earpiece. An agent named Cole was unaccounted for. "Neal, we may have a hostage situation. Keep an eye out for Cole."

Link furrowed his brow. If there was already a hostage, then the terrorist agency were well aware of their intrusion in their plans. This was going from bad to worse, Link thought. He double checked, then triple checked the cameras for the missing agent but had no luck. Anxiously drumming his fingers on his desk, Link scanned the communications channel for further clues or conversations between agents.

"Neal," H's voice sounded in his ear and startled Link, "Come in, Neal."

"I'm here." Link said quickly, relieved to hear from the other man. He changed tabs to locate H on the surveillance cameras. He stood in camera five, alone—the other agents must have moved on. He was looking up at Link.

"Any movement on your end?" H asked.

A brief check of the cameras showed Myth Int agents, and them alone. "Nothing. It might be worth checking places for hidden tech." Link refrained from saying bomb, not able to get the word out.

There was a movement in camera three, a man jogging through the cameras, moving into camera four. His face was obscured from view and he made a point of keeping it that way. Dressed in black, he was able to maneuver through areas absent of agents to stop him. The memory of the man who snapped the agent's neck months ago flashed across Link's vision; the man who kick started everything. And he was heading straight for H.

"H," Link said frantically. H appeared to notice the fright in Link's voice as his face turned into a grimace in the camera. "H. Someone's coming."

H didn't get a chance to respond as the intruder crashed into him, visibly knocking the wind out of the taller man as he was thrown into the hard, marble floor. The intruder pinned the dazed H down with his knees and pulled out an automatic weapon—equipped with a silencer, seemingly homemade—from his pants and raised it to aim at the surveillance camera. Link got one last fleeting look at H maneuvering under the intruder as the man shot at the camera and Link's surveillance link went dead.

In panic, he checked other cameras for movement, contacting the other agents.

"Agents, agents," He spoke panicked, fearing for H's life on top of the numerous lives outside, "Area five. I repeat, area five. Go now!"

He watched as the agents confirmed the order and made their way toward the destroyed camera. Link mentioned it, "I've lost visual. Be careful."

"Neal," Stevie's voice echoed in Link's ear, "Have you got your sights on the targets?"

"Negative. One of them attacked H and shot out the surveillance camera." Link said, anxious.

Stevie cursed aloud, and it sounded wrong coming from her small mouth, but it only enhanced her capability in Link's mind. But in light of the information Link had given her, Stevie did nothing.

"We have to concentrate on the bomb, Neal." She said.

"But, H is—"
"Neal," She sounded irritated, "Stay focused. Find me that bomb."

Right, yeah. She was right as much as he didn't want to admit it. H could be hurt, or worse...but Link couldn't think about that. It would distract him from the task at hand; distract him and cause him to make errors that they couldn't afford.

There was a small beeping from his laptop, indicating that one of the agents' channels had gone down. A hesitant check confirmed that H’s earpiece had gone offline. Link couldn't think about it; he couldn't think about anything.

"Neal, we're running out of time."

Stevie's voice kept him going. He felt robotic, frantically scanning the area for anomalies, or slip ups in code, anything that could incriminate the terrorism agency. A small jump in a line of code ignited Link's curiosity; a fire was bubbling in his gut. Sweating, he informed Stevie.

"Second floor." Link said, voice deadpan, "Inside a pillar. There should be an inconsistency in the marble."

"Got it," Stevie confirmed, and Link watched as she jogged upstairs in the building. She had to grip the handrail to steady herself multiple times; Link saw that she was distraught. About the situation, or about H, Link didn't know. Most likely both, a lot like himself. If H was hurt, would he get a temporary handler? He couldn't think about it.

"Neal, I got it," Stevie panted as she got down on her knees beside a hidden compartment within a cylindrical pillar. It had been hidden from view, disguised with a fake plant. So amateur, Link thought.

"Alright. Now move it carefully." Link guided her, a little more present in the moment. He had done this dozens of times, but he had never had to guide someone into doing it right. "It's possible it has a self destruct mechanism if it's removed incorrectly. Stevie, be careful."

"Yes," Stevie responded, her delicate fingers wrapping around each corner of the small device as she applied an even amount of pressure, "It's beeping."

"Yeah," Link said. "It should do."

Stevie took five minutes in total—Link was counting the seconds—to remove the bomb from its marble coffin. She laid it delicately on the floor in front of her and flipped the top compartment open, revealing a small, digital countdown device.

"One pm," Stevie sounded panicked, "What time is it?"

Link checked the time on his laptop, and compared it to the one on the cell phone, "Twelve fifty-five."

"Neal, help me out." Stevie almost begged. Hearing her distressed made Link's stomach clench with the urge to protect her.

"Yeah," Link bit his bottom lip and instructed Stevie to carefully turn the device toward the surveillance camera so Link could zoom in on it; not all bombs and explosive devices could be disarmed the same way. The method for disarming one could be catastrophic on another. It was the reason bombs were so threatening, and going in on it without granting demands like they had was even more dangerous.
The bomb was not complicated. Link had seen its kind before and worked with one or two. It was easily disarmed, which begged the question; was this terrorist agency as serious as everybody thought? If they couldn't arm a better, complicated bomb then their chances of getting what they wanted were dwindling.

"Listen very carefully," Link said, adjusting his earpiece and holding it close to his mouth as he spoke, "Talk me through the wires that are visible to you. Red, yellow, green and blue, right?"

"Right. They cross over a lot."

"Yeah. Don't worry about that." Link scanned nearby security cameras, paranoid, before he spoke again, "I need you to pull out the wires in a specific order."

"Which order, Neal?" Stevie asked. She seemed much more a hold of herself than before; prepared for the task ahead.

"The order is: yellow, red, blue, green."

"Yellow, red, blue then green." Stevie repeated, then waited for Link's confirmation before speaking again, "Remove them from the circuit board?"

"Yeah, but be careful." Link warned, "Be as gentle as you can."

Stevie nodded and got to work. She removed the yellow and red without issue, both of their breaths hitching as she did so. The blue was tougher than the others; she had to use both hands to remove it and fell backwards as it came loose. Both of them froze in fear of arming the bomb, but nothing happened and Link felt his heart hammer in his chest.

By the time she had gotten to the fourth and final wire—green—an agent had ascended the stairs and came to her assistance. Still no sign of H, Link reminded himself, torturing his thoughts with possibilities of H's fate. H could have been shot in the crossfire, but regretfully his surveillance didn't have sound and Link had no way of knowing how many times the automatic weapon had been fired. He couldn't think about that; he had to keep focused. There would be time for grieving later, he reminded himself. But later usually meant never in Link's mind and he knew it.

Stevie removed the final wire from the bomb with a jolt; again, she fell backwards with the force of it. A small cloud of smoke erupted from the small device and startled her and Link from behind his laptop. After the vapor cleared and Stevie came back into view, his hammering heart began to slow.

"Stevie, are you okay?" Link asked, slightly frightened by the turn of events.

"Yes, I..." She sounded winded, and he watched as she gathered herself whilst the other agent, a man with strawberry blond hair, turned the now disarmed device toward himself. "I'm fine." Stevie said.

Link watched as the male agent opened the container inside the bomb and furrowed his brow. That's when a small pocket inside the cylindrical container exploded. There was a flash of, not white, but red, and Link was blind to it for a short second. They're both dead, he thought, he lost them both. He had failed them, and he had failed H who was surely dead now, too.

But the two agents came back into view, the male agent completely covered in red. Blood, Link assumed, but the other man didn't appear hurt. Stevie was still sitting beside him, half of her body dyed a dark maroon as she blinked repeatedly.

"What the hell is this stuff?" The male said aloud as he raised his arms, drenched. He had a higher
pitched voice than Link.

"It looks like paint." Link observed, hearing his own voice shake. Stevie seemed to notice it as she peered up at the camera, a little two faced; half pale and perfect, half dark red and tainted. A walking metaphor for disaster.

"It's not paint," Stevie's tone was grim as she swirled saliva around in her mouth and spat it out next to her. It was red, too. "It tastes metallic. It's blood."

"Blood?" The agent asked and at the same time Link asked, "Who's blood?"

Within the next half hour, the other stand-by agents started reappearing. They had said the offender had escaped down a fire escape and into a waiting truck without a license plate. Among the agents who had pursued him was H, but the perpetrator had still managed to meander between the agents. Stevie was still tinted with blood, having only wiped her face with a towel and it made her smell to high heavens, as many of the agents noted. Decaying blood always smelled awful; Link had that experience.

H had been found pretty torn up, but walking. Link hadn't seen him, but he'd heard from other agents that he looked like he'd been through hell and back. H had high tailed it out of the area after a brief conversation with Stevie. Maybe he was afraid of being seen bruised and broken. Link felt his heart ache, but he was also relieved the other man hadn't been killed, feeling a surge of adoration for his handler having fought for his life with valor. Link had made his way down to Temple Square after the blood incident. Stevie looked relieved to see him as they stood together outside the building and watched as innocent tourists entered and exited the building, completely unaware of the certain death they almost faced. The bomb had turned out to be exactly as H had said: a hoax. Filled with blood and set to explode after it was disarmed. Link had to reconsider the intelligence of this terrorist agency. They had their gimmicks, he would give them that. Stevie, however, did not share his positivity. She stood with her arms crossed and brow furrowed, looking a little like she had jogged through a vineyard and collided with grapes. Link didn't say that, though.

"This isn't ideal." She said as the sun rose high above their heads, browning the blood on her shirt, "We got a glimpse of an agent on surveillance, but the getaway vehicle will be a needle in a haystack."

"H fought with the guy, too," Link said, thinking on it. "He might be able to ID him."

"Maybe, but from what H told me, the guy's face was obstructed." Stevie said, sighing.

"Like a mask?"

"Something like that."

Link raised a brow at Stevie's response. If it wasn't a mask, how was the guy's face obstructed? Or was it something else she was hiding from Link? Were her and H in on something? If H was as dangerous as he'd heard, then maybe Stevie was too. And Link had to admit, caked in old blood and irritated, he could believe Stevie to be dangerous. Only time would tell.

Chapter End Notes
Please let me know what everyone thinks of this chapter. The plot is coming into play now, and brownie points if anyone can decode the message from the terrorists. Feel free to critique, comment and review. All are welcome. This story does not have a beta.
Aide Non Désiré

Chapter by vanderloo

Chapter Notes

Story Title translation: Opération Clandestin - Clandestine Operation (An intelligence operation designed to remain secret)
Chapter title translation: Aide Non Désiré - Unwanted Help (lit. Undesired Aid)

JUNE 19TH 2007, present day

Link didn't hear from H for over a week after that. During which time he had been appointed a new, temporary handler who went by the name of C. Link liked the guy, sure—but he wasn't H. No one could really fill that gap in Link's life than the tall, bearded man that he had become infatuated with over the passing months. H had gone off the radar entirely; when Link had attempted to contact him the text messages failed, and he hadn't the nerve to call him. It left Link with two undesirable options; move on and forget about H, or bury himself in paperwork until H's return.

He preferred the latter, naturally.

Stevie had remained in passing contact with Link, having kept him up to date with the terrorism case. They had met in person once Link had been contacted to go to HQ. Results had came in for the DNA test on the blood inside the hoax bomb the week prior, and Link's face paled upon learning it was. The agent Shannon had mentioned who had gone quiet in Brooklyn; the one she had assumed to be dead. She was right about that one.

"They're trying to scare us." Stevie said with a shake of her head, blonde hair falling over her cheeks with the motion. "They killed one of ours, and managed to humiliate two agents by bathing them in her blood. Myself, included."

Link's face was solemn. "It's working."

"They can't know that." Stevie said sternly as she halted her steps from where they had been walking together in the middle of HQ. Link stopped a few steps ahead and turned toward her with a raised brow.

"What do you propose we do?" Link asked. Killing one of their terrorist agents wasn't really an option. Or maybe it was; he was sure H would be up for that.

It was possible that Link was bitter.

"Keep on it," Stevie said simply, "If we manage to snag one of their agents in the crossfire, we can interrogate them."

"Just interrogate them?" The implication in Link's tone was evident, and Stevie's brows raised in surprise. She opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by a new voice.

"You're implying that we hurt them, Neal?"
H had walked up behind Link silently, prompting him to jump when he heard the deep voice he could only identify as his handler's. Link faltered once he got a good look at the man now standing before him, towering over him like an unbeatable force. H looked like he'd been through Hell and back again. The skin around his left eye was a dark shade of blue, and it stretched to the side of his face and along his earlobe. His bottom lip was split and his neck was glittered with smaller, more red bruises. Link had the feeling H's beard was covering the worst of it. His handler looked like he hadn't sleep in something like a week.

"Isn't that what you do, H?" Link almost spat, irritation bubbling in his gut at H. Who did he think he was? To shut Link out for weeks and appear when he saw fit was not something Link would put up with, or ignore.

H's good eye twitched before he glanced at Stevie and gestured with his head that she should take off. Stevie seemed to comply; Link heard footsteps retreat from behind him, but he did not break focus from H. The taller man had a lot to answer for to Link; why the silent treatment? And what the hell happened in Salt Lake?

"Is there something you wanna say to me, Neal?" H asked, tone hard and steady. The use of Link's surname made it seem like H was angry at him, even if his stance and facial expression gave nothing away. Maybe Link knew H well enough to know what he was feeling. But evidently not well enough; Link didn't know what H felt about him. He didn't know what hell was going on his handler's head.

"What happened to you?" Link asked simply. Taking it slow and biding his time with the other man was a smart move, but Link knew his irritation was nagging at the back of his skull and causing an ache behind his eyes. H appeared to hesitate as he shifted his weight onto his right foot with a grimace. Link spared a fleeting look down at H's feet; was he hurt there, too? Figures. H was looking at him intently when Link had risen his eyes.

"Long story short, I got my ass beat," H laughed bitterly, "Was hot on the guy's heels, but he did a number on me." H gestured to the foot he was relieving of his body weight. "Broke a few toes."

Link's gaze softened for a short moment, and H began to look relieved, until Link caught himself and shook off the sympathy he felt for his handler. He couldn't afford to let himself get lost in his affection or admiration or whatever the hell he felt for H was. He needed answers. "And none of the other agents managed to catch him?"

"You already know the answer to that."

"There were four of them. And none of them could outrun one terrorist agent?" Link made a face at how ridiculous it sounded saying out loud. The most secretive and—arguably—most efficacious government agency in the United States couldn't employ capable enough agents to apprehend a suspect.

"What do you want me to say, Neal?" H seemed irritated now, his meticulously created emotional wall cracking at the seams. "That I'm faster than those imbeciles?"

An agent in a room to their right had paused their work to watch their exchange through their office window. Link noted them out of the corner of his eye, but he couldn't care less. This had to be said sooner or later, and he was tired of running from H.

"I want you to tell me what's really going on," Link almost barked, arm raising in front of his chest to point at H in emphasis, "Look at you; your face is wrecked. And you're going to stand there and tell me that one guy did that?"
H grit his teeth and said, “That's exactly what I'm telling you.”

“And none of the other agents were hurt.” Link continued, shaking his head and not bothering to keep his voice down, “Just you.”

Something in H's face seemed to snap, like a light switch being flicked on for the first time. He reached out and grabbed Link's pointing finger with one hand, gripping it with such a force that Link let out a strangled grunt of pain. For a brief moment, Link had the feeling H was going to hurt him. The taller man's thumb was conveniently—intentionally?—pressed against Link's palm scar, pressing down against the torn flesh in threat. But the moment was over quickly when H released his hand after removing it from view. The taller man's brow was furrowed in anger, and his tone was incredibly quiet. So quiet, Link almost didn't hear him.

“Keep your hands to yourself, AgentNeal.” H said, voice dripping in threat and authority. It was the first time that Link could see, in person, that H was indeed a very dangerous and powerful man. Agents had paused, mid-walk, behind H and were watching the exchange with wide eyes. Fearing for Link's safety, no doubt. But he wasn't interested in fighting.

Link could feel his palm throbbing in time with his racing heart. Keep his hands to himself; he would remember that. H was clearly severing whatever they had previously had. A mistake on his handler's part, probably. After all, H had been the one to initiate physical contact in the first place. Link's eyes narrowed and he said sternly, “Maybe you should take your own god damn advice, H.”

H faltered visibly, mouth opening but nothing coming out, and it made Link feel victorious. But also pretty guilty; he knew he was out of line, but if hurting H was the only way to get through to him then Link would damn well do it. H's eyes hardened as he assembled himself, and Link had nothing else to say. When it became clear that H had no response, Link walked away from him, turning his back to his handler and taking the stairs down to the lobby. It didn't sound like the taller man moved after Link did, and instead he could feel eyes on him and he turned a corner and disappeared.

Link's phone began beeping as soon as he'd parked up his car in the parking lot across the street from his small apartment. He had to force his fingers to uncurl from their steel grip on the wheel after audaciously speeding home from his unpleasant visit to Myth Int HQ. The exchange with H had done a number on Link. He had half the mind to call his handler and apologize for being unfair, but he reassured himself to stay strong. If he ever wanted to get anywhere with H and get the information he wanted, he'd have to stick with this technique.

Someone jogging past his window, out for a late afternoon exercise, shocked Link back into reality. He turned the key to turn off the engine and basked in the quietness inside the car. Leaning his head back against the headrest, he ran a hand through his admittedly messy hair and let out a shaking breath. His phone beeped once more and begged for his attention until Link finally caved and fished inside his back pocket for the device.

You okay, man? -B

Link groaned aloud and stretched his feet out over the pedals beneath him as he shuffled in his car. Had Ben already heard about he and H's tiff? Link hadn't considered the hour he had been driving; gossip was a disease.

Why wouldn't I be? -N
Benjamin's response was instantaneous and made Link grimace.

Word is spreading fast about you and H having an argument in the middle of the office. -B

Of course it was, Link thought. Of course he had to be assigned for most controversial handler on the west coast. Link huffed and text back.

I can imagine. But I'm fine. -N

What happened? -B

We had a disagreement regarding working methods. Among other things. -N

Link climbed out of his car and locked the door after texting back. The sun was still pretty high in the sky for it being almost five o'clock, shining brightly on Link's face and neck, threatening to burn him. Briefly, he considered moving his car into a parking spot with shade as to not burn himself on the buckle next time he had to drive, but in the end he was too lazy to do so. He allowed a car to pass him before crossing the street and making his way home. He climbed the steps up and into his small, agency apartment and kicked the door closed with a little more force than necessary when his phone beeped again.

This about the Salt Lake City situation? I heard some things. Probably not all true. -B

We had a situation regarding an enemy, with H in the middle of it. It didn't go well. That's all. -N

Link sighed to himself, and made his way to his sofa to check his emails in case H had contacted him. But Link knew he was clutching at straws; H wouldn't contact him. H seemed to be like that. Link had the unsettling feeling that he had pushed H away for good, it gnawed at his gut and made him feel like vomiting. Vomiting up his guilt and regret about treating H in such a way. Maybe he really wasn't cut out for being the tough one. He should have just left H to it. But no, he had to get answers. And he had to do something about his feelings for H. If that's what they were.

Some agents have been talking. I think we gotta bring up the terrorist situation next time we grab a drink. -B

Link blinked once, twice, and a third time until he understood what Benjamin had said. Curiously, he text back.

Talking? -N

I can't tell you over this. Luckily we can meet this weekend. -B

Link checked the date on his phone anxiously, then flicked back to his text messages. What did Benjamin know? Maybe he had been as suspicious as Link was; the whole situation seemed fishy, and especially with the way Stevie and H were treating it. Like a watered down assault; it was unbelievable.

Same time, same place? -N Link was fond of the routine.

You bet. -B

Link slid his phone back into his pocket with an irritated sigh. The sun was setting slowly and it was still reasonably bright outside. Link went for a walk along the promenade to clear his head; to rid his brain of the dull thoughts tugging behind his eyes. He stayed out until later in the night, where he stopped off and got some Chinese food on the walk back to his apartment. The hard wood floor of
his living room was cold underneath Link's feet as he sauntered around, eating noodles out of a cardboard box, until he finally, finally settling on his bed with a small grunt. He had contacted Jen and updated her, but he hadn't much to elaborate on and she managed to pick up on his shallow mood.

Don't let the job get you down, Neal, she had wrote, and Link could imagine her with a mouthful of noodles at the computer, a worried crease in her brow. You can do anything if you give it your all. I know you, and I know what you can do. Link took comfort in her words, taking a moment to give a lopsided smile at her email when he read what she had included in the postscript, There's always a place for you here in NC if things don't work out.

He could go home, but could he leave all of this behind? L.A. was such a life changing opportunity for him and he couldn't just drop it and run. Could he? Of course not. Even if he was homesick as hell. And he couldn't just abandon the abominable position of the agency being mixed in with a very serious and very dangerous criminal syndicate. And he couldn't abandon his handler; the mysterious man only known to Link as H, a ridiculous letter, but a great symbol of respect and fear throughout Mythical Intelligence. Whatever Link had done, he had caught H's attention, and losing that attention would be a foolish thing to do. Not when Link could figure out what sort of connection the terrorists and the agency had.

Link didn't sleep easy, but when he finally was able to get some rest, his mind was riddled with questions with no answers.

JUNE 20TH 1998, 9 years ago

At first all Link could do was observe his surroundings before he could understand them. It was bright and he was sweating, a thin layer of salt decorating his forehead and puddling in his palms. People were around him, smiling faces, full of congratulation. There was a man to his right dressed in white robes and holding a Bible. Music in his ears, a shushing among the crowd. He could see her then; a woman—a beautiful woman, dressed solely in a white gown—followed by two small girls, gripping the train behind her feet. Other people were standing then, too, enveloping around them and protecting them; this was their moment, after all. He could see her then; his love, and his life, standing before him, carrying his future behind a pristine veil. Together they stood, side by side, and Link felt alive.

“I do.” He heard her say.

“I do.” He heard himself say.

They kissed and Link floated on a cloud. He was finally joined with his fiancée in a bond that nothing and no one could break. He would make sure of that. Flashing lights and confetti, or maybe rice, and laughter assaulting his ears. Holding her hand and making their way out of a chapel, surrounded by people dressed in suits and gowns, smiling faces. Dancing and dancers, laughter and spirits, burning down his throat and heating his cheeks. A smile, so perfect and white, a kiss and cheering.

“I love you.” He heard her say.

“I love you, too.” He heard himself say, and Lord knows it's true.
JUNE 20TH 2007, present day

“Why so blue, Neal?” Alex asked with a small furrow to his brow. He held a glass bottle of beer in his right hand, whilst placing his free hand on Link’s shoulder and shook him. Link looked up from where he was fidgeting with the label on his own bottle and gave a weak smile. Chase was watching him like a hawk.

“Just a little under the weather,” Link offered, straightening his back and leaning his neck to the side to appear casual about it. He didn’t need a three man grovelling crew if he told them what was really wrong with him. He had had enough consolation; that was for sure. But dates were like a disease, they crept up on you when you weren’t expecting it and ruined everything afterwards. Or something. Anniversaries were nothing but an aching reminder of what used to be, and what could never be again. Link would have been married for nine years today, but he wasn’t. And he really, really didn’t feel like talking about it.

Chase opened his mouth to speak, but Benjamin beat him to it with an empathetic look, “I would be too if I told one of the most powerful agents on the West Coast where to shove it.”

Alex laughed and he and Ben clinked their bottles together and drank. They were cheering Link’s achievements, if anyone could call it that. If an achievement was pushing away the one person keeping Link semi-sane during this damn job then it was one hell of an achievement. Link pulled the short straw; he hadn’t heard from H since Tuesday. It was now Saturday. He had really blown it.

“What happened, anyway?” Chase asked, voice small but kind. Link had to admire the guy for seeming so attentive all the time.

“Nothing happened.” Link said.

“That’s bullshit.” Benjamin shook his head and put his beer bottle down, leaning on the wooden table with his elbows, toward Link. Link was sitting across from the bulky man, but he still managed to smell his breath from the proximity. “I heard you tried to shove him. But he slapped you down.”

“That’s not—” Link started.

“Where the heck did you hear that?” Alex interrupted him with a shocked expression, then gave Benjamin a look like he had a screw loose, “Beck from IT told me that H just grabbed your hand outta nowhere.”

“I had my hand raised, to be clear,” Link told them all, irritated, “He didn’t slap me down, and he didn’t just grab me for nothing.”

“Oh. Noah had mentioned he heard you guys having a disagreement.” Chase chirped in, silencing the other two who looked at him with curiosity. “With Stevie.”

“Stevie?” Alex asked.

“You know Stevie?” Link echoed, looking at Chase with hard eyes. Chase seemed to know everyone. But the smaller man seemed to shrink into the booth under the scrutiny.

“Yes. She’s a pretty high ranking agent,” Chase said, “I was surprised you knew her.”
“I don't really,” Link explained, mostly to avoid an abundance of questions, “We worked together once last week. In Salt Lake City.”

Alex and Ben collectively hummed their disapproval. It seemed the conclusion of that assignment had been well spread and discussed. No surprises there, really. Link was speedily becoming a hot topic of conversation among his colleagues, and others in the agency. He was turning into H, slowly but surely. Not.

“Did you find out whose blood was inside those containers?” Alex asked suddenly, a frown on his face. Benjamin looked down at his bottle.

“Yeah.” Link told him.

“One of ours?”

“Yeah.”

“God damn it,” Benjamin cursed, slamming his fist on the table in front of him. Link felt the table shift and one of Chase's empty bottles toppled over from the impact and he calmly set it back up straight without comment.

“You thinking it was Lizzy?” Alex asked quietly, and Benjamin nodded his head slowly. Link raised an eyebrow.

“Who's Lizzy?” He asked, and watched as Benjamin grit his teeth, tension rolling off of his shoulders. He looked like a giant sitting beside Alex, who had shrunken into the corner to give Benjamin some room, it seemed.

“A girl I know.” Benjamin said, and went silent.

“They had a thing,” Alex chirped in after a long, tense moment, to which Benjamin snapped back at him.

“Have.”

“Yeah, they have a thing,” Alex repeated, but even Link could tell that he didn't really believe the girl could still be alive. Link wasn't sure himself, but it seemed highly unlikely. It was a copious amount of blood inside those containers for the hoax bomb; enough to cover a grown man and half of a grown woman in it from head to toe. But he didn't feel like sharing that news with Benjamin.

“Serious?” Link asked dumbly.

“Yeah.” Alex replied, effectively ending the conversation for everyone's sake. The group didn't speak much afterwards until Chase asked Link about Stevie once more.

“She didn't mention anything about herself?” He asked curiously, leaning forward a little and inspecting his now empty bottle of root beer.

Link offered a small shrug. “No. She seems pretty nice, actually.” He paused, the added, “I asked her if she was a handler, and I guess she sort of avoided the question.”

Chase hummed in response. His beard had grown considerably in the passing weeks, so much so that he was half on his way to becoming H. Link smiled a little. “Maybe she is. All I know is she acts like she's in charge, so I'm not going to bother her.”
“Probably a smart move,” Alex said, and Link nodded in agreement. Benjamin's silence didn't last very long until he was talkative again, and the night resumed as normal. He had remarkable strength, Link thought, to have to deal with the thought of losing someone like that. Stronger than Link ever was, or ever could be. He really admired Ben for that.

Link drove his friends home that night, commandeering the title of designated driver from Ben. He figured the guy could use a break, and it was true. Benjamin's apartment was last on the list, and Link dropped off both Alex and Chase at Alex's place. Why, he didn't know, but Link was sure he'd find out what the two were planning sooner or later.

“Send me a text when you get home, brother,” Ben said, leaning on the open driver's side window to see Link better in the dark. Link leaned back hastily and gave a half-smile.

“Yeah, I will. Take care.” Link said calmly, appreciating the care that the bulky man displayed for him. He reminded Link of Eddie, back at his old agency. Boy, he sure did miss home. He watched Benjamin slam his apartment door closed before driving away; he had to make sure the guy got in alright. Link knew he wasn't feeling himself, and the only thing he could do was offer his silent support.

Driving home was a silent escapade. At least, it was, until Link's engine light came on a few blocks away from Benjamin's place. He frowned and made numerous attempts to ignore it, until the car began to jitter along the quiet road. A horrible noise, one that Link could only compare to an old man coughing, sounded when he braked and let the dying vehicle roll to the edge of the road. He heard the alloys scrape against the side walk with a grimace. A group of two men and a woman watched the show from the other side of the road, eyes wide at the sound the car had made. Link felt like shrinking into his chair and disappearing. Of course his car had to break down in the middle of the night. He had rented it, after all; so he hadn't anyone to blame but himself. Car rental places were sketchy at best, and it was clear Link needed to take more care when selecting one.

He turned the key in the ignition with a grunt and rubbed his hands over his face. He really couldn't deal with this. He had too much on his mind today, on top of a crap-pile of a car he had rented giving out on him on his way home. The bus was an option, he thought, but given the time of night, Link was probably better off walking. Once he had stepped out of the car in defeat, after numerous attempts to restart the engine, one of the men from across the street jogged over to Link's car. He was illuminated only in the orange glow of a light down the street, and Link couldn't exactly make out his face.

“Car trouble?” The man asked, sounding like a total cliché but Link got the impression the guy knew what he was doing. Link took a step back and tucked his car keys into the back pocket of his jeans and grunted. He squinted in the dark at his new found friend.

“Looks like it.” Link said. The man before him rounded his car, seemingly taking a look at it from a different angle. When he straightened his back, he looked at Link with a small smirk.

“Looks like your engine overheated.” He said, sounding cocky and irritating the heck out of Link, “Rentals are always actin' up.”

Clearly, the bright yellow sticker on Link's wind shield gave it away that the pile of crap he was driving was a rental. Link shook is head and looked for an out.

“Yeah, that was my first mistake,” He said, and the man seemed to shift on his feet. That was when he noticed the other two people making their way across the road towards him. This was quickly becoming a situation that Link didn't feel comfortable with. “I'll just walk back from here. Thanks for your help.”
“Nonsense.” The new male who had emerged from the shadows spoke up, loud and harsh sounding. The female next to him smiled, but it did nothing to reassure Link. He could hear his heart beat in his ears, echoing through his skull until he was sure the others could hear it too. The bigger of the two men continued, “My car's around the corner. I can take you.”

“Thanks, but I think I can make it,” Link said, with an uneasy smile as he backed up from the large man and instantly collided with the smaller one of the group. He shook off the grip the guy got on his elbow and managed to circumvent him until the guy got his hand on him again.

“We insist.” The smaller man said, his past humor and smile now gone and replaced by mischief which voiced I'm going to hurt you without words. Link clenched his fist so much that it shook with concentration. If this had to turn into a fist fight, he would damn well knock somebody out before going down. Three against one; it wasn't much of a fight, and Link was pretty sure with one hit from the big guy he would collide with the pavement beneath his feet.

“Come on, man,” Link tried to reason with the man before him. Don't do this, he wanted to say, but at the risk of sounding too pathetic, he refrained from doing so.

Skidding in the distance caught the bulkier man's attention. He turned toward the threat in question. Two bright lights shone from the far end of the street, until they were closer and almost blinding. A car; that much was evident, and a loud one at that. Modified engine, maybe. As well as tires. Deep blue assaulted Link's vision as a muscle car skidded to a halt next to his busted, old Volvo. He could feel the vibration of the car's engine on his feet, radiating through the asphalt and shaking Link out of his shock. He heard the smaller of his attackers curse in question, then retreat, stepping back and away from Link with an irritated grunt. The vehicle's lights dimmed until Link could make out his surroundings; a blue muscle car to his safety? And he thought his attacker had been cliché.

That was until he recognized the face of the driver.

“How in,” Link heard, and he had no choice but to comply.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, and I hope people are still enjoying this story. A slower update this time and for that je suis désolée, I had been travelling across the USA. But now I am back just in time for #sipmeup. Even though I did not partake in todays streaming event for Rhett & Link, I am very pleased for those who managed to speak to them. You are all very, very lucky.

This chapter has a small flashback segment, which I hope clears some things up with the readers. If not, stay tuned as there are more to come! Also, you will note that "present day" for this story is 2007, and this is intentional. Again, I apologize for the cliffhanger, but the good news is the next chapter is already half written. Please let me know what you think; all feedback is welcomed. Let me know how I can improve, and let me know what will please you! Merci et prends soin de toi!
Chapter Notes

**Story Title Translation:** Opération Clandestin - Clandestine Operation (An intelligence operation designed to remain secret)

**Chapter Title Translation:** Révélations - Revelations

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**JUNE 20TH 2007, present day**

“Get in.”

Link, without conscious thought, did as he was told and climbed into the passenger side of a dark blue Camaro. The instant Link had closed the door, H had put his foot down and rid himself of the scum on the opposite side walk, tires skidding into the night. Link fumbled with his seat belt and laced himself up before he could really register that he was actually here; that this was actually happening. He was with H; the mysterious handler whom he had tried his best to avoid at MTHQ, and yet somehow still managed to run into. But now they were together outside of work. In the harsh lighting, Link could only make out parts of H's face; he didn't look particularly pleased with the turn of events either.

H drove in silence but with intent; Link was afraid he would run them off the road, but the taller man seemed extremely skilled in driving each time he made a sharp turn or ran a red at an intersection. The car they were in was sure as hell modified; Link hadn't took H for a vehicle enthusiast, but a collectible like the one he was driving was certainly the product of dedication. H's knuckles were white from gripping at the steering wheel, shoulders and arms locked and tense as he glared at the road ahead of him. Link searched his brain for something to say as the lights outside sped past his window in a blur.

“A '69 Camaro?” Link asked breathlessly, eyes focusing on the firm line of H's lips, “Really?”

H laughed harshly, but it didn't reach his eyes. “SS, actually. You know your cars.”

“My dad had one,” Link responded, thankful that the other man hadn't simply ignored him. He could feel his phone buzz in his pocket; presumably Ben asking of Link's whereabouts. He wasn't about to tell him he was with H in person; Ben had seemed extremely taken back by the two men having their heated discussion a few days prior, or whatever it was. Link had not heard from H in days, and now suddenly he appears to Link's rescue. H's eyes had flashed over to Link for a second, before returning to the road; Link could hear his heart in his ears. Out of fear or anticipation, he didn't know.

“Had this since I was twenty-four.” H said.


“I didn't get it when it came out, smart ass.” H shook his head and snorted. He paused, eyeing the road ahead, then a small smirk danced on his lips, “I look good?”
Link cleared his throat, “For a sixty year old, yeah.”

H laughed, sounding more in control of himself this time. They still hadn't decreased their speed, but Link was feeling more at ease after getting the other man talking. Hell, if H hadn't showed up Link would be in the middle of a brawl right then; he had to be thankful.

“Were you following me?” He asked.

There was a deliberate pause as Link looked at H under the dim lighting. The taller man's expression remained hard until he said, finally, “No. I was in the area. I got a feeling.”

Link fought the urge to roll his eyes, recalling that H considered himself some warped form of psychic. Or whatever he thought it was; Link knew it was ridiculous. “HQ is an hour drive from Santa Monica. What were you doing in the area?”

H didn't respond right away, instead focusing on the task at hand. After a few minutes it became apparent that the other man had no intention of responding to Link's question at all, allowing Link to assume the other man had indeed been keeping tags on him. He wasn't sure how to feel about it; creeped out? Flattered? A little bit of both, maybe. Probably.

They drove in silence for a long time; neither man so much as breathing loudly as H had the chance to calm down. Eventually, the speeding stopped and H had began to drive like a regular human being, which Link was thankful for. Their surroundings came into partial view under the beam of the headlights and Link realized they were at the intersection near his home. Was H taking him home? Dread rushed through Link's body, not wanting to leave the other man just yet.

Abruptly, H braked and turned left at the intersection, going in the opposite direction of Link’s apartment. The motion caused Link to clutch at the arm rest to hold himself up.

“I wanna show you something,” H said, but his voice seemed distant. Like his mind was drifting further and further away with each breath he took. Link ached to help him; to say something to keep him grounded, but he didn't. He couldn't think of anything; he did nothing but stare out the passenger side window and rub the back of his neck.

H had changed the direction of the car and was now driving speedily down some side streets to get to his destination; where, Link couldn't hazard a guess. It became apparent that H was heading for the pier which Link frequented, the headlights of passing cars keeping Link on high alert. After a few minutes of driving, H pulled into a relatively empty parking lot; parking for those living on the beach front. Link thought about calling H out on his obnoxious choice in spaces, but didn't and instead kept it to himself. They parked at the edge of the lot in a small space next to a luxury apartment; Link suddenly had the thought that this could be where H lived, but when H exited the car and faced the opposite direction of the home it became apparent that Link was just the victim of wishful thinking.

“What are we doing, H?” Link asked as he exited the passenger side of H's car, taking care as he pushed the door closed. Last thing he needed was to damage H's pride and joy. H turned his head slightly, then gestured with it for Link to follow him.

“You'll see.”

Link raised a brow but followed H anyway, jogging to catch up and stroll beside him. They didn't speak, nor did Link dare look at the other man. If H was willing to show him something; surprise him, even, then Link wasn't going to object. The Ferris wheel was illuminated in the evening sky and created a colorful array of lights on the beach ahead of them; a kaleidoscopic display that made it
seem like H was taking him somewhere intense. Mythical, even, but even Link couldn't bring himself to make that joke.

H led him down the bike track at the edge of the beach until it meandered off, and H headed down toward the base of the pier. A few barrels, presumably for trash, were alight with flames to provide heat for the homeless and made the dark path seem a lot more brighter.

“Through here,” H said, leaning down to fit around one of the many wooden pillars fit for holding up the board walk several meters above their heads. A wall lined their right side and Link used it to keep himself steady in the dark as he moved forwards until they came to a small opening which led into a tunnel of some kind. They came to a large, metal door that looked like something out of a bank; maybe it was. H pulled a set of keys out of his hoodie pocket and unlocked the thing with ease, and the creaking of the hinges opening made Link's ears ring. Something told him H hadn't been there in a while. Once inside, Link discovered that it wasn't exactly a tunnel and more of a hidden bunker. Like something from an old war hero movie. H was full of surprises.

The large room was four walls of concrete, with boxes decorating them marked things like “car stuff” and “work stuff”; Link smirked at H's seemingly inability to organize his belongings. It felt like Link and H were kids and H had shown him his secret den for the first time; his hiding place where he could come and hide away from the world for a little while. Link felt something bubble in his chest, close to admiration but not quite. He couldn't put his finger on it.

H was rummaging around in another cardboard box when he spoke, turning to Link briefly and handing him a 9 mm. “Here. Ever tried target practice?”

“Yeah, back at my old place,” Link responded, taking the gun and checking the chamber automatically. Unloaded, none in the chamber. “It's not loaded.”

“Hold your horses, Link,” H scoffed, then rummaged some more before handing Link two magazines. He took them and juggled them before placing one in his jacket pocket and loading the weapon with the other. H had located another gun for himself, just about disappearing into the small cardboard box to get it. “Gotta show you some tricks. Maybe then you'll avoid getting' yourself into situations like before, again.”

“Look, man. I had everything under control.” Link protested, shaking his head in irritation. H didn't have to come to his rescue like he had with backup before; Link wasn't incapable.

“Not from what I saw.” H replied, voice once again distant as he loaded the semi-automatic. It looked extremely natural on the other man; like he had been handling weapons his entire life. Link wondered about H's upbringing and how many times he'd had to load a weapon like that.

“Whatever.”

H did nothing but clear his throat in response and gesture toward the other side of the bunker. A row of bottles had already been set up as if he had anticipated Link's arrival and their late-night activities. But that was impossible; he had to have set them up prior for his own enjoyment.

“Can't fire too much,” H said, raising his weapon and aiming toward the opposite side of the room at the glass, “Not sure how sound proof this'll. I ain't been here in a while.”

Link grunted in response and did his best not to flinch in surprise when H fired his gun without warning. Impressively, H shot the top bottle down from his pile and Link watched as it shattered into fragments, his ears ringing. H looked at him with a quirky smile as if he was challenging Link. Beat that.
Link exhaled through his teeth in annoyance, then proceeded to raise his gun and mirror H's stance as he took his shot. The kickback was barely worth mentioning; H knew his guns evidently, but so did Link. He shot down the top bottle with ease, then shot the third and fourth until only three remained. H whistled in appreciation.

"Nice, man," He congratulated, grinning easily. Link heard his heart in his ears. "But let's try something else."

Link watched as H moved each of their bottles into a line, discarding the extras until only four were positioned on the shelf-like plank of wood against the far wall. Raising an eyebrow in question at H, Link couldn't help but smile at the other man's enthusiasm. And if H wanted to spend time with him, he had no quarrels with that.

"Give me your gun," H said, thanking Link when he complied, and placed both of their weapons back into the cardboard box for his "work stuff". After a short second of Link holding his breath, H pulled two smaller, plastic looking weapons out of the box.

"Are those BB's?" Link asked.

"Yep," H responded simply and then tossed Link one of the plastic toys. Link's was orange in color and his pellets were a light shade of yellow; H was more classic and had a dark blue weapon with orange pellets. The taller man was grinning like a moron and Link couldn't stop his lips from turning up at the edges in response. For being such a professional at work, H could sure as hell act like a child. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" Link grinned as he swapped the gun into his right hand. H was smiling behind his thick beard; it didn't look like he'd trimmed it in a while.

"Like I'm fourteen or something," H said, then shook his head and aimed his eyes forwards. He squinted, aiming at the glass bottles. It wasn't possible; the momentum of the pellet alone wouldn't be great enough to knock over the glass. Link watched and didn't bother hiding his grin as he crossed his arms, letting the gun hang loosely at his side.

H shot at the bottle at the far right side of the bunch, and to Link's dismay, the bottle wobbled and toppled over onto its side. Link felt his grin fall in amazement. H was grinning and it made Link want to destroy him.

"You look surprised," H noted, triumph evident in his voice. Link grunted in response and attempted to repeat what H had done. He shot the toy weapon and missed once, twice, until the third time he actually made contact with the glass but did nothing. H was doing his best not to laugh, and Link could see it in his face.

"Go ahead, laugh." Link said, shoulders slumping.

H chuckled a little, then gave Link's shoulder a small pat. The touch jolted Link out of his slump with electricity; it surged from his shoulder to his bicep, and settled in his twitching fingertips.

"At least we know who'd win in a showdown." H said.

Link gaped at the tall man. A showdown with BB's? Was H crazy? In a burst of both confidence and defeat, Link raised his weapon and shot a pellet in H's direction. As it turned out, his aim was pretty good as he managed to hit H square in the jaw, the pellet disappearing into the other man's beard.

H's expression was incredulous, and he didn't move for a few seconds. The shock was evident in his stance, shoulders tensed in reflex at being hit. When he did speak, he didn't sound annoyed, to Link's
"Did you just shoot at me?"

"Yes."

That's what kick started it. H raised his own weapon at Link and opened fire until it became a childlike battle of BB's. Link had begun to regret his decision to initiate conflict as H's aim was excellent. Link took a pellet to the eye and used it as a distraction, H coming closer to see if the other man was all right, and Link snatched his keys from where they hung loosely on the taller man's belt. He had to escape the small room; they were both trapped in a minuscule war zone.

Surprisingly, the door opened without complaint and Link stumbled out of it and onto the sand, steadying his footing as he tried to run across it in his shoes. There were flashes of purple and pink, yellow and green, the Ferris Wheel creating a painting of color under his feet when he made it out from under the boardwalk. He felt something small and sharp collide with the back of his head, and a hasty glance behind him confirmed that H had shot at him, hitting him with a pellet square on the head.

“Link,” He could hear H's voice from behind him, hearing the grin plastered on his face without seeing it, "Slow down!"

“What's the matter, H?” Link shouted back, half panting from running, half from laughing. This was all so ridiculous that he couldn't help himself. He was a grown man, they both were. Yet, it didn't seem to stop them acting like teenagers, running along the coast with plastic, toy guns in their arms, sweating and laughing like it was the most crucial of missions; to attack one another. Maybe that's where all of this would end up, Link thought, in the midst of his laughter. Maybe he and H really were destined for destruction. It certainly seemed that way for his handler, and the way Link was becoming tangled in his web, it seemed they would soon share the same fate. “Out of shape from sitting, ordering people around all day?”

H's laugh bellowed around them, sounding louder than intended, or maybe Link was just sensitive to it. He wanted to say something more, something to get H to laugh again, but he came up short, feet faltering as he careened through a lifeguard hut and lost his balance. His stumbling didn't go unnoticed by H.

“You have two left feet,” H grunted loudly, meandering around the hut after Link. Link didn't attempt to slow down given that the beach spread for miles, but would his handler really chase him the entire way? Would he really run the entirety of the sand? He was not used to acting so childishly; he didn't know what to do, what to think. How to act. Link had really missed out on a lot of things in his life, and messing around like this, without conscious thought, with someone like H, made him feel like he was floating. Like he was gliding across the small dunes of sand without a care in the world.

“And I'm still managing to have the upper hand!” Link said back, turning his head to see H falling behind with a raised brow. His handler was cradling his gun like a professional; like a killer, an assassin. If the guns were real, Link would be fearing for his life, fearing that H would hurt him. He would be dead for sure. But there was still breath in his lungs and beating in his chest; H had spared him.

For now, a dark circle of Link's mind reminded him.

H snorted at Link's response, and the shorter man didn't see it coming, nor did he hear H charging behind him. Link's side collided with the sand beneath him, a brute weight over him, shoulder
aching, momentarily stunned. H twisted Link's arm until he lay flat on his back, effectively pinned by
H's knees on either side of his thighs. Link's eyes took a moment to refocus and when they did, H
came into view, towering over him from a great height, a gun pointed at his face. H had on a cocky
grin. *I told you so,* Link could tell his handler ached to say it. Emerald eyes burned a hole in Link's
mind as he panted for breath, both from having ran so far, and from having the wind knocked out of
him. H was good, he'd give him that. He was sure as hell capable, and sure as hell strong. A worthy
opponent, a terrifying enemy. H really was something else.

Link blinked up at H, hair splayed messily over his forehead. A bead of sweat dripped from H's
forehead and hit Link's arm, soaking into his jacket in a small circle.

“I've got you,” H said significantly, aiming his gun closer to Link as he spoke. Heat from H's legs
radiated through Link's thighs and spread to his chest, making it feel tighter than before. He felt
breathless; like an unbeatable pressure had applied itself to his lungs and refused to let up, refused to
stop his head from swimming with thoughts he didn't know what to do with. But, in that moment,
with H above him under the stars, Link couldn't see anything else.

“Yeah,” Link said breathlessly, “You do.”

Something changed in H's gaze once Link spoke, as if he suddenly became aware of their proximity.
He lowered his weapon achingly slowly, eyes on Link's face as the smaller man panted beneath him.
Time seemed to stand still, the world swirling around them until nothing existed but Link and his
handler, in an admittedly implicating predicament. H's lips parted and warm air hit Link's face,
ingling with his own breath, drawing Link's attention to his handler's mouth. H appeared to falter,
but didn't budge to remove himself from the situation he had—quite literally—landed himself in.

Something caught Link's eye at the corner of H's mouth, and he shifted, leaning up onto his elbows.
Steadily, he reached with his right hand, the other holding him firmly on the sand, fingers digging
into the cold grain. His fingertips grazed the edge of his handler's beard, softer than Link thought it
would be; it looked rough, but it had been trimmed and no longer touched H's lips. H exhaled
heavily; warm, moist air ghosted Link's fingertips as he pulled his hand away from H's face holding a
small, bright yellow ball.

A pellet, wedged into H's beard from where Link had shot him and started this whole thing.

H stifled a small, strangled laugh when Link smiled at him. It seemed he had had an affect on the
taller man, and something about it made Link's stomach twist. He tossed the pellet to the side, and H
took that moment to roll his way off of Link, onto his back, laying to the left of Link as he focused
his gaze on the dark sky above them. His breath was uneven and quick, similar to Link's; but Link
couldn't hear anything above his racing heart. It thumped in his chest and threatened to swell, but he
kept himself together. He could handle it.

What the hell had just happened? Were they about to—was H about to kiss him? The better question
being: was Link going to let him?

“You're faster than I gave you credit for.” H said suddenly, voice quiet and unsteady. He didn't look
at Link and instead remained rigid where he lay, eyes on the stars over their heads. Link looked at
him, torn from his disconcerting and embarrassing thoughts.

“You expected me to be slow?” Link scoffed, keeping his tone light to help with H's evident turmoil.
His handler cracked a smile, and Link could feel his body heat up from inside out.

“That's not what I said,” H retorted, smirking into the sky, “Seems your decryption skills weren't the
only thing overlooked in your file.”
Link felt like scoffing; he hated the fact that H seemed to know everything about him over one tedious file. Yet, Link was submerged in the dark when it came to him. He pursed his lips and said nothing, instead counting the stars in his head to distract himself. The heat from H’s body laying next to him was comforting, at least.

“Something on your mind?” H asked suddenly, eyes on Link. Link spared him a short glance, not attempting to hide his irritation.

“It occurs to me that you know everything there is to know about me,” Link started, clasping his hands over his stomach, “Yet, I know close to nothing about you.”

“I don’t know everything about you,” H offered with a small smile, attempting a joke to bring light on the conversation.

“You know what I mean.”

H’s smile faltered, and he went quiet. After it seemed like their conversation was over, H spoke again, startling Link who had been lost in thought, “What do you want to know?”

Link hadn’t prepared a response, having not really thought H would listen to him. He had to pause and think, then asked, “What do you specialize in?”

H laughed, “What, in work?”

“Yeah,” Link said, brows furrowing as he turned his head, sand getting in his hair, “What’s so funny?”

“It’s just,” H shook his head and made a show of cracking his knuckles, gun resting at his side, “You want to know about me. Then you ask about work.”

Link just scoffed and rolled his eyes, guessing he should cut his losses right then and there to save further embarrassment. Why would H share himself with Link, anyway? Link was nothing special. A typical agent, with a terrible back story; those tales got old, and they got old fast. H would lose interest, he was sure of it. The sky seemed darker now.

“Weaponry and stealth, including assassinations.”

Link blinked and looked at H with a curious brow, “Assassinations?”

“Yes.” H said simply.

Link nodded slowly. “How did you become a handler?”

H didn’t respond straight away, seemingly choosing his answer carefully, resulting in making Link even more interested in him. What was he hiding? Was it something to do with Stevie, or Shannon?

“A long time ago, I impressed some people higher ranked than myself,” H explained, voice stern and cautious. He didn't fidget and kept his gaze on the stars. “Before I knew it, I was a handler. Guess it helps to know people high above.”

“Someone told me—” Link paused, catching himself. He didn’t want to implicate anyone, and certainly not one of his fellow agents and friends. “I mean, I heard your father plays baseball with the head of Mythical Intelligence.”

“Basketball, actually,” H corrected him, “We both play.”
“Your height gave it away.” Link joked, smiling a little at the other man. He had propped himself up on his elbow to see H better, leaving them in close proximity. H didn't appear fazed by it, so Link didn't move to correct it. The waves beyond them swooshed in and out of the shore, calming Link's cautious mind.

“It has its advantages. As well as its disadvantages.”

“What are the disadvantages?”

H glanced at Link from where his head was still resting against the sand. Link was now slightly higher than him, and H had to look up to see his face. “Intimidation, for one. And apparently I'm frightening.”

Link recognized it as a jab at something he had said in the past. Something over text, and something Link still felt embarrassed over. “Your height had nothing to do with it.”

“Yes, it did.”

“Okay, it did a little.” Link huffed, and H smiled up at him, and for once, Link could actually see his teeth. He couldn't help but smile back at his handler, feeling something bubble within him at the sight. Something about H was so intriguing; so engaging and chronic that Link had a hard time keeping up with him, but when he did manage to, Link only sunk deeper into the quick sand H created beneath his feet. He spoke to hush his mind, “I played soccer in college. But, nothing serious.”

H smiled softly at that, seemingly enjoying the thought of a younger Link skinning his knees as he skid along fake grass. Link could almost smell the fresh grass in his memory; it was nothing pleasant to relive.

“An engineer, right?” H asked. Link nodded slowly; of course H knew that. He had a hard time getting used to the fact that H could rime things off about Link that probably he, himself, didn't remember off the top of his head.

“What did you study?” Link asked back, curious.

“I didn't.” H admitted, looking back up at the sky, “Joined Myth Int when I was nineteen. Before that, well... let's just say I did some things I ain't proud of. The agency turned me around, or something like that.”

“Oh, sorry.” Link apologized for asking, which gained him a wave of H's hand in dismissal. Sensing the other man beginning to retreat back into his shell; back into the wall he created, Link reached out without thinking and brushed his fingers along the top of H's palm. H's sharp inhale startled Link, but he didn't pull his hand back. After a moment, H sighed heavily, breath escaping his lungs as he relaxed.

They stayed like that for as long as it took Link to lose track of the time, asking H about himself. Where he lived before L.A., what being a handler was like, how H got to where he was. H was surprisingly informative, though Link had considered every word coming from H's mouth was lies. But he couldn't be sure, so he could neither confirm nor deny, simply soak in every last detail he could extract from the other man before it was too late. When Link had expressed distaste for his relationship with Shannon, H laughed; a loud, throaty laughter which warmed Link to the core. H had no interest in her, nor she in him, and Link felt like burying his head in the sand, literally. Throughout their talk, Link had kept his fingers on H's palm, momentarily forgetting they were there as he had already warmed to the presence. That was, until H turned his palm over and linked their
fingers together, acting as if he had done nothing, not faltering as he spoke whatever answer Link requested. But Link had a hard time listening as he felt H's pulse against his palm; he could feel H's heart beating and it was...really something. Really something. So much something that Link couldn't name it, but he sure as hell wanted more of it.

H had smiled softly at Link's silence, and looked back up at the stars, lost in thought. Link knew he was in trouble.

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**JUNE 20TH 1997, 10 years ago**

Flashing lights and roller skates. Music sounded in his ears, ringing back and forth. People were around him, surrounding him, smiling faces and laughter, slipping and sliding on the polished wood under his skates. A hand was in his. A wistful look from a woman, dressed in a short skirt and blouse, hair as soft and smooth as her skin.

“You can skate?”

“Not well.”

“I'll teach you.”

They held hands and slipped and slid and glided and spun, fingers entwined with electricity holding them together. They sparked and laughed. The woman was beautiful and Link knew it as soon as he saw her. Enveloped in his arms to prevent them both from tumbling, laughter assaulting his ears, disco music in the background. A smile, so perfect and white, a kiss and cheering. His friends approved.

“Need a ride home?” He heard himself say.

“I do.” The woman said, and Link knew she was going to be his.

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**JUNE 20TH 2007, present day**

“Need a ride home?” H asked, fidgeting with his keys in one hand, his other hidden away in his jeans pocket.

“I do.” Link replied, and his stomach churned.

H drove him home without complaint until they sat together in the parking lot across from Link's apartment. It was late; late as hell. Link hadn't the chance to check the time after they left H's underground bunker of sorts. His handler had thrown their BB’s into the trunk of his Camaro before he had driven Link home. A careless gesture, Link thought, but he wasn't about to ask and ruin their evening. An evening he didn't want to end; he spent the night with his handler, talking and getting to know him, breaking a hell of a lot of rules that neither of them pointed out.

And then there was the touching, the caress; Link touching H's face, ghosting fingertips along his
palm, H reciprocating and interlinking their fingers together. And they fit, too; they fit together like it was natural, like H was coffee and Link was cream, ready to make their day a little bit brighter.

“Do you, I mean—” Link cleared his throat to prevent his voice sounding timid, as if it was anything but, “Do you want to come in?”

H's fingers flexed around the steering wheel as he leaned down and peered up at Link's apartment window. After a long moment of deliberation, H nodded and keyed off the engine, before getting out of the car.

The idea of having H inside his apartment was nothing compared to the reality of it. His handler stood out like a sore and uncomfortable thumb, standing between the front door and Link's bedroom door awkwardly. His shoulders were tense, but his head was held high, as if somehow by admitting vulnerability was impossible for him. Link did his best to accommodate, offering drinks and food which were politely declined.

“Your clock's broken,” H noted from where he stood. Link had been rummaging around in the kitchen cupboard when he spoke, and had to poke his head out from the wall to ask what H was talking about. “In there.”

“Oh,” Link looked towards his bedroom, which was admittedly untidy, “Yeah, earthquake did that.”

“You didn't replace it?” H asked absently, making his way into the other room to pick up the busted digital alarm clock; it displayed four eights instead of the time, a typical sign of malfunctioning. Link remained casual about it, making his way toward the bedroom after patting his hands down on a dish cloth in the kitchen. H seemed more taller now than normal; towering over Link in his minuscule bedroom.

“I'm not concerned about time,” Link said simply. Something about his response appeared to unsettle H.

“I am.” H placed the clock back down onto the night stand as Link took a seat down on his bed, a crease in his brow. “This was the only thing that was broken?”

“Aside from my pride, yeah,” Link said with a sad smile, absentmindedly rubbing the cut on his palm. It had healed up nicely now, but it was still obscene to look at. H smiled knowingly at Link from where he stood, understanding the sentiment. In a dash of curiosity, Link asked, “Where were you during the earthquake?”

“At home,” H said, and didn't continue. Link didn't pry, either; he had pushed his handler enough for the night, and he was satisfied with it. He had peered behind the curtain and now he could see H more clearly than before. He had an in, whatever that meant for his career. They were crossing boundaries, but crossing boundaries was different from violating them. As far as Link could tell, H hadn't been dismayed by the turn of events. After all, H was the one to initiate this whole mess in the first place, after that day in HQ. The day he met H in person; it felt like a lifetime ago. And it had been nothing but trouble for Link since; migraine inducing, an irritation and aggravation rich bond between that formed and nested itself firmly in Link's skull, burrowed deep behind his eyelids, threatening to take everything away every time he closed his eyes. He could blink, and H could be gone. He couldn't stand the thought, whatever that might mean.

“I'm sorry, you know,” Link said quietly, looking down at his mattress in defeat, “For what happened at HQ.”

H hesitated visibly, before saying, “Forget about it.”
“I caused a scene and that wasn't professional of me,” Link offered, looking up at H. The taller man gazed back at him through guarded eyes, hands at his sides. “So, I'm sorry.”

H's eyes softened as he looked up and away from Link, towards the window, “I think the opportunity for remaining professional with me has come and past, don't you?”

Link gaped at H, who didn't seem as affected by his own words. Did H just acknowledge whatever they were doing out loud? But it was true; their personal and professional lives had mingled to the point where Link couldn't tell which was which. It was the consequence of befriending a colleague; especially a colleague who could get him killed. H was dangerous and Link had to—had to—remember that. But in the dark space of his bedroom, under the light shining in through his window from the street lamps outside, H didn't look dangerous. He looked...he looked amazing. H was nothing short of amazing in many aspects; both handsome and charming, but also had a sense of danger and mystery about him that kept people coming back for more.

Link didn't understand what H saw in him.

“It's late,” H said, indicating that he should go. Despite his words, he made no move to leave and simply turned his gaze towards Link.

“It is,” Link agreed, then added, “If you want to stay, you can. I'll take the sofa.”

“No, I—” H paused, and it was the first proper time Link had witnessed the man struggle to find words. Link, without conscious thought, stood from where he sat and moved past H, circumventing the bed so that he then stood at the opposite side. Wordlessly, he pulled back the cheap duvet and sat down, back to H as he removed his socks and shoes.

“What are you doing?” H asked from somewhere behind Link. Link finished removing his socks before he responded, sliding his legs under the duvet with a grunt.

“What does it look like?” Link asked, staring at H with a raised brow. He was wondering if H would take the bait or not. Or would he leave? Link had to work out how he felt about H himself, but it didn't help that he had no idea what the other man was thinking. How did H feel about him? Was Link clutching at straws, or was there really something? After all, he could have been reading way too much into it.

After a long moment, once Link had turned over on his side and faced the window, he felt the weight of the bed shift. H lay down next to him silently, over the duvet and presumably still fully clothed. Link didn't turn around to find out. He didn't dare disrupt the moment; or disrupt whatever H was doing. H's breath was heavy and even, breath tracing the back of Link's neck and causing him to shiver. H was really there; there, in his bed. Of all places. The night had really been something crazy; he had H to thank for that. He had H to thank for a lot of things.

Link didn't remember falling asleep, H's consistent presence behind him easing the way.

Chapter End Notes

I am aware that this chapter gets a little, how you say, silly, and I think I'm sorry for that. Bask in it whilst you can, though, as it's going to come skidding to a stop very quickly in the coming chapters. Thank you to those who waited patiently for this update! In this chapter there is another flashback segment, which is notable in 1997, compared to last
chapter which was 1999. Brownie points for noticing the parallels! Again, the present
day for this works in 2007, and this is intentional!

Furthermore, if there are any mistakes I will get to them momentarily. I was just in a
rush to update this! Feel free to critique, comment and review. All are welcome. This
story does not have a beta. Merci et prends soin de toi!
JUNE 21ST 2007, present day

There was suddenly a bright light assaulting closed eyelids, rousing a sleeping Link from his sleep with an inaudible groan. The familiar warmth of the sun heated his face and neck from where he lay, half hunched over on his right side in some sort of cocoon of duvet sheets. Deep and steady breathing sounded from behind him. That was when he remembered where he was, and who he was with.

Link turned slowly as not to rouse the sleeping man next to him, which turned out to be a terrible idea.

H's eyes were closed and he was laying on his back, hands clasped across his waist in what looked like restraint. His head was angled towards Link, his mouth slightly open. Had H really slept on top of the duvet the entire night? With all of his clothes on? Link almost sucked his teeth, then thought better of it, knowing he hadn't exactly given H a choice about staying at his apartment. Then again, H hadn't put up much of a fight—if any—to leave. Link took what he could get from his handler.

He hadn't considered how intimate waking up was going to be. Witnessing H as vulnerable as he was made Link's head swim, and he had to close his eyes a couple of times to ensure himself that this was real. That H was real; that H was really there, laying next to him, sound asleep.

H's eyebrow twitched and Link held his breath, but nothing happened and his handler resumed his steady breathing. The guy looked like he hadn't sleep in little under a week, the dark circles around his eyes more prominent now in the sunlight. H really looked perfect, and Link had to refrain from kicking himself for thinking it. His lips were a soft tint of pink, parted and exhaling hot hair into Link's pillow, his eyebrows relaxed and forehead uncreased; the perfect picture of calm and something Link thought he'd never see. H actually looked content laying there next to him, even if he wasn't aware of it. Link knew his handler had clearly deliberated during the course of the night and decidedly lay in a defensive position. Maybe he didn't want Link to touch him, or maybe, maybe he didn't want to risk touching Link.

The idea was ridiculous; Link was thinking too highly of himself.

He lay there for an eternity until the need to urinate was too much to ignore. Sliding out of bed slowly, as not to rouse H, Link managed to saunter to the bathroom undetected. He was the personification of disgruntled; ruffled bed hair and circles around his eyes, with the beginnings of a beard ghosting his cheeks. He flattened his hair with one hand after he brushed his teeth and freshened up. It was only seven am, a quick check of his phone confirmed. He half expected a text from H, but remembered the other man was currently sleeping. In his bed.
Link was really in way over his head. He hadn't slept next to someone in, well, a long time.

He made his way back into the bedroom barefooted to see H still sound asleep in the same position Link had left him in. Link's expression softened at the sight; H must have been exhausted. Link recalled he did have trouble sleeping, after all. He hadn't the heart to wake H. Instead, he lay back down next to him and tucked his legs under the duvet. He really had a lot to think about, after all H had told him. He had to piece together which was the truth and which was lies, going by information people had told him and information that H had said.

If his handler had joined the agency when he was only nineteen, then that would make him—Link worked out—to be twenty nine, give or take. H didn't look that young; the wear and tear of experience making him sharp and rough at the edges. But it wasn't a bad thing. It was far from a bad thing, Link thought as he admired the way the sun brought out small freckles on H's skin, decorating his nose and cheeks. Far, far from a bad thing.

Link was in way over his head.

So, they were the same age. Link couldn't believe he had been ordered around by someone on the same level. It did a number on his self esteem. H seemed so much older and wiser than him, perhaps it came from having an “in” at the agency from a younger age. Not to mention the fact that H had family much higher ranking than himself. That must have been irritating growing up, among other things.

Then there was H's specializations in both weaponry and stealth. His handler had made sure to throw assassinations into the mix when he had mentioned it; obviously it was important to him. He had killed numerous people, after all, if the case files were anything to go by. Link ached to ask him about it, to find out that H hadn't really killed after all. That everything was blown out of proportion and he wasn't harboring a murderer with a hot temper in his bed.

As if on cue, H stirred, hands moving and fingers stretching. Link heard the cracking of knuckles before he registered that H was waking, having been too inside his own head for outside comprehension. H grunted and grimaced, and Link figured he really couldn't be a morning person.

Link searched his mind for something to say, anything. “You know, you should take your shoes off before climbing into bed.”

H's eyes opened instantly, as if he had forgotten where he was until Link had spoken. He looked to the side, taking in the room around him before his eyes zoned in on Link. His expression seemed unreadable, on top of exhausted. “Sorry.”

Link did his best not to smile at the croak in H's voice, raw from sleep. “Remember that for next time.”

As soon as the words escape his mouth, he almost desperately clawed at them to come back so he could swallow them whole. Next time. Link cleared his throat and wondered if he was reliving his teenage years, not knowing when to close his dang mouth. His slip up didn't go unnoticed by H, who hesitated then smirked a bit.

“Noted,” H said, and Link felt like disappearing. “No 'good morning'?”

“Good morning.”

H did nothing but stretch his arms over his head in response and sit up a fraction. Link heard his back make noises he didn't know a back could make. His appalled face made H pause. “I have a bad
“I heard that.” Link said, gaping. Then, briefly, with concern, “What's wrong with it?”

“I've always had it,” H replied casually. A casual exchange between them. On Link's bed. Yeah, casually, Link could kick the other man off of the mattress. “Comes with the height, I guess.”

Link didn't really move from where he lay, body angled towards H, covered by a duvet up to his waist. H registered Link's silence in one fluid motion, returning his hands to rest on his stomach and turning his head back towards him. H's eyes were brighter than Link had ever seen them, reflecting the sun and making his stomach bubble. There was a small crease in H's brow, and Link didn't know what it meant.

“Morning,” H breathed, and his voice felt like velvet in Link's mind. He felt hypnotized; he should be fearing the man before him. He should feel something to scare him, not the crushing sense or admiration he felt welling in his chest. Attraction in its rawest form. H was smiling, suddenly.

“Morning,” Link replied stupidly.

“You said that.” H noted, raising his hand to run his fingers through his hair. It had fallen in his sleep, his gel or spray or whatever product he had used not managing to make it through the night. He still looked good and Link was convinced he could pull off most looks.

Time seemed to stand still; at least, that's how Link felt. H was there with him, and he was so close. He wasn't running, and he wasn't looking at Link like he was crazy. Maybe they really had something; maybe he hadn't spend all this time rolling his eyes at his own feelings for nothing. Did H feel the same? Did he have feelings for Link?

Did Link even have feelings for H?

H shifted suddenly, moving his hand to fix a small stray hair from descending into Link's eyes. He had been meaning to get a hair cut; hell, he'd cut it himself if he wasn't so damn preoccupied with work. But in that moment, having longer and disobedient hair really seemed to be working out for Link. H had a small and interesting smile on his face as he let his fingertips graze the fine hair of Link's eyebrow, before pushing the stray hair back and away from his forehead. Link could feel H's hand stutter across his skin, sticking to him, and that's when he realized he was sweating. Maybe H noticed it too. Link was in way over his head.

Link remained frozen as H's hand descended the side of his face, down his cheek and settled at the base of his neck. He swallowed audibly and noted the way H's eyes flickered to track the motion of his Adam's apple. It was a brief glance, but Link felt heat rise in his stomach, making its way to his throat and restricting his breathing. He cleared his throat awkwardly.

"I should," Link started, voice hoarse, "We should, uh,"

"Get out of bed?" H asked, seeming a little cocky and making Link want to punch him in the face. But he couldn't ruin the moment, whatever kind of moment it was. H didn't remove his hand from Link's neck, and instead moved his thumb until it rested under Link's chin. A dangerous grip, had it been tighter, Link noted. Perhaps a warning; H was dangerous and he could kill Link. Choke him to death with one hand in his own apartment, in his own bed. A humiliating way to go.

"Yeah," Link managed, voice sounding miles away. H faltered, seemingly taking Link's hesitance for discomfort, and removed his hand. He sat up hastily, and Link felt like he'd ripped a band aid prematurely. He swung his legs over the side of the mattress and stood up after H did, feeling
ridiculously under-dressed. H didn't seem to mind.

"I should get going." H stated, plain and simple. Whatever mask Link had managed to peek under the night prior was now re-equipped, disguising H's true feelings from view. Link stifled a sigh as the sun heated up the back of his neck.

"You could stay," Link said, the spot where H had touched burning hot, "If you like."

"No," was the response Link received, and his face must have conveyed the disappointment in his gut because H faltered, "There's paperwork that I, uh, that I have to fill out. At home."

"I'm sure," Link replied as he shifted his weight from foot to foot and gave a half smile, "Let me show you out."

H seemed shorter then as Link passed him to unlock the door and let him escape. His handler was slouching, shoulders slumped and it caught Link's attention. He typically stood tall and allowed his height to intimidate those around him. But not frighten people, no, Link had to remember that. Paperwork, yeah, Link had heard better excuses, but if H wanted to leave then Link wasn't about to stop him. He was on the verge of a meltdowns himself, and a break from the cause of those meltdowns would probably do him some good. He ignored the twitch of his hands as H stepped outside, allowing himself to be engulfed in sunlight. He still looked a little disheveled when he turned back to Link, hair flat and hoodie crumpled.

"Thank you for letting me stay the night," H said politely, and Link got the feeling he wouldn't see his handler for a long time. He'd really screwed up this one. "I had a nice time yesterday, Link."

Link's fingers turned white as he gripped the door knob, "I did, too. I guess I'll see you around?"

"Yeah, see you around." H responded, then hesitated, a small smirk upon his lips. Link cursed the sun for the way it made his eyes look brighter than before, "Next time, I'll remember the house rules."

Link gaped at him as H descended the stairs and disappeared. House rules. Link had said that. House rules to remove shoes before getting into bed. Was H messing around with him?

Link stood at the door, mouth agape, long enough for the mail man to ascend the stairs after letting H slip past him. The guy delivered some junk mail into Link's hand before Link gathered himself and went back inside. Next time. Link had said it by mistake, wishful thinking the night before. And now H confirmed it. What was going on? They could lose their jobs, they could...

No, Link didn't care about that. He had to stop lying to himself. Maybe they had something worth the sacrifice. He got the impression H was some kind of player, with that face and his attitude, but it didn't really seem the case. Murderous secret agents mustn't be that appealing in the market, Link figured.

Murderous secret agents were apparently his type, though. Link didn't know what he was going to do.

"How the hell did you get home last night, Neal?" Ben asked, all but yelling at Link from the outside of his busted up Volvo. It seemed like the group who tried to jump Link settled for totaling his car
instead. His windows had been smashed in, leaving glass and who knows what else scattered across the car seats, and the paint job had been keyed. Link was having an interesting day so far; first H, now his car. He really was cursed. But there was no way in hell he planned to detail the events of his evening to Ben. He had no idea what the bulkier man's reaction would be, and he wasn't sure he was even prepared to talk about it himself.

"Who the hell goes for a Volvo?" He heard Ben ask, mostly to himself as he grunted and grumbled, pushing the deceased car into a nearby parking lot for towing. Link was in the driver seat to steer. "The thing’s banged up enough without some kids scratching up the paint job."

"Maybe I should invest in a better means of transport." Link suggested by the time they had taxied the car into a small parking garage near the docks. Benjamin just spared him a shake of his head, wiping away some oil on his hands with his t-shirt.

"No kidding," He said, and then clapped Link on the shoulder with a laugh, "Only you."

"Yeah," Link sighed and fiddling with his cell phone to call a tow truck. It was true; bad things only happened to him and his big mouth. "Only me."

They stood out in the sun for a while, perched on the bonnet of the car and trying not to dehydrate themselves from sweating in the heat. It was nothing compared to the weather in North Carolina; Link really had to grow out of his habit of taking a jacket with him wherever he went. Sweat ran down the sides of Ben's face and soaked into his t-shirt, making him look like some kind of mechanic. Ben laughed when Link pointed it out, then reminded Link of who's fault it was that they were stuck waiting for a tow truck before noon. Link had no one to blame but himself, but he was grateful for Ben's help.

"So, how did you get home last night, anyway?" Ben asked, and Link felt his head swim, searching for an answer. In the end, the excuse he came up with was pathetic.

"I walked."

"Brother, you should have crashed at my place." Ben said, face seeming serious. Link considered it, and tried to imagine the evening he would have had had he stayed at Ben's. It would've been fun, sure, because Ben was a good guy—but he wasn't H. He didn't irritate the hell out of him like H did. And he wouldn't tackle Link to the sand and let him caress his face. Or hold his hand as they watched the sky above their heads.

"Yeah, I'll remember that for next time." Link said with a small smile, ignoring the echo of next time in his head. He sighed and rubbed a hand over his neck, wondering how he managed to get so entangled in the biggest deal of the agency gossip.

"Alex and I are crashing Chase's place tomorrow night," Ben mentioned as he looked up at the sun with a slight grimace, "You in?"

"You know he has, like, a collection of weird animals, man." Link said, not because the idea bothered him, but because his exchange with H in the morning had left him agitated. Or, at least, more agitated than normal. Ben didn't seem dismayed.

"We know," Ben spared Link a crooked grin, and Link couldn't help but return it. "'Sides, he said he had something to show us."

"'Something to show us'?"

"Work related. I think it's something to do with what happened in Utah."
"Link paled. "Oh."

"Yeah, and he's a friend of that chick, what's-her-name?" Ben raised a brow.

"Stevie." Link answered. As if he could forget. Stevie was equally as mysterious as H when it came
down to assignments and work ethics. And they were clearly close, what with the embracing and
their secrets. But H had said it wasn't romantic, which begged the question; what was it? What did
they know that was so secretive that they had to keep hidden? Link gnawed at his bottom lip and
looked away from Benjamin in thought.

"Yeah, Stevie." Ben grunted, then his tone became quiet, "Maybe he has something on Lizzy."

Link's response was equally as quiet, "You think she's alive?"

"She's alive."

Link looked up at Benjamin from where he sat, almost rubbing shoulders with the other man in
comfort, but he wasn't sure the bulkier guy would appreciate it. Link's silence didn't appear to sit well
with Ben, who folded his arms across his chest and looked straight ahead.

"She's smarter than that. Ain't no way she got herself killed." Benjamin claimed, and Link actually
began to consider it, "There's gotta be something else to it."

"It only takes one mistake," Link said, and he knew it. He knew it all too well.

"Yeah, well, not her." Benjamin's tone was firm and Link noted how his biceps twitched in restraint.
The guy was clearly angered by the idea of Lizzy being hurt, or worse, but Link wasn't sure he could
buy it. It was a hell of a lot of blood inside that bomb for her to still be alive. Well, unless...

"Did they test the entire blood sample?" Link asked suddenly, hinting at the possibility that the blood
held within the container could have belonged to multiple people.

Ben blinked at him. "I think, yeah. Although a lot of it was soaked into Stevie's clothes."

"What about the other agents' clothes?"

"What other agent?" Ben raised a brow at Link, who returned the gesture, "Report said it was only
Stevie who disarmed the bomb. With your help, of course."

But...that wasn't right. There had been another agent with her, and he had been drenched in red from
head to toe. Link couldn't forget that; he couldn't forget the moment he thought he'd killed them both.
No, there was definitely another agent there.

"I watched the security footage, I was there," Link said sternly, and Benjamin's face began to twist in
realization, "There was another agent. A tall guy, he got covered in blood."

"But the report—"

"Forget the report," Link ordered as he rubbed his temple with his palm, the threat of a headache
tugging behind his eyes under the harsh sunlight, "I'm telling you what I saw."

Benjamin was silent for a long moment and Link didn't bother looking at him, his mind absent of his
exchange with H for the time being. He had seen another agent, and so had Stevie, so why had the
report skimmed over an important detail like that? Stevie was in charge of the assignment and she'd
have given a witness statement, just as Link had. Was her statement altered? Did that mean his own
statement had been altered? He had mentioned both agents, though admittedly he hadn't an idea of the guy's name or code name. It would've been easy to edit out. Link had never felt so stupid.

"You think they doctored the report." It wasn't a question. Benjamin had caught up and he knew what Link was thinking. Ben was sure as hell capable, Link had to remember that. He needed someone to have his back on this one.

"And my witness statement. And probably Stevie's, too." Link said, but he didn't mention the idea that Stevie could be in on it. As well as H, because of course H was in on it. Why wouldn't he be? Joining Mythical Intelligence was turning out to be one hell of a ride, that was for sure, and Link didn't know if he could get off anymore. But now Ben was beside him in this, and he wasn't sure he wanted to drag him through it.

"I should've known there was something up with the whole mission," Benjamin grunted in annoyance, "I swear, something always goes wrong when H is there. That guy brings trouble wherever he goes."

Link had the small urge to defend his handler, but it dawned on him that it would seem too obvious that he liked H. As a friend, or as more, it didn't matter because that was news he didn't need getting out. And besides, if the rumors were true, Ben was right. H was temperamental. "You think he had something to do with it?"

"Probably," Benjamin swirled saliva around his mouth before spitting onto the asphalt, much to Link's distaste, "That guy is bad news."

"Yeah," Link said, but there wasn't much emotion in it.

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**JUNE 22ND 2007, present day**

Mythical Head Quarters looked menacing during a thunderstorm, the top of the building hidden in clouds which disguised the logo and made it look darker than what it was. The windows reflected the chaos in the skies, and Link found it fitting. The same chaos echoed throughout the buildings walls, and he wanted answers. He was tiring of dancing around the topic as he and H did; it was time to end their waltz. He needed closure.

His hair was matted to his forehead by the time he made it into the lobby, and he pushed it back from his face once he was inside the elevator. A man in a well tailored suit with a briefcase rode up with him in comfortable silence, before he moved to let Link out of the elevator.

"Good afternoon," The man said, and his voice had a slight southern tint to it which made Link pause, one foot out of the elevator to face him. The guy was smiling; he looked like a figurehead. Someone with authority.

"Good afternoon, sir," Link responded, reliving his college soccer days when he had to call his coach 'sir' to his face. It made him want to grimace at the knee jerk reaction, but the older, dignified man seemed pleased at his politeness. Link smiled back awkwardly and exited the elevator, more confused than before. He'd just about had it with overly confident guys in suits.

It didn't take long for him to find Stevie, after a quick visit to Noah so he could log into his computer and pretend to be doing some kind of work. But there were more important things than that. He
found Stevie inside a small office marked Levine on the door. Her last name, Link assumed, and it fit her. The woman in question had a grim look on her face, and her top lip was split as if she'd gotten into a fist fight with someone. Link felt a pang of sympathy for her, but he figured she had to be used to it by now, working in this job. Link had gotten the hell beaten out of him countless times, and Stevie was more experienced than he, regardless of being younger. She looked up with pale eyes when he entered the room, distracting her from her laptop.

“Mr. Neal,” Stevie greeted him and rose from her seat, offering to shake his hand. Link took it gingerly and shook it once out of politeness before dropping it and taking a seat adjacent to her.

“How are you doing?”

“What happened?” Link asked in response, gesturing to her injured lip. Stevie brought a hand to her bruised flesh, slim fingertips grazing the gash there. She seemed solemn and it didn't settle well in Link's stomach.

“Assignment. Things got heavy.” She explained, then shook her head, allowing her hair to shift and sway across her chest. That's when Link noticed the bruise decorating her collarbone, dark and purple and probably painful to the touch. Link's grip on the armrest of his seat tightened. “I'm very lucky I had back up, otherwise...I don't know where I would be right now.”

“I'm glad you're alright,” Link said, not sure of what else he could say. She didn't seem like she had been telling him the truth, but he wasn't about to pry. Stevie waved it off and focused her attention back to her laptop.

“I'm sure you came here for something other than my complaints.” She said with a small smirk on her lips, careful not to open the cut on her mouth. Link cleared his throat and crossed his arms over his chest.

“I'm here about the Salt Lake incident,” Link stated, not missing the way Stevie's smirk faltered. He was onto something and they both knew it. The air around them turned thick and heavy, and difficult to see through. Link could only concentrate on the woman before him.

“Oh?” was the only response Stevie offered him.

“What happened to the agent accompanying you, Stevie?” Link asked, face stoic, “The guy who helped you disarm the bomb.”

“I'm not certain I know which agent you're referring to.” Stevie replied, eyes on her laptop screen.

“I'm certain you know exactly who I'm referring to.”

Stevie sighed heavily and closed her laptop in one abrupt motion, then leaned back on her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. She looked at Link with tired eyes, and for the briefest of moments, Link second guessed himself. He started to regret bothering her.

“It was...necessary to exclude the agent from the report, as well as excluding him from any further assignments regarding the terrorists.” Stevie said, and Link could tell he was getting a lot of half-truths.

“Why?”

“I'm afraid that's classified information, Mr. Neal.”

“It's because the blood inside the bomb wasn't only Lizzy's, right?” Link asked and watched as Stevie's eyes widened a fraction in surprise at Link's knowledge. He had theorized about it being a
mixture of DNA, having been a great volume of blood for one person. Stevie's expression just confirmed it. “There was more, and it's one of ours.”

Stevie hesitated and an incredibly tense silence stretched out between them before Link grunted in impatience. Stevie raised a hand to rub her temples. “Not just one. There were four separate DNA strings in the blood we sampled from our clothing.”

Link gaped at her, speechless. Four separate DNA strings, four separate people; people who had been taken from the agency and tortured, no doubt. Innocent people being kept hostage by criminals; there had to be an end to this. There had to be an end game; they had to want something before someone else got hurt. He couldn't live with himself if someone he knew got taken. Especially not H.

“Four?” Link managed.

“Yes,” Stevie sighed once more, dropping her hands to the table and looking up at Link with cloudy eyes. Link suddenly felt sorry for her. Shouldn't H be around to support her, anyway? Where was he? “One is Lizzy’s, two are agents who disappeared six months ago during a job in Washington, and the other is an agent who was presumably killed in action over three years ago.”

“Three years ago?” Link asked, curiosity itching at him and making him fidget, “He's been gone that long?”

“Yes,” Stevie said, “But to be missing for this long, at this level of threat, I assume the agent had been turned against us by now.”

“You bond with your captor, you survive,” Link agreed, but neither of them seemed enthusiastic enough to continue the discussion. Stevie clearly looked exhausted.

“I'd suggest you let the people down at medical take a blood sample, in the unlikely event that we lose you,” Stevie said, as if it were as casual as asking Link for the time. In the event they lost him? Did they expect to lose more agents? Stevie noticed his turmoil, then added, “Standard procedure. We blood test regardless, but having your DNA on file wouldn't be a bad idea right now.”

“Yeah,” Link nodded, a little unsure of how he managed to get wrapped up in all of this, “Yeah, I think that's a good idea. Did you?”

“Yes, a long time ago,” Stevie said and made a point of keeping her gaze towards her hands.

“I see,” Link had nothing left to say to her, except to ask for a copy of the report. He read it on his way home, in the back of a taxi that smelled like someone ran over a coyote and chucked it in the trunk. Link wouldn't have been surprised if that was the case.

The report skimmed over a lot of gory details, some important and some not, but the most important was that H was mentioned. But it wasn't in his favor; he had failed the agency by letting the perpetrator that attacked him get away. Or so he claimed. A pretty heavy accusation for a simple case file. Link wasn't stupid; he knew something was wrong with the way H had acted about the situation, but to call it a failure was uncalled for. And it kind of made Link want to throw something at his bedroom wall and watch it as it turned into fragments.

He looked over and re-read everything Stevie had included into the small, brown folder he had asked for. He was surprised she'd caved and given it to him in the first place, but that must have meant she thought enough of him to trust him with it. Or something else, perhaps, but Link didn't have time to ponder the possibilities. By the time he’d read it for a fifth time, he was having trouble keeping his eyes open. The tension in his shoulders from the day's ordeals were finally catching up to him. A
small glance at his bedside clock said it was six am, and Link momentarily forgot that it had broken in the chaos of an earthquake and assumed it was at the correct time before he remembered. The earthquake felt like years ago.

With a heavy sigh, he dropped his head onto the pillow and hoped the day would be over soon.

Chapter End Notes

Bon soir! Sorry for the delay in this update, please forgive my slip up. Weekly updates should resume now. This chapter we see Link dig himself a deeper hole into the secrets of Mythical Intelligence's past, present and future. Let me know what you think, and I should note that next chapter is the chapter. Take that as you will. There will be multiple peaks next chapter, so hold on and bear with me momentarily because the plot is about to rock the boat. Thank you for reading those who are still present!

Like normal, if there are any mistakes I will get to them momentarily. Feel free to critique, comment and review. All are welcome. This story does not have a beta. Merci et prends soin de toi!
SEPTEMBER 24TH 1998, 9 years ago

Link's face was swollen, his eyes rimmed red and bloodshot, his expression solemn. There was a firm hand on his rigid shoulder, soothing him, or at least attempting to. Nothing could soothe him that day; the day everything was confirmed. Confirmation of a devastating turn of events which Link had done his best to run from, to avoid at every corner and dodge when discussed, but not now. Not when he stared at the enlarged face of his wife—a portrait supplied by his in-laws, now ex-in-laws, if such a thing existed—and a small, grey plaque reading "Kimberly Neal, 1978-1998". Her parents blamed him, and Link didn't defend himself; truth was, he blamed himself for it, too.

The service was small and private, most faces blurring into Link's peripheral where they stayed for the remainder of the day. Nothing but a mixture of colors and sounds and condolences to deaf ears. He had lost his partner, his best friend, his wife. Gone. No one to blame but himself; he should have known. He should have.

"It's not your fault, Charles," Jen assured him, the use of his first name feeling more intimate than it should. The hand on his shoulder came back into focus through his blurry eyes. He was wearing his glasses, black frames decorating his sunken eyes; he hadn't been brave enough to apply his lenses without violently tearing his eyes out of their sockets. "You couldn't have known. Kimberly wouldn't want you to blame yourself."

Link looked up at the sky and exhaled heavily, shakily, embarrassingly crumbling beneath Jen's hand. She didn't seem to mind, nor notice, probably out of respect. He could hear his wife laugh next to him, feel her hands ghost his thigh, a phantom breath on his neck. She was there, and all he had to do was let her go. But he couldn't; Link couldn't let the woman he loved leave him. It was his fault, he should have done something. He was a sheriff's deputy, for god's sake. How had he not known? How couldn't he save her?

"Charles," Jen's warning sounded in his ears, but he couldn't hear it. He couldn't hear anything. He wouldn't hear his wife's voice again, wouldn't hear her laugh any more, wouldn't hear her tell him she thought his job was sherrific. It had been funny then and it was funny now. Link crumbled at the seams, a hand coming up to his mouth to muffle his strangled laugh, morphing into a sob. It drew stares, which drew people until bodies surrounded him, crowded him, comforted him. It was comfort he didn't want, nor deserve, but he was too weak to deny it.

On August 19th, Link had lost his wife to the hands of a terrorist agency. Attacking civilians inside a small hotel, holding them hostage, demands filled by the police department proving fruitless when
the entire place went up in flames before Link's eyes, his wife still inside. Money, money, money; that's what they always want, and this time, it wasn't enough. It had shaken the city to the core, people losing loved ones and family members, Link among them. He didn't expect to survive the coming weeks, and if he did, then he was pretty damn sure God hated him.

JUNE 23RD 2007, present day

Link gasped himself awake, jolting upright much to the complaint of his stomach muscles. He raked at his skin, fighting fire that wasn't there, heating up his body from the inside out. He could feel the flames grace his skin like poison, like arsenic, boiling him and tearing through his soul. There was a sharp sound to his right—the sound of rain against his window—and he yearned for it to extinguish the fire within him. He panted, sweating, hair matted to his forehead as he gasped in shallow breaths to ease his headache. Another sharp sound to his right—it couldn't be rain this time. He craned his neck to look toward his window just as a small rock collided with the glass. Puzzled, Link slid his legs out of the bed, ignoring the soaked sheets beneath him.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what was happening. Link peered down at the offender throwing rocks at his window like this was some kind of romantic comedy, but when he saw H's face partially illuminated in the street light, looking up at him, the anger bubbled out of Link's gut in an instant. He breathed a sigh of relief, half pleased to see his handler, half grateful for the company and distraction that H offered. The faint click of his window opening caused Link's ears to ring, but he ignored it, save for the grimace decorating his features as he leaned over the sill and popped his head out to see H better.

“What are you doing?” Link asked, or more, hissed. H grinned up at him and made like he was about to throw another rock at Link, who flinched in response. He was certain H's chuckle would wake his neighbors beneath him.

“What are you doing?” Link demanded, at the same time H asked, “Did you shower in your clothes?”

Link felt the back of his neck heat up in either anger or embarrassment, most likely both. “No.”

H eyed Link carefully when he opened the door and let his handler inside. H had a guarded look on his face as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him. Link absently wondered if this would be the norm now—H being in his apartment under questionable circumstances. And, shockingly, he couldn't find anything wrong with that. His handler was dressed in a shirt and jeans, clinging to his slim figure in a way that Link figured just wasn't fair. Not when he had nothing but a t-shirt and sweat pants on.

“What are you doing here?” Link demanded, at the same time H asked, “Did you shower in your clothes?”

Link felt the back of his neck heat up in either anger or embarrassment, most likely both. “No.”

H gestured a hand towards him, his other tucked away inside his jeans pocket, posture screaming
uncomfortable. But Link didn't think about it; H was here of his own accord, and Link was still to
find out why. “Your appearance says otherwise.”

Link shot him a look. “I'm aware of that.”

H raised an eyebrow at him, and Link just sighed in response, rubbing a hand over his face and
wiping away the remnants of sweat on his upper lip. “I get these,” he paused, because he wasn't
exactly sure what they were, “nightmares; where I feel like I'm burning from the inside out. Like I've
swallowed a liter of gas and picked the wrong moment to light a cigarette.”

“You smoke?” H asked, seeming distracted. Link shook his head.

“No, I don't. It was just an metaphor.” Link explained, “I don't know how else to explain it. I feel
like I'm having a panic attack, like the air's too thin. Then I wake up like this.” He gestured to
himself, beginning to dry off but still undeniably drenched in his own sweat. H's expression was flat,
eyes hard and shoulders tense, like what Link had told him had offended him personally. Link
opened his mouth to speak, to apologize, or something, but H spoke first.

“How long have you been having these nightmares?”

“A long time.” Link said, purposely vague.

H shot him a look. “Specifically.”

“I don't know, man, a long time.” Link sighed, “Around nine years, give or take a few months.”

H had to know what he meant, what he was talking about; he had read his file, after all. He knew all
about the targeting, the bombing, the fire which tore Link's family apart. H's hesitation caused Link
to look away from him, towards an extremely interesting stain on the floor. He had to stop finding
himself in these kind of situations with H if he wanted to maintain at least an ounce of his dignity.
Stripping himself bare only drew people's attention to his scars, to the cracks in his foundations, the
vermin in his mind. And he didn't need that kind of attention, especially not from H, whose
attachment to Link was questionable, at best.

“Sometimes at night, when I turn the lights off in my apartment,” H said, his voice quiet and so
undeniably tender that Link faltered, hands twitching by his sides at their sudden moment of
intimacy, “I stand outside on my balcony and watch the city below. It's peaceful, and terrifying,
watching all those lives underneath my feet.”

Link looked up at him when H paused to find the taller man looking out toward Link's own balcony.
He imagined it paled in comparison to whatever H's apartment looked like; presumably something
too expensive for Link's simple tastes, with H being a handler. It pays better. H's words echoed in his
head because of course he earned more than Link. Of course he did.

“It's really the only time I feel safe—when I feel in control.” H said, and in that moment, Link
realized why he liked H in the first place. H was soft and thoughtful, but also rough and mysterious
in all the right ways, in all the right measures. And Link really was in far too deep to be thinking that
way about his own handler; they were going to be discovered, and whatever this was between them
would be ridiculed and they would be separated. The idea was maddening, and irritating, and
everything else in between.

“My balcony is only one story up,” Link offered, attempting to lighten the mood but not exactly
wanting to. He didn't want his anxiety to come across as ungratefulness of H's intimacy, because he
really, really didn't want his handler to hide himself behind another veil. “My view of the city below extends to the Santa Monica pier.”

To his surprise—and relief—H laughed. “Not a bad view, if you ask me.”

“I guess not,” Link replied, then shifted his weight onto his opposite foot, “Why are you here, H?”

“It's—” H paused, and it was so unlike the other man that Link raised a brow in response, “It's complicated.”

“Okay,” Link said, emphasizing the “o”, “Just...let me grab a shirt.”

It didn't take him long to change into an old running t-shirt, torn at the hems. But it would do because H certainly seemed distraught. Link sauntered into the bathroom and splashed water over his face and neck, taking in the sunken cheeks and eyes on his face, sleep deprived and dehydrated. He couldn't do anything about it except groan and curse at the ceiling before drying himself off and re-emerging into the living area, only to find it empty. Had H taken off on him? Disappearing was beginning to sound like his forte.

“H?” He called out dumbly, feeling blind inside the darkness of his own home. There was a shuffling of feet to his right and he turned towards the offending noise just as he heard H say, “In here.”

Link watched as H fidgeted with his broken alarm clock on his bedside table, perhaps both purposefully and politely ignoring the sweat soaked sheets of his bed. Link was thankful for it, at least, but more confused at H's insistence on him repairing his that damn thing.

“Sorry, I—” H began, then paused as the clock beeped in his hands and flashed four zeroes at him. He glanced at his wrist watch and corrected the time accordingly whilst Link watched him in disbelief. “Your clock is fixed.”

“I see that,” Link replied, “You know, those things are less than eight bucks to replace. You didn't have to.”

“So I saved you money. And time, ironically.” H placed the bulky clock back onto the bed side table and positioned it so it was facing the pillows, probably so Link could read it during the night. He squinted to read it from where he stood, leaning on the door frame with crossed arms and amusement glittering his face. Two thirty-two am, apparently. H was sure as hell far away from home at this time of night. Had he driven all this way just to see Link? Link's stomach did a strange flip, causing him to clear his throat and imitate ignorance to it.

“H,” Link grunted, because H had still to explain what the hell he was doing in Link's apartment again. Not that he was unwelcome. His handler let out a sigh and all but crumpled down onto the mattress, putting his head in his hands and grunting, elbows balancing on his knees and gaze to the floor. It was a sight to see, and if it had been under a different circumstance, Link might have cracked a joke. But he didn't and instead lingered in the doorway, uncertain to enter his own bedroom in fear he would disturb H in some way and he'd take off running, then Link wouldn't hear from him in weeks. So, he played it cool—in some form of the word—and gave H all the time and space he needed. Which turned out, wasn't a lot.

“It's been one hell of a week.” His handler huffed, sounding rougher than Link had ever heard him. He wasn't able to linger for much longer, advancing into the room to take a seat next to H on the
mattress. An ache to be closer to him, for support or something more, he couldn't be sure.

“You heard about the DNA results, right?” Link asked, figuring he might not get another chance to mention it. “About the doctored report.”

“Yeah,” H replied and lifted his head to look straight ahead, out the door and toward the living area. “I signed off on it.”

“And?”

“And what?” H asked, seeming irritated, “My ass was handed to me on more than one occasion over it. I did what I could, but it wasn't enough.”

Link recalled the file, recalled the blame being plastered to H's back unnecessarily. Sure, Link couldn't figure out what exactly had happened, because things were clearly going on behind his back, but he didn't think H was to blame. At least, not entirely.

“You don't seem like the type to take a beating when you don't deserve it.” Link stated, matching H's stance and putting his elbows on his knees.

"Did you give a blood sample to HQ?" H asked suddenly, glancing at Link, something in his eyes that he couldn't recognize. A car passed outside Link's bedroom window, headlights momentarily shining into the apartment, illuminating it in a soft white light, before disappearing and making the room feel darker than before.

"Yeah, Stevie asked me to," Link allowed his eyes to focus and shifted slightly, leaning partially to his left, towards H. Close enough to feel his body heat but not close enough to touch; no, he hadn't the nerve to ruin whatever kind of moment they were having with a momentary lack of judgement. A momentary lapse in his self restraint. He was in way, way too deep for this; the whole showing up at his damn apartment at two in the morning thing was not in the job description.

"Good. We can't afford to lose anyone else." H replied as he straightened his back, and Link was sure he heard a soft cracking of bone. H's back was sure as hell messed up, among other things. "And I can't lose you."

It took around ten seconds of silence for Link to process what H had said; I can't lose you. Link blinked once, twice, until H came into focus under the harsh lighting, finding the other man's eyes in the darkness. There was something in them, something camouflaged in the poor lighting, or lack of. What, Link wasn't sure, all he knew was he wanted H to always look at him like that.

"I'm here," Link offered, a small and awkward smile on his lips as he tried and tried again to process H's words, but from the way the other man was looking at him, inches away, it was hard to think about anything else. It was difficult to understand his surroundings. His peripheral blurred, the details of his bedroom became nothing but circumstance; a mesh of color and texture which Link was now ignorant to.

"You are," H responded from somewhere in the recess of Link's mind, "Miraculously, given your efforts to seek out danger."

"It's not like I aim to get myself into stupid situations," Link managed a scoff, but faltered under H's raised brow, "I'll admit that luck and I have a pretty dysfunctional relationship."
"Putting it mildly," H shook his head and it sparked something in Link's gut, similar to irritation. Flustered, maybe.

"Don't act like you deflect danger, H. We both know that's not true."

H sighed heavily, eyelids drooping as he shot Link a look, but Link could tell his heart wasn't exactly in it. H lowered himself onto his back, feet still touching the floor, stretching out on Link's bed like he owned the place. But Link didn't have a problem with it. None whatsoever. Link actually attempted to ignore how it made him feel but the fact that H was comfortable enough to be vulnerable with him was pretty much impossible to discount. His palms began to sweat and he had to pat them down on his thighs, cursing himself for letting this happen to him.

H's face was solemn under the low lighting—why hadn't Link turned on a light, damn it—and his breathing was unsteady. Something was wrong; the way H was acting didn't feel right. H rarely lost his composure from what Link had gathered, after knowing him the short few months he had. And from what he'd gathered from his colleagues, H was a private guy; quiet, terrifying and arguably dangerous. But good at his job, damn good up until recently. What was going on?

"H," Link began, pulling himself out of his thoughts and twisting his body around to peer down at H from where he sat. His handler's eyes were studying the ceiling. “What's going on?”

“Nothing,” H's response was instantaneous and in no way genuine. Link could smell the lie from where he sat, perched awkwardly on the edge of his mattress, eyes narrowing. H kept his eyes trained on the ceiling, splaying his palms out on his stomach. The edge of his shirt rode up the side of his stomach, and Link pretended not to notice.

“You show up at my apartment at two am—announcing yourself by throwing rocks at my window, I'll add—and you're telling me everything's good?” Link's irritation was evidence in his tone, dripping in sarcasm in his tired state of mind. H faltered visibly, glancing over at Link in the darkness and shifting uncomfortably. “I know I don't know you that well, but give me some credit.”

The exhale from H's lungs was worth it, and Link knew he had triumphed the argument or whatever it was. He would finally get the explanation he'd been waiting for.

“Come here.”

Or not. Link blinked down at H in confusion. “What?”

H looked up at him briefly, then shifted over slightly to give Link more space on the mattress. His legs hung over the edge ridiculously, and Link had to remind himself that, yeah, H was incredibly tall and squeezing sideways onto a small and cheap mattress probably wasn't comfortable for him. Which begged the question; what the hell was H up to?

“Come here.” H repeated, gesturing with his head for Link to lay next to him. It felt strangely intimate laying next to H again. It was nothing short of exhilarating, among other things—things that Link made a point to ignore and push back further and further into a dark circle of his mind. He looked up at the ceiling and refused to meet H's gaze when fingertips brushed against his own in an all too familiar gesture.

“You have a remarkable talent to distract people from the matter at hand,” Link heard himself say, dazed by the electric spark between them, making his biceps twitch and tingle. The pressure on his chest was both pleasant and uncomfortable. H laughed, deep and throaty in response as he took his time entwining his fingers with Link's own. They fit like the had before; it felt the same, and it felt
familiar. Like this was where Link belonged, where he'd been along.

“It's a gift,” H replied, so obviously full of himself. Link propped himself up on his elbow, feeling their fingers shift slight at his motion. From this angle he could see H's face perfectly, and admire the way the dim street light cast shadows over his eyelids and cheekbones, over his lips and down his neck. Link had to swallow before speaking up.

“Seriously,” he begged, almost, “You can talk to me, man.”

H's eyes looked over at his own, pale green orbs burning a hole through his skull and searing into his soul. His handler appeared to consider it, and almost, almost, Link felt like they had turned over a new leaf. But then H's expression hardened and the moment was gone, hidden behind whatever thoughts plagued H's mind.

“Being with you,” H began, voice soft and sweet and sounding nothing like himself whatsoever. Link could have gotten used to it if he was able to ignore the hammering inside his chest, “Makes it easy to forget about everything. To forget who I am for the moment, and just...enjoy the time I have.”

Link's breath hitched in his throat at H's words; they warmed him to the core and began bubbling in his stomach. His fingers tightened around H's calloused ones automatically, and somewhat embarrassingly as his own body betrayed him. H was looking up at him with a questionable expression; desire, or fascination, perhaps both. Perhaps neither. The other man was so difficult to read.

H's thumb caressed the inside of Link's palm, and Link almost crumbled at the contact. He felt naked under H's gaze, stripped bare and vulnerable, completely willing to hand himself over to whatever H was offering. He hated himself for it, for letting himself get too close, but H sure as hell didn't seem to be going through turmoil over it. He was looking up at Link expectantly, but Link had no idea what to say. How could he respond? He could tell H the truth about how he felt about him, how he'd worry about him, and miss him like the pathetic guy he was. But he couldn't; he had to cling to one thread of his dignity.

“Link,” H said, sounding firm as he furrowed his brow, “You're thinking too much.”

Thinking too much. Link almost sucked his teeth in response. Thinking too much would be wondering what the hell they were doing, what H was thinking and what other people would think. Thinking too much would be thinking about the small scar above H's eyebrow and wondering how he got it, or thinking of the light freckles decorating his cheeks and wondering if they were more visible in the sun. Wondering if there was any way to have H look at him like that all the time, to have him smile like that all the time, to treat Link like this all the time.

So maybe he was thinking too much. But his thoughts all led to the same conclusion. He knew what he wanted, and it was time to take it. He could face rejection; he had faced enough disappointment in his life to get over it, bruised or otherwise.

H's lips parted when Link began to lower his head, shoulder tensing in attempt to support his weight. H didn't move and he didn't push Link away, simply pausing his thumb caress on Link's palm when their lips met in one swift motion. H's lips were surprisingly soft and smooth, nothing like Link's dry ones. H's beard created a friction which Link melted into. Kissing H was a whole new ballpark entirely, nothing compared to kissing people in the past. H was solid and strong beneath him, all warm breath and twitching fingertips, soft lips moving against his own without complaint. The hair from H's beard was as soft as Link remembered, having caressed his face the night at the beach; it felt like weeks ago now, and they had made so much progress since then. Now H was opening up to
him, making himself vulnerable in front of him, trusting Link with secrets he wasn't sure H had ever voiced to anyone. It was maddening.

Link was the first to pull back, as little as possible, their lips still grazing as he sucked in a well-deserved breath. He felt like he had to speak, like he had to explain himself. Or apologize, or thank H. Or something.

“H,” Link breathed hot air into H’s mouth who inhaled softly in response, eyes half lidded and watching Link's lips.

“Rhett.”

Link's hesitation was evident, the air between them remarkably still. After three beats, he spoke, “What?”

“My name,” H said softly, eyes opening wide and unreadable, looking up at Link, lips tinged pink. Link looked at him with careful eyes, a little in shock. “It's Rhett.”

Rhett. Rhett. Link looked down at him with softening eyes, amazed that he would share something like that with him. Link felt the need to kiss Rhett—gosh, that would take some getting used to—again, and he did. He leaned down and pressed their lips together once more, enjoying the feel of Rhett's smile against his mouth.

“Nice to meet you, Rhett,” He said once they had parted, enjoying the way Rhett's lips chased his for a moment before his handler caught himself. There was a small smile on Rhett's face, though it looked saddened; by what, Link couldn't hazard a guess. All he knew was he wanted to take whatever it was he was hiding away from him. Even for a little while.

“Funny,” Rhett said, and leaned up and recaptured Link's lips with his own, kissing him for the first time. And Link thought, yeah, it was pretty funny. The whole situation was pretty funny, but he wouldn't change it for anything. Not now, not since they'd come so far. From texting to arguing to kissing in Link's bedroom, free from worrying about the complications the world threw at them. No, he wouldn't change it for anything.

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Link awoke to a loud, shrill beeping, a noise saved for the darkest circle of hell. He rubbed at his face with a groan and moved to turn off his alarm clock, blindly waving his arm until it connected with the dang thing. The task proved easier than he would have assumed. The opposite side of his bed was cold, and Link's eyes snapped open upon realization that he was alone. Figures...and he thought he had actually gotten somewhere with his handler. He furrowed his brow and swallowed down the hurt bubbling in his throat as he glanced around the room for evidence that H had actually been there, that Link hadn't dreamed the entire thing.

The alarm beeping again should have been a dead giveaway; but why the hell was it going off twice in under a minute? The sound ricocheted around Link's apartment, circumventing the fragile arena of his skull until it felt like his ears were bleeding; not a morning person, not a morning person in any form. He cursed Rhett for repairing the blasted thing, slamming his fist down onto it and effectively halting the beeping. Link's ears were ringing with the sudden silence of the room, the birds outside making themselves known, as well as a dog down the street.

He could still make out the sharp curves of Rhett's body on the mattress, could still imagine sharing
his body heat as they lay side by side, breathing heavily into the night air. He couldn't have dreamed it; Link's subconscious betrayed him often enough, but it wasn't capable of such detail. Rhett was there and Rhett had kissed him; no, he had kissed Rhett. But his handler had responded with enthusiasm, confessing his real name in a moment of blind intimacy, it seemed. But the name rolled off Link's tongue as naturally as breathing; it was a strange name, unique and different in every way, and it suited his handler to the core. Rhett. It would take some getting used to, but Link could see himself using it. Not at work, that was a given, but other times; intimate times, if Rhett would have him.

Which begged another question; where was he? Had he freaked and ran? Link's brow furrowed, torso twisting to peer at the alarm clock. A small corner of white paper was tucked underneath it in plain view, Link having missed it in his scramble to destroy the harsh ringing in his ears. He pawed at it, and unfolded it delicately, eyes focusing on the harsh writing.

I am not who you think I am. I'm sorry, Neal. But in time I hope you understand.

Wait for me. -R

Link read the message twice, once to himself and once out loud. Neither times did it make any sense. In a moment he was on his feet, not really thinking, tearing through his bedroom in search of his phone. He clutched the note with one hand, the other frantically searching for the stupid device—where did he put it? When he had located it—stuffed in between his pillows, idiot—he immediately scrolled through his contacts and called Rhett, or H, or whatever. Straight to a machine; an automated female voice claiming the number didn't accept incoming calls, which made Link want to hurl his phone at the nearest wall and watch the screen crack and crumble. He tried a text, pertaining of Rhett's whereabouts, and a few seconds after he'd hit send the message was returned back to him. Message sending failure, his screen read. His second and third attempts resulted in the same outcome; Rhett had disappeared on him, again. But this time it hurt.

He began to panic, but caught himself, letting his legs give out beneath him as he sat back onto his mattress and put his phone on his bed side table. He clutched at the note and read it again, studying the clunky handwriting, straight from Rhett's calloused hand. I'm not who you think I am. What did that mean? Rhett was clearly into something serious if he had to vacate the premises as quickly as he did, but why didn't he just come clean to Link? He had given him more than enough opportunities. What was Rhett guilty of? Link's brain began to hurt, matching the tightness in his chest; the feeling of rejection washing over him in an instant. It felt like a break up, but it wasn't, and Link knew it, because he and Rhett had never been together. But the use of Link's last name, Neal, thrown into Rhett's note was no mistake. Perhaps his handler had planned to cut ties once and for all, deciding this wasn't what he wanted; that Link hadn't given him enough.

And then there was the underlining of some of the letters, and Link had no clue of their significance. They didn't spell out anything logical, but once rearranged they spelled out his name. Or rather, Rhett's nickname for him. L-i-n-k. He sighed heavily as he racked his brain for answers, coming up short and losing his temper, giving up after a whole fifteen minutes of doing nothing but sitting in silence.

His phone buzzed and startled him with the vibration as it slide across the bed-side table. Link grabbed it with one hand and opened it, hoping for a text from Rhett, but it wasn't. Another surprise, it was Chase.

Hey, Neal. You're off today, right? -C

Indefinitely, Link thought, given that his handler had disappeared on him. Yeah. I thought you were on duty today. -N
So did I, but I guess not. Mythical HQ seems a little behind the schedule today. -C

How so? -N

Their systems went down this morning, according to Noah. Then there was some agent reshuffling. Suspicious, if you ask me. -C

Link looked down at his phone with a skeptical expression, thinking of Rhett. Perhaps he had been contacted from a head at HQ and had to head in without explanation. It would make sense, given that Rhett was clearly some kind of figurehead. But that didn't explain the note, and that was a big but. He hadn't noticed Chase had text him again until he went to respond to the first message. He had to have zoned out.

Do you want to come to my apartment today? -C

Link deliberated, wondering if he should just stay put and try to get a hold of Rhett. Rhett, or H, and his damn mind scrambling note. Couldn't he just have been straightforward?

Sure, brother. Give me an hour. -N

I'll prepare the animals. -C

Link grinned at that, small but genuine, momentarily forgetting that Chase owned a small petting zoo inside his home. Because, a chinchilla, really? He figured Chase wasn't all that social, but could handle interactions when it came down to it; if he couldn't he wouldn't have landed this job. He was sure as hell capable when it came to his intelligence, and maybe he could help with the entire situation Link found himself in. Perhaps he could get some information from Chase about where his handler might have run off to.

Absentmindedly, he shoved the note from Rhett into his jacket pocket as he was exiting his apartment.

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DECEMBER 9TH 2000, 7 years ago

“Are you sure about this, Neal?” Jen asked from where she is perched on the edge of Eddie’s desk, hair long and hanging at her shoulders. She had her arms crossed over her chest in a defensive position, but her face looked concerned.

“I’m sure, Jen,” Link reassured her, having already made up his mind months ago. “I have to do something. And being a sheriff just won’t cut it anymore.”

“I know, but I know how self destructive you can be.” She said, or more warned him, and suddenly her biceps seemed much larger than before. Whether she had tensed them for effect, or Link’s conscious had finally caught up to him was uncertain. But he had made his decision; he wanted to join the North Carolina agency. His qualifications were enough, and he’d had the experience, on top of a shady background of family tragedy. He had to do something; he had to bring some warped form of justice to the world and to his country after what had happened to him. “I just don’t want you doing this for the wrong reasons.”

“I know, but I know what I’m doing,” Link assured her as he made his way over to her and perched
down next to her, waiting on Eddie to come off his break and discuss his promotion. “I need to do something, Jen. I can't be a sheriff my entire life, not when there's much more ugly things out there that I need to worry about.”

“You're only twenty-two, Neal, you have your whole life ahead of you to make a difference.” Jen said, obviously not grasping the idea as well as Link hoped she would. He had known about her reservations before, but they had turned out to be nothing but concern for his mental health, rather than doubts of his abilities. Link was grateful for that, at least.

“And you're barely twenty, look at you,” Link gestured to her with his palm, feeling a small sense of sibling rivalry with Jen, “You've already got the job you wanted since you were a kid.”

“I'm still a kid, Neal.”

“At least you admit it.”

She punched him in the arm, and it hurt, but it was all in good fun. Jen was much, much, much stronger than Link both physically and mentally, he assumed, and it was good to have her so close to him. She was a sister to him, one he actually went out of his way to speak to, unlike his biological sister whom he exchanged Thanksgiving and Christmas cards with twice a year. Not like Jen; he spent most of his holidays with her and her family, he let her cry on his shoulder over women not worth her time, in his opinion, and cooked her soup when she was sick. They were family, and family didn't end in blood.

“My point is that people change, and you might realize what a mistake this is,” Jen said, but there was a small and affectionate smile on her face when she returned to crossing her arms over her chest. Link shot her a look.

“It's not a mistake.” Link said firmly, “You're just going to have to put up with me being around more often.”

“I'm sure I can handle it.”

“Good.” Link raised a brow at her, surprised by her submission. She glanced at him and laughed a little.

“I got training tonight. You're coming, right?” She asked, and Link was once again reminded of her strength, imagining what it'd be like to stick out like a sore and slim thumb at a her boxing match. She had always made him feel small, but he didn't mind it so much. It made Jen who she was, and if she wanted to be strong and capable, Link wouldn't fault her for that.

JUNE 23RD 2007, present day

“Hey, just—let me—here.” Chase greeted him at his door by shoving a small cardboard box into Link's awaiting arms. He let out a soft grunt in surprise and raised an eyebrow at the smaller man who was sporting now sporting a beard since the last time they had met. Chase ushered Link inside his small apartment, and he was greeted by a snoring Alex on the sofa. “Ignore him. He’s been sleeping all day.”

“Right,” Link replied, wondering what the deal was. Did Alex crash with Chase all the time, now?
“Where do you want this?”

Chase showed him into a small room, just to the left of the living area where the snoring was coming from. A small office, decorated with two desks, two computers, and a bookshelf on the opposite wall. Chase took the box from Link's hands delicately and placed it down onto a small table at the edge of one of the desks, presumably his own. Link moved to close the window upon Chase's request, wishing he hadn't needed to, clinging to the fresh air while he still could. He needed air to think straight; to prevent himself turning into a meltdown over his whole situation with Rhett.

“What's in the box?” Link asked comically, before moving towards Chase and peering into the small opening at the top of the cardboard. Two small and beady eyes met his own, before they disappeared into the dark and rustling was heard from inside the box.

“My chinchilla.” Chase stated. And Link spent the better part of an hour trying to get the furry thing back into his box after Chase let it out, having it poop all over the kitchen counter and spread dust around the house. He managed to pick it up, having it wriggle around in his arms before settling, deciding that then was a good time to clock out and fall asleep on Link's forearm. It was cute in a weird way, like a weird, pooping, small fluffy thing kind of way. As cute as it could be, he guessed.

Chase sat down at his computer once they'd safely secured the chinchilla – Larry, it was called because, really? – and Link perched on the spare side of the wood and crossed his arms over his chest. The room felt stuffy and warm, but surprisingly smelled rather sweet. Link had expected it to smell like a petting zoo of some sort, but it really didn't. It smelled like a home.

“So, what's up, man?” Link asked once they had settled into a comfortable silence as Chase brought up some work files on his screen. “You think the agency's up to something?”

“Yes, to put it lightly.” Chase replied, and drew Link's attention the case file highlighted on his screen. Some kind of work order, rearranging agents and discarding some. It seemed relatively normal. Chase appeared to read Link's train of thought and spoke up before he could, “They've been picking out agents and placing them in places at random. Like this – look, “agent(s) Fischbach, Mark sectioned in Ohio to be placed in temporary conditions in Nevada”. That's one hell of a move without explanation.”

“How did you get this?” Link asked suddenly, hijacking Chase's mouse to scroll through more of the agents transferred. Chase just shook his head at Link.

“There are ways to get information without getting caught, Neal,” He said with a small, knowing smirk. Link simply rolled his eyes in response, concentrating on the list before him. Something caught his eye.

“This list, is it just for this year?”

“Yes, to put it lightly.” Chase replied, and drew Link's attention the case file highlighted on his screen. Some kind of work order, rearranging agents and discarding some. It seemed relatively normal. Chase appeared to read Link's train of thought and spoke up before he could, “They've been picking out agents and placing them in places at random. Like this – look, “agent(s) Fischbach, Mark sectioned in Ohio to be placed in temporary conditions in Nevada”. That's one hell of a move without explanation.”

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“This list, is it just for this year?”

“Yes, but I have transfer lists going back almost ten years.” Chase explained, shooing Link's hand off of the mouse so he could take over. “Actually, I...there's something you need to see.”

Link raised an eyebrow at him and dragged the spare chair from the opposite desk over and sat down next to Chase, who shifted to give him more room. It felt like they were teenagers grouped around a small computer screen, playing video games. If only things were that simple; things were never simple anymore. Not with Link; simple just wasn't in his vocabulary anymore. He watched as Chase clicked around and brought up a few old files, listing agent after agent, obituaries and transfers, nothing catching Link's eye. The smaller man beside him brought up a small list of agents and transfer dates and let go of the mouse, leaning back on his chair with a concerned expression.
“This is the transfer file from July, nineteen ninety-eight.” Chase said as Link leaned in and took the mouse from him and highlighting some of the names. A few he recognized, some he didn't; it didn't take long for his eyes to zone in on H. Withheld his real name, as usual; what a jackass. It stated that he had been transferred from Los Angeles to North Carolina under temporary circumstances. There was nothing suspicious about it, given that a number of other agents had been assigned the exact same transfer.

“You mean H?” Link asked, looking at Chase who just gave a sharp nod. “What are you saying?”

“I don't know, it's probably nothing.” Chase said, a hand coming up in defense as he took the mouse back from Link's shaking hand, avoiding his gaze. Link didn't say much after that, silently cursing Chase for planting ideas in his mind. What if the agency really had something to do with what happened to his family? He'd heard of inside jobs before but...innocents? Posing as a terrorist agency? Surely national security drew the line somewhere, hopefully somewhere miles before it came to that. And then there was Rhett, placed in North Carolina when it all happened. Could he have been one of the agents on scene? It would explain his immense knowledge of the incident, aside from reading Link's case file. Which begged the question; how did Chase know about it?

“You read my case file.” It wasn't a question, and Chase didn't so much as twitch in response.

“Yes, when we met.” Chase said, “Nothing personal. I read a lot of people's case files.”

“I don't know whether I should be insulted, or impressed, Chase.”

“Probably both.”

Link smiled a little, but it didn't touch his eyes. “Yeah. Probably both.”

After a long silence, Link spoke again, sounding rougher than he intended and startling Chase out of whatever train of thought he had boarded. “You think the agency had a part in it?”

“I think it's possible, Neal.” Chase replied. Well, he certainly didn't waste time peeling at the band-aid, ripping it clean off and exposing Link's freshly healed scar over his heart. Scabbed over but never fully healed, and he couldn't change that. “I also find it hard to believe that having H assigned as your handler was merely coincidental.”

“Because of his transfer the month prior to—” Link stopped, unable to finish. Chase registered his difficulty and read his train of thought easily, a careful smile on his face for comfort.

“Exactly. He could have been tasked to keep an eye on you, in case you turned on the agency.”

“Keep an eye on me?” Link parroted, and Chase grimaced at his screen.

“Get close to you, see what you're about.” He explained, mentally punching Link in the gut, “When you had that argument, it could've been a test to see what you were capable of. You know, to see if you were a threat to the agency. The president abhors publicity like that.”

Link felt the as if someone had picked up the room and began spinning it, sweat forming on his forehead and palms, mouth going dry. He had to admit, it could've been a test to see what you were capable of. You know, to see if you were a threat to the agency. The president abhors publicity like that.”

“Hey, man, I didn't mean to overstep,” Chase voiced his concerns and gave Link a worried look; he must have looked as terrible as he felt. “I just thought you should know.”
“No, it's...thanks for telling me.” Link croaked, and Chase's eyes softened as if he'd suddenly felt pity for him.

“You two have a personal relationship, right?” Chase asked as if he already knew the answer, but he needed Link to confirm it. But he wasn't about to admit to something that could implicate them both; he and Rhett could lose their jobs over something as stupid as a fleeting romance. He had been so blind.

“Something like that.” It was the only response Link could offer.

“I assumed as much. The way you talk about him seems much more intimate than the way I'd talk about my handler.”

“That obvious, huh?” Link felt like enveloping in on himself and shipping himself off somewhere he'd never be found. Chase didn't seem phased by the news, however, and only nodded in understanding. It made Link feel better, but only a little.

“No. I'm not sure the guys have any idea.” Chase offered in attempts to reassure Link of their most recent development. “And I'd keep it that way. Alex would be fine with it, I'm sure. But Ben's another story.”

“Yeah. They got history.” Link nodded, coming back to reality inch by inch, energy depleted from the recent revelation that his place of work might have had something to do with his life falling apart. And the one person grounding him to reality, making him feel himself again, might be only in it for business instead of pleasure.

“Come on. Alex's snoring has stopped.” Chase offered, clicking his computer to sleep and offering Link a hand up from his chair. He accepted it unsteadily, then cleared his throat and shook it off. He had plenty of questions and little to no answers. He had to contact H again, or try to; he had to talk to someone, anyone. And it had to be soon, before he lost his mind.

Chapter End Notes

Bon soir! This chapter does a bit of time jumping, and I have added further descriptions to them i.e. "nine years ago" and so on. I have also altered past chapters to include this detail. Hopefully this isn't confusing for anyone and hopefully you are enjoying (to some extent) the flashbacks and back stories. As some readers have been asking, the answer is no; Christy Neal is not in this particular story. The reason for that should be pretty clear. This chapter is a bit up and down, and I'll admit to that, but brownie points if anyone noticed the two mini easter eggs I included:

H's (Rhett's) words "Sometimes, at night, when I turn the lights off in my apartment..." are influenced by a speech from Red Dragon, by Thomas Harris. And the mentioned agent Fischbach, Mark (aka Markiplier) is also a famous Youtuber!

Like normal, if there are any mistakes I will get to them momentarily. Feel free to critique, comment and review. All are welcome. This story does not have a beta.

See you next week! Merci et prends soin de toi!
JUNE 24TH 2007, present day

Link had just about had it with the cell phone in his hand, half a mind to chuck it off the edge of the Santa Monica pier and be done with it. In between the failed text messages, work emails and rejected phone calls, he was surprised he still had hair on his head from the hardship. The sun was bright and cooked the back of his neck uncomfortably, but he didn't bother seeking out shade and allowed the warm rays root him to the spot. They grounded him and reminded him of this warped reality he managed to find himself in. He rubbed at his dehydrated eyes with a frustrated hand, finding his contact lenses glued to his pupils and causing him to blink excessively. He had slept in them without thinking, forgetting to take them out—for the first time in five years, he'd like to add—and now he was paying the price for that. He would have worn his glasses if he hadn't found them crumpled and broken at the bottom of his duffel bag, presumably from the rough handling on the plane to LAX—a flight which felt like an eternity ago, now. Link's luck just kept getting better and better.

He couldn't get a hold of Rhett which admittedly wasn't all that surprising, but it was still insulting and it hurt. There was a dull ache in his chest, a familiar thud, thud, thud echoing in his ears. He felt like a teenager pining over unrequited love, rejection and acidity rushing through his veins, the impulse to kick himself and make sure he never found landed in this situation again causing a throbbing in his temples. Rhett had evidently disappeared off the grid for the time being—not wanting to be contacted, shutting out the world and brooding alone like he did best—which made Link's life puzzling to say the least. Rhett had laid his soul bare to him the night prior, caressed his hand for comfort and kissed him, then took off in the morning with a baffling hand-scribbled note left on the bed side table which Link still hadn't figured out.

I'm not who you think I am. Rhett's voice echoed in his mind, warm and moist air breathing down his neck, and Link's own breath caught in his throat. What did he mean? What did any of it mean? Would it kill for someone from HQ to speak clearly once in a while? Wait for me. Rhett's voice sounded miles away, years apart, and all Link ached to do was to draw his handler back to him.

Link typically wasn't an irascible man but today he was and he knew it, but he had damn good reason to be. Grouchy just wouldn't cover it, wouldn't dull the fire behind his eyes. On top of the fact that Rhett—or H, or whoever he wanted to call himself—disappeared on him there was also the pressing matter of him being transferred to North Carolina a mere month before Link's world collapsed around him. It was possibly a coincidence, a caustic foreshadowing for their relationship—a bleak possibility which left a bitter taste in Link's mouth.

The second possibility was that Mythical Intelligence knew fine well the terrorists would strike that
hotel and attempted to one-up them and take them out before their plan was executed—making a shoddy job of it, he'd add—which would explain the sudden inflation of agents in the surrounding area.

The third and final possibility Chase had suggested was that Mythical Intelligence was involved in something much larger and treacherous, ultimately embroiled in the bombing which took North Carolina by storm. That they had been aware of the situation and neglected to do anything about it, to gather information about the terrorist group and allowing innocents to die at their hand. Collateral damage they would claim, a necessary evil, and Link would choke the life out of the contemptible man in charge with his bare hands.

Not one of the options were desirable and Link didn't want to jump to conclusions, which was why a simple text from his handler would suffice for an explanation. But, of course, he couldn't grant that. Rhett was impossible sometimes, but it wasn't as if Link knew him well enough to say that.

A short buzz from his phone startled him and he scrambled to answer it, almost dropping it onto the board walk. Surprisingly—not—it wasn't his handler.

You're needed at Mythical Headquarters ASAP. -Stevie

Link's brow furrowed at the message. He wasn't aware Stevie had acquired his number, which was foolish considering his number was probably easily attainable through his case file. Secondly, why would Stevie need him down at HQ? He hadn't had an assignment in days and his handler was nowhere to be found, so the prospect of a work assignment didn't seem probable. Unless that's what it was about; maybe Stevie had information on Rhett's whereabouts. The idea caused Link's feet to move for the first time in hours as he made his way back to his apartment to call a cab, silently cursing himself for not picking up his rental car sooner from the garage. He spared Stevie a text response telling her he was on his way as he paused at an ATM and made sure he had enough cash to actually tip the cab driver this time. Los Angeles was nothing like home.

“Agent Neal, a pleasure,” Stevie greeted him before they collided in the hallway, Link having been preoccupied with the zipper on his hoodie, a dark blue color effectively matching his mood. He took Stevie's offered hand politely and shook it firmly in greeting, offering a short and forced smile that neither of them appreciated. Stevie had a peculiar look on her face, similar to worry but entwined with guilt and contrition—but, hey, Link was no mind reader.

“What's the problem?” Link asked as soon as Stevie released his hand, folding her arms over her chest. He wanted to get down to business as soon as they could, no dancing around the subject. The sooner they were done, the sooner he would learn what Stevie knew about Rhett, or H. He had to address him as H to everyone at HQ, he had to remember that. The last thing he needed was another headache regarding titles.

Stevie looked slimmer than before, smaller than Link had ever seen her. She looked frail and tired, much like Rhett had when Link got a good look at him. Perhaps everybody knew something he didn't, something that was stressing everyone out to the point where eating and sleeping weren't the priority anymore. Not that he could judge them; his diet and sleep schedule were scrambled as it was without additional stress being added to the table. The woman before him gestured for Link to follow her, pulling back a long strand of blond hair and tucking it behind her pierced ear.

“There's been an development in the terrorist case.” Stevie stated, and immediately had Link's full
attention as he fell into tow. Walking side by side with Stevie did not attract stares like walking with Rhett had. “A communications channel was discovered by Candace early this morning. We’ve had the decryption team working around the clock trying to crack it, but so far we’ve come up blank.”

Link didn’t respond, finding it pretty hard to believe the entire highly skilled and well-trained decryption team had had zero progress when it came to decoding one little channel. It seemed impossible, which begged the question: was it a set up simply so Stevie could get Link to HQ, or were the terrorists really that clever?

“I thought you would be here already, admittedly,” Stevie continued as they came up to the decryption team's office door, the familiar sound of fingers on keyboards ringing in Link's ears, “But the rota says you haven't been at work for days.”

Link took offence to the accusation in her words. “I haven’t been assigned.”

“No.” Link replied, and then shrugged, “Perhaps you should check on that.”

“I will.” Stevie looked angry, or irritated, or maybe a mixture of both. Link was being coy with her and he knew it, but it wasn’t a day to test his patience and Stevie was clearly much more informed than she let on, which only fueled Link's negative attitude.

The office looked exactly like he'd remembered it, and for a second he imagined Rhett sitting at Candace's desk, working silently at her computer. Much like the day they'd met and he'd challenged Link to a decryption competition, then effectively wiped the floor with him. But Link knew it wasn't real and Rhett wasn't really there, and Candace was at her own computer typing furiously. Noah looked up from his screen as the two of them entered, Link slightly behind Stevie to allow her to address the agents without interruption.

“Agent Noah, may I borrow you for a second?” Stevie waved a hand in Noah's direction, who appeared to widen his eyes at the request. He nodded once, shortly and stiffly, then murmured something to the man sitting next to him who promptly took over on his computer once Noah had risen.

“What's up, S?” Noah asked politely as he came over to where the two were standing, then spared Link a glance. Link smiled passively.

“Have we made any progress?” Stevie looked around the room as she spoke, and Link followed her eyes, scanning the agents hard at work. A few new faces from last week, some he recognized, some he didn't. Possible transfers, but Link couldn't be sure. He had to get Stevie alone to talk to her.

“Not since this morning,” Noah admitted, face downcast, “We thought we'd got the key a few times, but it's a tricky one. Multiple words in different languages.”

“What languages?” Link asked, speaking up in curiosity before he could catch himself. Stevie looked at him pointedly, as if he hadn't had her permission to speak, then looked at Noah for an answer after deciding the question was valuable enough.

Noah shook his head and looked a little irritated. Link knew the feeling. “Spanish, I think. But I'm no expert. I don't even speak Spanish.”

“You live in L.A. and you don't speak Spanish.” The guy from Noah's desk, whom he'd been working with earlier, spoke up in a sarcastic tone. Stevie shot him a look and the agent lowered his head like a scolded child and got back to work. Link felt like rolling his eyes, feeling like he was in
high school all over again. Only this time he was on the principle's side.

“I took French in high school.” Link offered, not really sure where he was going with it.

“Good. Noah, fill him in.” Stevie ordered, then a familiar buzzing sounded from her pocket before she reached into it and pulled out her cell phone, nervously typing on it, lips pursed. “Keep me updated. I'll be in my office.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” Noah replied sarcastically as Stevie walked away. She didn't so much as turn her head as she left, choosing to ignore Noah's voice entirely. Maybe too consumed by whatever news she'd just received via text message. Link briefly wondered if it was Rhett, but dismissed it to the back of his mind, focused on the task at hand.

“Have you really been trying to work this out all morning?” He asked as Noah showed him his computer screen, shooing the guy next to him's hand off of the mouse. The page was brightly colored, much to Link's surprise. Often enough decryption programs were grey and bland.

“Yeah, with no luck,” Noah said, “Could really use your expertise.”

“Let me take a look.”

Noah shifted out of his chair and let Link sit down, hovering over the back of him, one hand on the back of the seat. It would have made Link uncomfortable had he not been occupied. The decryption key was outlandish to say the least, more bizarre than Link had ever seen, and he'd cracked a lot of codes in his time. A group of letters shoved together which didn't make sense until Noah explained that they had to be placed into the correct order, similar to a cipher. Then things began to fall into place.

“Sick parvus magna?” Link read aloud, not really sure if he was pronouncing it correctly. It certainly wasn't Spanish, that was for sure. He elbowed Noah in the ribs who let out a grunt, followed by a what the hell, man? in surprise. “This isn't Spanish. I don't even know what it is.”

“It's Latin.” The agent next to them said, and suddenly he had Link's full attention. “Sic parvis magna.”

“Okay, Morgan, that's great and all,” Noah mocked him, and Link had half the mind to punch him in the throat, “But do you mind telling us what the hell it means?”

“It means “greatness from small beginnings”,” The agent—Morgan, though Link had a hard time believing that was his full name—explained, and Link raised a brow. Since when did the terrorist agency start including riddles in their communications? He rubbed at his temples with both hands, feeling a migraine tugging at his eyes.

“How the hell do you know that?” Noah asked. Morgan simply shrugged at him, all nonchalant, and Link decided he was working with the most irritating people on the planet.

“Alright, so where does that leave us?” Link asked, getting everyone back on the topic at hand, taking the mouse back and typing out the code with the other hand.

“Use the software we've got—here.” Noah shifted Link's chair so he could click the program for him.

“Anyone want coffee? I'm doing the rounds.” Candace suddenly asked, making her way to the desk where they sat. Link had forgotten there were other people in the room until she announced herself, having been too focused on his work. On cue, his stomach complained at him and Candace raised an
eyebrow at the noise, her long hair swaying as she came to a stop in front of their desk. “I'll get Neal some food, too.”

Two cups of coffee—black, two sugars—and an apple danish—dry and half-eaten—later and Link had made some headway, having successfully used the code, or the saying, or whatever the Latin words had meant, to break into the line of communication. The celebration was short lived once the chatter came in, and Link's face fell. Noah's curse could surely be heard from down the hall.

“Get Stevie in here.”

“Nevada?” Stevie asked, seeming distraught at the idea. She had obtained a beige blazer in her absence, which now hung loosely around her fragile form. “Las Vegas?”


Stevie cursed suddenly and it sounded foreign coming from her lips. Link had to remind himself that Stevie was a capable agent, outstanding in the field, and most likely cursed often. He should have known that already; he had seen her in action, yet she seemed so much more at home at HQ. She seemed like a natural born leader and everyone seemed to listen to her. “Some agents were transferred to Nevada recently. I'll alert them, it's likely that they're targets.”

“Whoa, wait,” Noah held up his hands as if he could physically stop Stevie from speaking. “What'd you mean 'targets'?"

“I mean they're in danger,” Stevie said simply, roughly typing something into her mobile, not even sparing Noah a glance. It wasn't rude, considering she was focused, but Link could tell Noah was irritated about it. “We have five days to stop this. We'll need to move, and faster than we did back in Utah.”

“Those agents in Nevada won't know their way around. They're newly transferred, right?” Noah asked, and suddenly all eyes in the room were on him, “They won't know the ins and outs of the area. They're vulnerable.”

Link blinked slowly in realization, face turning grim, “It's extremely convenient timing, don't you think?”

“What're you saying, Neal?” Candace demanded, red in the face. A few stray hairs fell from the bun she had tied her hair in and settled around her face, making her seem much more distraught and disheveled compared to the others. “That the terrorists knew about the transfer?”

“That's exactly what I'm saying.”

“Impossible.” Noah chirped in, shaking his head wildly, “The agency has one of the best security systems in the country. No way they got into our systems without us knowing.”

Link was about to include that if he had been able to hack into Myth Int's private files, then anyone could.

“Unless it was an inside job.” Morgan suggested before Link could speak up, and suddenly Noah
looked like he was ready to leap at him. But it was true, Morgan had a point. Could there really be an inside man in all this, someone who would betray the agency in a heartbeat? Someone who could put so many people's lives at risk? Link shuddered at the thought, the better half of his brain discounting the fact that Rhett's disappearance was pretty convenient for this new revelation.

“What're you trying to say, Morgan, huh?” Noah sounded angry now, and he looked larger than Link thought he was before. The air in the room became heated and tense, anger bubbling from one body to the next. That's when Stevie decided to speak up.

“Enough.” She ordered, voice calm and steady, but the threat was there and caused everything in the room to stop. It sounded so wrong coming from her mouth, so alien and unlike her to lose her composure. She had seriously taken this one to heart, face riddled with worry and something else that Link couldn't identify. But it made her no less frightening, and he was reminded about the possibility that she could be dangerous, much like Rhett could be. “No one is pointing fingers here. We can decide who blames who another time, but right now we have to focus on the lives that are going to be lost if we don't do something about it.”

Noah simply sighed heavily and sunk into a nearby desk chair, slouching, legs outstretched before him in defeat. Morgan cleared his throat, and the others sauntered back to their desks.

“Neal,” Stevie said once everyone had returned to their desks, the hysteria dissipated, “My office. Let's go.”

And Link couldn't muster up the courage to argue with her.

Stevie's office was more intimidating than Link remembered, feeling like the walls were closing in on him, white paint assaulting his vision and making him light headed. It was all so much to take in, so much to process, so little time. They had no time for anything; they had to figure out how to save who knows how many people under five days, not to mention sending capable agents to another state to protect those vulnerable. It was all a mess, and Link hadn't felt so helpless in a long time. He needed more time; they needed more time to sit and figure this out before other people got hurt.

Stevie's eyes were on him the moment he let his legs give out and sank into the chair across from her desk. She took a chair in front of him and leaned her elbows onto the wood, booting up her laptop, her expression bleak. Under the harsh table light—the drapes had been cast, why, Link didn't know—he could make out the healing scar on Stevie's lip from the last time they'd spoken, obviously hidden now with make up. Perhaps she'd been more careful after Link had noticed and called her out on it; definitely suspicious. If she had gotten hurt on the job, why would she need to cover it?

Link was in the dark about so many things, and he was sure as hell tired of it.

“I'm going to Nevada myself,” Stevie said suddenly, and caught Link's attention as she clicked around on her laptop, the screen hidden from view, “And I want you to come with me.”

Link's response was already on his lips before she had finished speaking, “Of course.”

Thank you,” Stevie said quietly, sounding sincere before her tone returned back to normal and Link was reminded of the way Rhett did the same; how he masked his emotions from view when he deemed necessary. Perhaps Stevie had learned that from him, or vice versa. “I'll round up other agents; some from decryption, some from assault, others from stealth.”
“What about H?”

Stevie’s hesitation was painfully evident as her fingers halted until she had to press the delete key numerous times to erase her mistake after being startled. She knew something. “He isn't needed. He'd be safer here.”

Pulling the safe card, Link thought, low blow. And it actually might have worked on him had he not been so pent up on figuring everything out. He was tired of being in the dark, tired of taking half-truths for answers, tired of giving his all and getting half-measures in return. Someone had to meet him halfway, someone, anyone. Something was going on behind his back, behind everyone's back, and if it was as serious as he thought it was he had to know about it. Everyone had to know.

“Stevie,” Link said and didn't continue until her eyes met his, looking tired and expressing how much she really, really didn't want to have this conversation. It didn't sway Link's determination one bit. “Level with me. What's going on?”

“I'm not sure what you mean.”

“With the agency. The unexplained transfers yesterday.” Link explained, and the look on Stevie's face was worth it. It was a toss between betrayal and surprised, and it almost made Link feel better. Almost.

“I see you've been busy decrypting in your own time,” Stevie noted bleakly, and Link nodded in confirmation. The woman before him sighed at him, half proud and half irritated by the new development. “How did you do it without being discovered? Last time—”

“It's besides the point,” Link responded, not letting her change the subject, “Stevie, come on.”

“I'm amazed you seem to think I know anything about the transfers, Agent Neal,” Stevie replied, and there she went again pulling the Agent Neal card, distancing herself from him and their conversation. Her face seemed to pale slightly, but Link didn't comment on it, too focused on getting some form of information out of her. “Transfers are customary within the agency, you should know that.”

“Unexplained transfers, transporting agents half way across the country without warning?”

"It's been known to happen." Stevie rubbed at her chin with the back of her bruised hand, a concentrated look on her face. Silence stretched between the two of them, Link too busy being caught in disbelief at her denial, before Stevie's face changed. Her eyes scanned Link's face for something he didn't know and her lips pursed softly, concerned.

"What?" Link asked, a little self conscious under her gaze. Stevie simply closed her eyes and let out a short breath through her pale lips.

"H was transferred." She said, and Link felt like she'd have been better off punching him in the face, "He forwarded me the email yesterday morning."

"Transferred?" Link didn't know what else to ask, what else to say; he didn't know anything. Except that he was more alone in this now than before, the agency having stripped him of any emotional tie. Why hadn't Rhett said something?

"He won't be helping us." Stevie continued, her eyes hard and burning a hole into Link's mind, "You will be appointed a new handler in the next few days."

"But—"
"Agent Neal." Her tone caused Link to abruptly close his mouth, scolded into submission. But there was something, something in her voice that seemed like she knew. That she knew everything, everything he'd hoped she'd never find out. It was in her eyes; that soft and calculated expression on her face, the way her hand was stretched out towards him across the desk—how long had it been there?—and the way it made Link's palms feel clammy yet cold.

"Take it as a blessing." She said and her words were nothing but white noise to Link's ears, "You have the opportunity to back out, no strings attached. And I'm sure H will be thinking the same. Take the out, Neal. Trust me on this one."

"I'm not sure that I—" Link paused and suddenly he had no idea where he was going with that. Stevie's determination didn't seem to dwindle.

"I'm positive you know what I'm insinuating." Her eyes softened at her own words, and for the briefest moment, Link wondered if she'd ever been through the same thing. "I'm the last person who will judge you on it, but in terms of your future at this company, I strongly insist you take my advice."

A bitter taste in his mouth, Link cleared his throat and got up from his chair, abruptly making the decision to leave the room, slamming the door closed as he exited. It was a conversation that he never, ever wanted to have. He was ready to pack up and go back to North Carolina. Stevie remained silent and watched him go, not even bothering to make a move to stop him. And Link was glad; she had done enough.

AUGUST 19TH 1998, 9 years ago

Somewhere in the distance, Link could make out the sound of anger in Jen's voice, shouting and yelling and everything in between. But he couldn't see her, he couldn't see anything. He was trapped inside a spiral of color and sound and questionable smells that caused his stomach to churn with every shaking breath. A blanket was placed securely around his shoulders, to keep you warm, a voice had told him, but it didn't stop Link's hands from shaking. He gripped at the cotton—rough, itchy, unpleasant to the touch—around his body and squeezed, hoping he could wake himself up from whatever nightmare he'd concocted inside his head. Hoping he could pinch himself awake, roll himself out of bed and into the cold, hard floor of the apartment and rid himself of the hell that surrounded him.

There were flashing lights somewhere ahead of him—or were they behind him?—besetting his vision—cloudy, at best—with a cold hand on his kneecap, shooting both warmth and discomfort up his leg and into his body. Lincoln, his mind echoed, reconstructing a past memory or more conceivably he was waking up, a gentle hand shaking him awake. Lincoln. He heard it once more, and this time it wasn't in his mind.

"Lincoln," The sound was real and his ears recognized it amidst their ringing. "Lincoln Neal, look at me."

It was Jen. Jen's voice, her mouth, her face, the hard features of stress and turmoil and grief speckled across her skin, dark circles around her eyes and cracked lips. The flashing was definitely real,
somewhere above him—fireworks?—and he was sitting down on a cold ledge, feet dangling over the side.

"Neal," Jen's voice again, closer, "You did everything you could."

Reality came crashing down on him, a ton of red and blue and white bricks falling on his head and crushing his skull. Not fireworks, but lights, bright flashing lights from an ambulance. He was perched on the back of it, a paramedic by his side amidst the chaos—debris and some cracked, old furniture splayed around him—Jen kneeling before him, both hands on either of his knees.

"Can you hear me?" Jen asked, then further away, "Can he hear me?"

“Yes.” Link replied weakly, but it came out as more of a grunt, a whimper, admitting how helpless he was. His world had collapsed around him and he had crumbled with it, spiraling down the staircase to madness until Jen's strong hands gripped at the side of his face and hauled him from perdition. Her eyes were weary and Link's eyes felt wet, eyelashes sticking to his face whenever he blinked. He was decorated in soot; cinders and grime covered his clothes and dyed his skin a nauseating color and dirt gathered under his fingernails.

"Neal," Jen said to him, holding his face until he met her eyes, albeit shakily, "You did everything you could."

The familiar thud, thud, thud of his heart kept him grounded under her stare, listening to her repetition and basking in the sound, allowing it to consume him and shelter him. He needed consolation, he wasn't made of stone. He needed something, someone. Jen was there for him and she always was, always would be. Not like he was there for Kim, he should have been there for her, he should have—

"Neal." Jen scolded him, thud, thud, thud, "Let's get you to a hospital, okay?"

And he had no reason to fight with her, no energy to decline. There were people surrounding him, some in suits and some in uniforms, gold badges reflecting in the light and hurting his eyes. There was still flames nearby, still fire in the building and bubbling within him. Thud, thud, thud, his heartbeat told him he was still alive, just alone. No companion heartbeat to compare, nothing to cling to. Just memories of this cursed day.

JUNE 24TH 2007, present day

Link watched and listened, never really speaking up, afraid his voice would sound too deflated and draw attention to his internal turmoil to the group. Alex was shouting something incoherent at the television—a football game, Link didn't know who was winning or losing, or who was even playing—and every so often he would offer Link some of his potato chips. He'd politely decline, of course, because there was no way he could keep anything down. What Stevie had said to him had rattled him to the core and crumpled his resolve. He had no idea what he was going to do, or what to think. Could Stevie fire him for being involved with Rhett? Was she even privy to the details of their relationship? He had overstepped his bounds—he and Rhett both had—and they had shared a piece of themselves with each other, and they had kissed and slept next to one another, Rhett's long arm around his torso, shielding him from the horrors in his mind.
Link had felt a sense of serenity in the amorous gesture. Rhett was comfortable, and perhaps confident enough to embrace Link in the darkness, enveloped around him, sharing heat and breath and quiet discussion before Link fell asleep. He wondered if Rhett had stayed awake, worrying, debating with himself. Link didn’t even know when Rhett had left him. Had it been early in the morning? Or mere hours after they’d shared their moment?

“Neal, can you come here for a sec?” Chase's soft voice interrupted his musings, a head poking out of his office door, “I need help with Larry.”

_Larry_, his infamous chinchilla. Link would never get used to that one. “Sure.”

Naturally, Larry was safe inside his cage and seemed to be happily rolling around in a dust bath, as Chase had called it. Chase looked at Link with a careful eye before he asked, “So, what happened at HQ?”

“Nothing good,” Link replied honestly, not really wanting to go into detail but he knew he needed to. He needed someone on this, someone on the inside who wouldn't turn on him and above all someone he could trust. That someone was Chase. “Look, I—”

There was a beat of silence, the familiar *thud, thud, thudding* of Link's heart in his ears as he deliberated his speech—how should he word it? How do you tell a co-worker you're romantically involved with your boss? Oh, and that boss is involved in some pretty sketchy activities with the agency? Yeah, that boss—his mind came up blank.

“You okay?” Chase asked, eyes hard but concerned. He was leaning up against the far wall of his office adjacent to the open window, arms folded across his chest. Link faltered visibly and had to hold onto the edge of the desk for support, clearing his throat and blinking.

“Yeah, I just,” He started, stumbling and shifting from foot to foot, “I just have to get something off my chest.”

“Okay,” Chase replied skeptically, elongating the 'o'.

“I haven't been exactly truthful with you.” Link admitted, “Or anyone, really.” Chase's silence said it all, and it encouraged Link to continue, slurring through his words hurriedly as if he was guilty of something catastrophic. Which wasn't that far off, really. “H and I, we are—we were intimate.”

A beat, then, “Intimate?”

“Intimate.”

“Intimate how?” Chase asked, not seeming to judge Link for what he was saying but more baffled by the idea.

“More than friends, intimate.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.”

Shockingly, Chase shrugged as if Link had simply told him he was about to head home. Not the reaction Link had expected, but not unwelcome. “I had my suspicions. Now I know my observational skills are up to par.”

Link choked on his own breath, struggling, “Glad you're taking this so well.”
“In comparison to you, maybe,” Chase surprised Link and actually laughed it off, “I’m actually more impressed that you managed to charm one of the most isolated guys I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not like I intended it,” Link scoffed at Chase, slightly insulted, mostly relieved that the other man hadn’t torn him a new one for getting involved with someone so dangerous. A breeze from the open window shook the drapes and sent a shiver down Link’s spine. Chase rubbed at his arms absently, mind elsewhere.

“You said were,” he pointed out, and Link grimaced, “You mean you’re not anymore?”

Link shrugged and tried to seem ignorant and unaffected, but he knew Chase could see right through him. He was as transparent as glass. “I guess not, no. He disappeared—transferred, apparently.”

“Convenient.”

“That’s not all.” Link mentioned, figuring it was all in or nothing, fishing into his hoodie pocket to retrieve Rhett’s note he’d stuffed in there. He had transferred it around from jacket to coat to hoodie, carrying it around with him like some sort of memoir; some warped version of a memento. Chase’s eyes zoned in on the faded white sheet of paper, folded neatly into a square. “He left me this.”

Chase took the note from Link’s hand when he’d offered it, reading it over a few times whilst Link nervously fidgeted with his sleeve. He had the ridiculous urge to bite his nails, to nibble along them as he waited for Chase’s verdict—but he wasn’t a child, and he didn’t hate himself that much. Not yet, at least.

“What is this?” Chase asked suddenly, confused as he flipped the piece of paper over in his hands. Link furrowed his brow.

“H left it for me. I don’t know what it means.”

“No, I know that,” Chase almost snapped back at Link, who widened his eyes at the remark. The man before him thrust the paper back to Link’s hands and pointed down at it. “What’s on the back?”

The back? Link had checked the entire note, hadn’t he? There was no way he could miss—or, he totally could have missed something because there was apparently a bunch of random letters on the back of his note, scribbled together by Rhett’s shaking hand. It was gibberish, not identifiable as another language, but rather some kind of code.

“I don’t know.”

“You hadn’t noticed it?” Chase seemed in complete disbelief as Link shook his head dumbly, completely surprised at himself. And ashamed, if he was honest. He worked for an intelligence agency and he hadn’t the coherent thought to flip a piece of paper over and read the back? What was wrong with him? He peered down at the note in question with undeniable spite, clutching at the edges as if he could make the piece of paper disappear.

HEMSETNC DAACAAMC-H 2AVROVNOA IO&ATSAIA

What the hell did it mean? It was a cipher of some sort, but he’d never seen something as lengthy as this before. And with both symbols and letters as characters, it was like a riddle. Much like Rhett himself, Link was precarious about his ability to comprehend it. They sat for hours trying to figure it out, Link on the computer searching for possible solutions, and Chase frantically scribbling in his journal. They had tackled mathematical outcomes and possibilities, but it proved fruitless. Everything they tried seemed to be a waste of time and effort and cups of coffee. Alex had sauntered in at some point, having been crashing at Chase’s place again it seemed, and offered to help but in the end, even
he couldn't comprehend the data in front of him, as they had called it. They couldn't risk word getting out about it, and word getting out about Link and Rhett would surely be the end of a few friendships not to mention his career. Workplace fraternization banned between handlers and agents, everybody knew that.

Link had been so stupid.

They had to figure this out before he had to leave for Nevada, and it had to be soon. Rhett was trying to tell him something, perhaps something too dangerous to explain openly, and it fueled Link's determination. If Rhett was in danger, he'd sure as hell find him and help him. No matter the cost.

Chapter End Notes

Bon soir! More jumping around in this chapter into the past and present, hopefully it wasn't too confusing for anyone! Again, this chapter is a little up and down with its moments. A few things I'd like to mention this week:

1) Sic parvis magna is a quote from Sir Francis Drake, a man famous for travelling the world, and it means (literally) "Thus great things from small things (come)".

2) The code which Rhett leaves behind on the note is an actual solvable cipher - which will be solved later in the story - probably much easier to crack than I'm making it out to be. But for the sake of plot, and such, let's pretend that it's extremely difficult to make sense of. Okay? Okay.

3) In this chapter I have altered the way I'm writing quite significantly, making it a little more comedic and easy-going when it comes to describing Link's thought process. I hope people have noticed and are liking it!

I would just like to add that I am absolutely blown away and humbled by the response I've been getting for this story! It really warms my heart and gives me the confidence to keep pushing through every week and delivering you guys a chapter every Sunday evening! So, from the bottom of my heart, merci! You know the drill: if there are any mistakes I will get to them momentarily. Feel free to critique, comment and review. All are welcome. This story does not have a beta. (Though I would be interested in getting one, if anyone is interested.)

See you next week! Merci et prends soin de toi!
February 14th 2001, six years ago

Link’s eyes opened to a familiar room, head horizontal on the hard surface of his desk. His cheek was wet and sticky, the undeniable feeling of drool puddling next to his mouth and trailing its way along to his eye. His vision blurred when he straightened abruptly to gather himself, wiping the drool on his sleeve before someone noticed and disintegrated the one shred of dignity he had left. His computer screen flickered awake before him, his hand bumping the mouse when he jolted out of his unscheduled nap. Images from the fire assaulted his vision, along with numerous articles splayed across his screen from titles such as: Foul Play? The Truth Behind The Infamous 1998 North Carolina Blaze and Conspiracy Theories Surrounding North Carolina Disaster Aftermath. Link hadn’t had a good nights rest in a few weeks, tossing and turning and perspiring his body weight on the mattress each night. His mind was plagued with memories; the charred remains of what could have been and the cinders of any coherent thought Link could manage.

The exhaustion had left him indisposed; eyes sunken and purple around the edges, lips dry, cracked and bruised from a tenacious blow to the jaw during a training exercise the night prior. He hadn’t flinched in time, hadn’t been fast enough, hadn’t been good enough, and the tender flesh of his mouth could attest to that. But Link was strong-willed and stubborn, determined to do better and conquer whatever demons he was trailing around behind him, bedeviling him with petty worries and regrets. He would understand what happened to his family if it killed him – it was a promise. It was a commitment he had made to both himself and to Kimberly.

“I’ll figure out why this happened to us,” He promised, thinking aloud in an empty room whilst he scraped away at the remaining nail on his thumb with his index finger. His hands were in a sorry state of repair; dirt crusted under his fingernails and skin calloused from brawling, pushing himself too hard and too fast.

“I thought I told you to go home.” A voice from behind him echoed throughout the otherwise silent room and Link turned towards the offender now advancing towards him. Eddie’s face was solemn and disappointed, but also dripping with a sympathy that made Link want to strike him square in the jaw. Eddie sighed heavily to himself, coffee cup in hand as he sunk into the empty desk chair next to Link and took a long sip of caffeine.

“Maybe you should take your own advice,” Link offered, voice cold and distant, cracked around the edges. His mouth felt a little dry. The man next to him made an unappreciative noise around his cup.

“You got me there.” Eddie admitted with a small quirk of his lips which Link felt obligated to return, even if his heart wasn't in it. He wasn't sure if he had a heart anymore, and if he did it was hidden
away behind a curtain of stress and painful palpitations, poison surging through his veins. “So, what is it this time? Government conspiracies, time travel?”

Link snorted at how foolish it sounded saying it aloud, despite having studied and researched both of those things in attempt to make sense of the universe that he was now walking alone in. No one by his side, echoes of past conversations in his ears, the painful reminder that his happiness was torn away from him and singed alive before his eyes.

“Foul play.” Link sulked.

“Dang it, Neal,” Eddie sounded irritated all of a sudden, putting his cup down on the desk in front of him and commandeering Link's computer despite great protests. “You can't let this eat away at you, brother. You're going to hurt yourself if you let this continue.”

“I know,” Link replied, because he knew that. He did.

“Then why do you do it?” Eddie asked, offering the open articles a quick glance before getting rid of them them one by one. Link's resolve shattered, making him feel more drowsy with every closed window.

“I guess I just,” Link paused because he really didn't know where he was going with it, instead focusing on a grey patch on the ceiling and leaning back in his chair. He fought a grimace at the way his shoulder blades dug into the cushion behind him.

“You need closure, I get it.” Eddie spoke for him, shutting down the computer and frowning when Link flinched at the sound it made. “But this isn't how to find closure, Neal. Obsessing over it, reliving it day after day. Don't think I haven't noticed the way you throw yourself into training. It's like you're asking to get hurt.”

Link cleared his throat in discomfort, rubbing absently at his damaged lips – a blend of yellow and purple by now – and thought the better of a snarky comment. Because Eddie was right, and so was Jen; he had to stop before he killed himself. It had been almost two years but the wound still hadn't healed simply because Link hadn't let it. He had gripped onto his pain and allowed it to define him, but also confine him into a set of influences. He had to learn how to let go, but he didn't know where to start. He didn't know how.

“Don't make me call Jen.” Eddie warned. And Link surrendered, pulling at the chains tormenting his mind, eager to be set free. But he needed time. Everything needed time.

JUNE 25TH 2007, three days ago

I'm not concerned about time. Link heard his own voice in his ears as it ricocheted around his mind and settled in his temples, creating a tension in his neck. It was true; he wasn't concerned with time, not now. Time didn't define him and it didn't confine him, not like it used to. He wasn't the same man he was six years ago, and he was better for it. But something about Rhett's response had unsettled Link, his mind having wondered from the cipher in his hands in more pleasant directions, particularly directions leading him to Rhett. I am. His handler's voice replied in his head and created a lump in his throat. What did he mean? Why was time so important to him?

I am. It taunted him, prodded at him andmocked him simply because he couldn't understand it. He
couldn't understand the meaning behind Rhett's words over a stupid alarm clock. Could he have been hinting at Link's past?

“Link,” Noah's voice interrupted his thoughts and Link turned his head, irritated, “Shift's over. Time to go home.”

Oh, yeah. He had been working late, lost in thought and getting little to no work done on the terrorist case. His mind had been elsewhere, frazzled into unconsciousness and even Noah had began to notice. The taller man looked at him, concerned.

“You okay, man?” Noah asked, a hand falling onto Link's shoulder as he rounded the desk, “You've been weird all day.”

“Yeah, I'm fine,” Link lied, turning his eyes back to his computer screen. He had been making arrangements for his trip to Nevada before his mind had wondered off. Absently, he shoved the crumpled copy of Rhett's note into his jacket pocket. Chase held on to the original. “Just a little stressed.”

“I hear that.” Noah replied, but Morgan shot him a look from across the room where he'd just raised from his own desk.

In the past days, Link had come to a conclusion about a couple of things. Number one was that he was in way over his head with Rhett, with the agency, with everything, and he couldn't take much more of it. Number two was that Morgan absolutely hated his guts for no reason whatsoever.

“Stressed over doing nothing all day,” Morgan commented with a sneer, shrugging into his leather jacket, “Give me a break, Neal.”

Link raised an eyebrow at Morgan who rolled his eyes in response, and he was about to speak up before Noah bet him to it. Noah had a habit of fighting Link's battles for him, and whilst he appreciated it, it was becoming an aggravation.

“Dude, you've been acting indignant all day. What's your beef?” Noah demanded, seeming overly irritated. Link sighed and rubbed a hand over his face.

“He's right, I haven't really done anything today.” Link offered, much to Noah's distaste. Morgan just shook his head at the both of them and sauntered to his locker for his belongings. Truthfully, Link had no idea what Morgan's problem was, if he even had one since it was possible he simply wanted a bone to pick with someone and Link was fresh meat. The new kid that the teacher – Stevie, in this case, though Link wasn't sure she'd appreciate the metaphor – took a liking too.

“You keep letting him walk all over you like that and he's gonna think it's okay to do it.” Noah commented once Morgan had left for the day. It was the smartest thing Link had ever heard him say. He didn't doubt Noah's abilities when it came down to it; he was an extremely powerful and talented hacker, stumping Link on more than one occasion, but when it came down to human interaction? Noah wasn't the sharpest tool in the box.

Link sighed to himself, feeling the crinkled paper inside his pocket, “I know.”

Noah gave him an exasperated look. “This whole thing is a mess. The situation in Nevada.”

“I know.” Link repeated, feeling like something had bent him out of shape. He didn't know where his mind was, but his body was so far behind that it slumped and he had to lean on the desk with his elbows in exhaustion. “Just when we think we get headway in Utah, they throw this at us.”
“Yeah,” Noah seemed defeated, and Link felt just about the same. “You need a ride home?”

“No. I got my car back from the garage.” Link said and Noah stifled a laugh. His *hunk-o-crap*, as he liked to call it. Again, it was Link's own fault for renting a Volvo.

Link was left alone after that, grumbling into his jacket and trying to figure out the note from Rhett on top of everything else. He was scheduled to fly out to Nevada the next day alongside Stevie whom he hadn't spoken to and purposely avoided over the past two days. The last thing he needed was a reminder of her words, of the advice she'd given him, or the bitterness he'd tasted in his mouth shortly after. Would Rhett really just drop him after everything? Even if it was in both of their best interests, Link wasn't sure what he would do. Rhett was transferred out of the blue, and Link was pretty sure it was because of *him* and nothing to do with the terrorist group. There was no other explanation.

A boss much high ranking than them had discovered their relationship and put an end to it. They were both too unduly valuable for the agency to let go and that's why they had been separated and not fired. If that was the case, it only complicated things further. And Link wasn't sure if he could handle that sort of pressure. Being held down under a magnifying glass whilst someone examined the details of his personal life didn't sound like something he'd want to be a part of.

Link stifled an irritated grunt and settled for pushing himself up and away from his desk, tucking his chair under it and going for his locker to get his things. He didn't bring much to work; his backpack for travelling, his wallet, keys and a few other essentials. Nothing extravagant like the other agents. Link was sure he'd spied Morgan with some kind of smart-watch the other day, hiding it underneath his coat and peering at it when he could. An unnecessary luxury, something Link didn't understand. He barely looked at his own watch – generic, regular, boring – never mind something that would cost him three month's worth of pay cheques.

But this was Los Angeles, and everyone was a little eccentric. Link just had to adapt to that.

His mind wandered to Jen, thinking of her and how her company would calm him, soothe his nerves. He would let her advice consume him and cure the disease in his mind. Link had met a lot of people in his life – some good and some bad, some memorable and some not – but no one he couldn't figure out. But Rhett was like a virus. Each time Link thought he'd made progress, Rhett would evolve, change and adapt to his techniques, and Link would be back to square one. It was part of what made Rhett so fascinating to him; the desire to understand him, to relate to him, to seek him out in the darkness and allow him to be the light at the end of all this. Link heaved a sigh and pressed the button for elevator, not feeling up to facing the stairs.

“Agent Neal,” A voice from behind him startled Link and he turned on his heel towards the man approaching him – recognizable, where had Link seen him before? The man in question wore a ridiculously expensive looking suit. “I hoped I might catch you.”

“Sir?” Link asked timidly, having no idea who he was speaking to. There was a persistent nagging in the back of his mind telling him he'd met this guy before, recognizing his elegant demeanor and distinctive cologne that smelled like something with a ship on the bottle. Link couldn't put a name to it, but it was certainly discernible.

“We met a few weeks back.” The man explained and held out his hand for Link to shake, a discreet southern tint in his voice. Link blinked stupidly at him before accepting the gesture. They shook hands once, firmly, and Link was sure as hell intimidated by the tightness of the guy's grip. “People call me Mr. McLaughlin around here, but it appears you don't know who I am.”

“Should I, sir?” Link asked, adding the sir as an afterthought. Another obnoxious agent in a suit –
was he just a walking target for these guys? – and Link had just about had it. The man – Mr. McLaughlin – laughed, charming and restrained. Link shifted his weight awkwardly from foot to foot and returned his gaze to watch the elevator floor number increase, willing it to move faster.

“I suppose not.” Mr. McLaughlin responded, “I'm your boss. Everyone’s boss, really.”

Link side eyed McLaughlin, taking in his profile and weighing his words in his mind. Could this guy really be the head of Mythical Intelligence? “You're the head of HQ?”

“In the flesh.” McLaughlin responded. Charming and cocky; everything Link expected from the head of such an illustrious organization. He should've known. The high pitched ding of the elevator arriving caught both of their attention, doors opening before them. Link took a step inside and, much to his dismay, McLaughlin followed him in, briefcase by his side. “You're from North Carolina, aren't you?”

“Yes, sir.” Link responded automatically, cursing his southern accent. It only seemed to get him into situations he'd rather avoid, much like this one. The doors closed in front of them once Link pressed the button for the lobby. “Harnett County.”

“I have family there, as my accent surely gives away.” McLaughlin commented, and Link forced a smile.

“I hadn't noticed.”

“I'm sure.” McLaughlin responded, then paused. For some reason it made the hair on the back of Link's neck stand up, goosebumps forming on his forearms.

McLaughlin placed his briefcase on the ground of the elevator and Link watched him curiously, wondering what the hell he was doing, but then the guy proceeded to push the emergency stop on the panel inside the elevator. They came crashing to a halt, Link losing his footing and falling against the back of the elevator. The lights flickered before turning a dull amber color, retreating into emergency lighting.

“What the hell?” Link demanded, not really meaning to voice his thoughts but not shying away from them once they had escaped his mouth either. He regained his composure as the other man turned to face him, seeming much taller now and a hell of a lot less pleasant under the orange glow above their heads.

“I was hoping to have a chat with you, agent Neal,” McLaughlin began, straightening his suit lapels and patting himself down as he spoke. Link watched him suspiciously, anxiety creeping up on him like a ghost, seeping through his skin and settling in his stomach, fear bubbling within him. “It has been brought to my attention that you have been chiseling your way into business that isn't your own.”

“I –” Link started, but was quickly silenced with a wave of the other man's hand.

“It would be wise of you to quit whilst you're ahead, agent Neal,” McLaughlin stated, and there was no doubt in Link's mind that it was a veiled threat. “And refrain from meddling in affairs that aren't your own.”

Link's face had paled to the point where it looked like he was about to lose consciousness, unsteady on his feet and backed into a corner – literally as well as figuratively. Meddling into affairs that weren't his own? Did he mean Rhett? Did... did the head of HQ know about Rhett and him? Had Stevie told him?
Link’s head began to swim. “I don't know what you're talking about.” he managed.

“I'm positive you do.” McLaughlin was quick on his heels, getting into Link's personal space and breathing heat onto his face, thinning the air and making it hard to comprehend the words coming out of his mouth. “With hacking into personnel databases and digging into information about the terrorist organization. I advice you to pick your battles, agent Neal.”

Link stuttered in response, having trouble forming words. He had hacked into the personnel database for a second time in the past two days, having extracted information about the agency transfers and the case files of the agents missing, along with Rhett's file. But Rhett had been among the group of transfers, so it wouldn't have come up as a red flag, surely. He hadn't found anything worth mentioning, but given the reaction of the head of fricking HQ, he knew for sure that he'd missed something. Perhaps McLaughlin didn't know that, perhaps he thought Link saw something he shouldn't have.

He was going to get his ass kicked for knowing nothing.

“This isn’t your fight, nor your concern.” McLaughlin continued, seeming like he was delivering a lecture on discipline. Link's fist was shaking at his side in restraint, feeling the vigorous urge to strike the taller man dead in the jaw and knock him out for his trouble. But he didn't have a death wish. “Back down and we will overlook this minor mishap. Am I clear?”

Link didn't respond and settled for standing his ground, watching McLaughlin carefully because he really had no idea what he was agreeing to. Someone must have ratted him out, but who? Stevie? Had she told this guy about his run-ins with Rhett and the hacking? Or Shannon? Chase? Could Link really trust anyone?

“Am I clear?” McLaughlin repeated, louder this time and no longer attempting to veil the threat in his words.

Link nodded dumbly, but when it became apparent that a verbal answer was required he cleared his throat and managed, “Yeah.”

Then, without a word, McLaughlin slammed his fist against the emergency override button behind him and abruptly the elevator stuttered back to life, resuming its descent and making Link's head swim. The taller man picked up his briefcase gracefully, seeming undaunted by the turn of events and effectively masking any anger or distaste he felt for Link once the elevator doors swung open and he was greeted by two very large – and very scary – men dressed in identical suits.

“Good evening,” McLaughlin nodded towards Link as he exited the elevator. Link managed to croak a good evening in response, decidedly remaining inside the elevator until the guy had vacated the building. He could hear his heart in his ears, the familiar thud, thud, thud echoing throughout his mind, the banal lump in his throat making it hard to breathe. Things just got a hell of a lot more complicated.

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Yes, Neal. That's really him. -C

Link looked down at his phone with a frown, wishing it hadn't really been the head of Mythical Intelligence whom he'd just had a run-in with. He was in the midst of towel drying his hair, fresh out the shower, willing the soap suds to whisk away the remnants of the encounter from his skin.
Fumbling with the device in his hands, Link managed to text a response without getting water droplets on the screen.

*You said he plays basketball with H's father, right? -N*

Chase's response wasn't instantaneous and allowed Link to gather himself before his phone buzzed again. He carried it with him to his small kitchen and began the task of pouring himself cereal for dinner – nutrition, at its finest – and held the phone in one hand.

*I said he plays baseball. I guess H corrected me? -C*

Link cringed at the screen before replying. *Yeah. -N*

*They're all certainly tall enough for it. -C*

*No kidding. -N* Link didn't want to think about how Mr. McLaughlin had towered over him, reeking of intimidation and authority, making Link shrink in on himself like a scolded animal.

*What're you going to do? -C*

*What can I do? -N*

Link didn't see any other option other than retreating with his tail between his legs, not willing to fight that kind of power or that kind of authority. It felt like a death wish; a web that Link didn't want to become tangled in, wriggling and fighting for his freedom. That wasn't part of the deal, and his contract sure as hell didn't have that in the listing. He sighed to himself, mouth full of Mini Wheats as he contemplated the decisions he had made, the ones he wished he hadn't and the ones he was grateful he did.

Rhett was a tricky one. There were an abundance of things he wished he could have done differently with his handler, but the overall outcome being their relationship – whatever it was – was something Link didn't feel anguish over. The relationship itself was gratifying, calming and everything Link hoped it could be, but with it came the necessary baggage of choosing someone like Rhett. Or, Rhett choosing someone like him considering he had made the first move. He had shown care and affection when Link had needed it most, and then came back for more. Rhett's troublesome personality didn't make Link shy away from him, just the opposite; it attracted him to his handler with the ache to get Rhett in a way that no one else could. In a way that Rhett clearly didn't grant to other people, but acquiesced in Link's insistence to let him in. And then Rhett disappeared on him, either by the agency's hand or his own, leaving nothing but a bitter taste in Link's mouth and Stevie's alarming advice ringing in his ears.

*You could stop. -C*

Link looked down at his phone and actually considered it. Considered letting go, finally, finally giving up on whatever they had uncovered. He wasn't a quitter, not by a long shot, but he was ageing and he had been through enough in his life that he wasn't sure he could govern another situation like this, another blow to his chest.

*I could. -N* Link typed his reply after a long moment of deliberation, thinking of Rhett and the note he had left for Link. With the underlined letters spelling out his nickname only adding to the pile of confusion and irritation that kept Link awake at night, tossing and turning and reliving the conversation he and Stevie had shared. What did Rhett want from him, in the end? Perhaps he had overestimated Link, thinking he could comprehend the note and come to his rescue, or whatever.

Everything was happening so quickly; first the impending attack in Nevada, and now Rhett's
disappearance from the grid under the pretense of a transfer. (Stevie had something to do with it, Link knew she did.) Then he had been threatened by the president of Mythical Intelligence. Link was starting to feel like stopping would be more valuable to his health, than anything.

His phone buzzed and Link swiped the screen to answer it, brow furrowing when it displayed an unknown number instead of Chase's like he had expected. He stared at the words on the screen, mouth agape and fingers twitching.

>Be careful in Nevada.

“Rhett?” Link thought aloud, peering at his screen in disbelief. He tried to reply to pertain about Rhett's whereabouts, to ask about his well-being, about why the hell he left, and what the hell did this stupid note mean, but his text failed twice indicating that Rhett's number was privatized. Typical. He muttered under his breath, "Jackass."

At least Link could confirm Rhett was alive, and evidently reading Link's thoughts. But if Rhett was still in it, then so was he.

He typed another text to Chase and then went about packing for Nevada. 

_I could stop, but I won't. -N_

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**JUNE 30TH 2007, present day**

Another glance upwards and yeah, the room was far, far too bright for Link.

“Neal, get your head out of the clouds and do some work.” Morgan's voice cut through him, cracking the patient plating in his mind. He rolled his eyes and Stevie looked just about as irritated as Link felt. She was dressed in a black, woolen jumper and khakis, combat boots on her feet. Regular field uniform, and similar to the one Link was wearing. Link thought she was missing a pair of aviators, or something, but it wasn't the time for that kind of joke. It wasn't the time for any kind of joke.

“Morgan, instead of instructing Neal, why don't you, I don't know, do your own damn work?” Stevie said, forcing a stoic look on her face when Link could tell she was itching to glare at the guy, to put him down for his trouble. Morgan had been a pain in Link's backside ever since they got off the plane a day ago, jumping down his throat for the simplest of things, tracking him, monitoring his work, watching and waiting for him to slip up and chew him out. Link was beyond displeased about it, just about ready to knock him unconscious before Stevie succumbed to the same urge.

Without protest, Morgan rose from his chair and exited the hotel room, miraculously closing the door gently behind himself. Link was sure he heard the sound of a fist colliding with the opposite wall coming from outside in the corridor. They were all frustrated, and he could understand Morgan's mindset. If they didn't do this right then people could die; not only innocents, but people of their own. Losing people was not something Link intended to let happen.

He had been monitoring radio chatter throughout numerous channels all morning, the decryption keys being easy to crack with Noah's aid. Noah was stationed in another hotel, five minutes south of Link's position. They had people in every area, around every corner, blending in and ready to strike once given the word. Now all they had to do was wait, and waiting was the worse part. Link's knee
jittered under the desk and he drummed his fingers on the laptop, watching, waiting, anxiety making him crumble at the seams.

“Anything?” Stevie's voice interrupted his internal turmoil as she seemed to sense his discomfort, looking over at him from where she was perched on her bed, laptop on her thighs. It was the first time Link had seen her since their talk, or whatever he should call it, and he had been fleeting in his responses until now.

“Nothing.” Link replied, having been sitting in the same position for hours peering at stationary channels of communication, “I'll let you know if something comes up.”

Stevie seemed to mull that one over before sighing into her hands as she rubbed them over her face, stress creating wrinkles at the edges of her eyes. Link felt like saying something, anything to comfort her, but his mind came up blank and he simply blinked at her dumbly. She spoke after a moment, voice distant and more unsure than Link had ever heard her, “Did you think about what we talked about, Neal?”

Link wasn't hasty with his response, wishing she hadn't mentioned it so he could resume pretending that their conversation hadn't happened. It was simply a bad dream that Link could wake up from and everything would return to normal. But alas, the world was against him. “I haven't come to a conclusion, yet.”

It was an honest answer, and Stevie appeared to accept it. “I see. That's unfortunate.”

“I hadn't intended for it to become an issue within the agency –”

“I know you didn't.” Stevie interrupted him with a hand raised, making Link close his mouth abruptly. “I'm well aware who started the... relationship between the two of you.”

“You are?” Link asked, irritation building in his gut, “What else are you aware of?”

“Nothing,” Stevie replied hastily, voice dripping in lies and half-truths. Link got the impression she wasn't even trying to hide it anymore, knowing that Link could see right through her. She was as transparent as glass. “Only that I had a similar chat with H myself. Cards on the table.”

Link didn't have a response for that, too busy pondering over the idea of Rhett and Stevie sitting at her desk under similar circumstances. Did his palms sweat like Link's had? Was he bitter in the end, or would he willingly give Link away without a second thought? He had to know. “And?”

“And nothing, Neal. It's done.” Stevie responded, returning to her work and seemingly ending the conversation. Link wasn't going to have that.

“Stevie,” He warned, gaining the woman's attention as they locked eyes across the room, tension rising high in the air circulating them, “I know you know where he is. And I know there's something else going on that you're not telling me.”

“I'm currently unaware of H's whereabouts, all I know is he was transferred,” Stevie parroted, blissfully ignorant to the fire settling in Link's stomach, the flush spreading over his skin, heating him from head to toe, “As for the situation, I'm not sure what you mean.”

“The transfers, the disappearing agents,” Link counted them on one hand to prove his point, enjoying the way Stevie's eyes tracked the movement of his fingers, “H's disappearance, and the terrorist organization. Something isn't right and you know it, you're just not telling me.”

“Agent Neal, that's not any of your –”
“My concern?” Link interrupted, rising to his feet and leaving his laptop running, the channels beeping absently in his earpiece, “My business? When will it be my business, Stevie? ’Cause I'm getting pretty tired of people telling me to pick a side.”

“Pick a side?” Stevie asked, momentarily distracted by Link's words. She didn't appear distraught by the new development or the way Link was speaking to her, simply listening to him and letting him get it out, because they needed him or they couldn't do this. Link nodded sharply, face grim and shoulders tense, arms folded over his chest.

“Mr. McLaughlin had a... conversation with me, for want of a better word.” Link spoke slowly, watching the way Stevie's eyes widened marginally in surprise. So she hadn't known about that, and she hadn't been the one to snitch on him. Which begged the question, who did? “He told me to pick my battles.”

“That's,” Stevie forced, “precipitous of him.” She shook her head suddenly, as if shaking herself out of her own surprise and sinking back behind the veil and back into whatever she was hiding, shielding it from view before Link could get a peak. “He is correct, none the less. What's done is done and there's no changing it now. You'll be appointed a new handler after we're done here, I'll oversee the paperwork personally.”

Link would have preferred if she had punched him in the face. “Stevie,” he tried again, a threat in his voice, “How many more people have to die before you trust me with this?”

Stevie hesitated in response which was response enough for Link to know that he had gotten to her, caught her in her own web of lies and turmoil. He intended to save her from it and resolve the lies to learn what the hell was going on. But the woman before him simply looked away, voice reserved, “There's nothing for me to concede, agent Neal.”

Link's fingernails dug into his palms, leaving crescent moon shapes on his skin – dark red rims of damaged skin on his palms. He cracked his neck and made his way to the door. He couldn't do this; he couldn't sit and let her make a fool of him. He couldn't watch her put thousands of lives at risk on top of their own and he couldn't understand why. He couldn't comprehend nor could he imagine a reason crucial enough for an agency to lie to its agents.

“Where are you going?” Stevie demanded from where she sat, pushing her laptop aside so she could rise to stop him. Link turned to her and stopped her dead in her tracks, gazing at his expression with a hint of regret, perhaps, but he couldn't be sure.

“You have a tell, you know,” Link offered, keeping himself calm and collected, “When you lie.”

“I –” Stevie started, then stopped, because evidently Link had rendered her speechless.

“You're picking at your nail. Left hand,” Link pointed at Stevie's hand that was betraying her. He had noticed it the first time he caught her lying to him, and spotted the pattern. Stevie looked at her own hand like it was a foreign object attached to her body, forcing herself to refrain from scraping away at the remaining nail polish on her index fingernail. When she looked up, Link was already opening the door and leaving and she didn't utter as much as a word to stop him.

“Neal, where the hell are you?”
Link was in the midst of splashing cold water on his face when Morgan's irritated and irritating voice sounded in his ear, shouting through his headset from somewhere close by. Link flinched at the volume and reached for a hand towel to dry his face. He had retreated to his own hotel room after his outburst in Stevie's room in attempt to calm down, to no avail, his mind reeling and heart racing.

“I'm here.” Link replied simply.

“What happened in here?” Morgan asked back, and Link could hear the chatter of someone in the background, “Stevie sounds like she's about to be sick.”

Link didn't feel bad about it; he didn't really feel anything, numb and immune to that kind of behavior. He fished around in his backpack, searching for any kind of equipment he could use, all the while avoiding Morgan's things thrown carelessly across his bed. He had regretfully agreed to share the room with Morgan, figuring it would only be one night and he could handle that, but now he had began to second guess himself.

“Why?”

“I don't know why, Neal,” Morgan spat back. There was a beat of silence and Link could hear his heart in his ears as he peered over at Morgan's things, “She's on the phone to someone. Sounds serious.”

Link paused. “Serious?”

“That's what I said, Neal,” Morgan mocked him, “She's arguing with someone. I don't know who it is but I'm telling you, you could cut the air in here with a knife.”

“I can imagine.” Link responded, wondering if she was on the phone to Rhett, or perhaps Mr. McLaughlin. He couldn't hazard a guess and he realized that he didn't care because it didn't matter; nothing mattered apart from saving those people at Sunset Station. In one fluid motion, Link leaned over and commandeered Morgan's belongings, fishing through his backpack for something, anything that would help him.

“What are you doing? Get back here, the channel could come online any second.” Morgan's voice was back in his ear, creating a headache that Link really didn't have time for.

“Stevie can handle it.”

“No, she can't. She needs you.” Morgan replied, and Link actually paused at the sincerity of it, “Why'd you think she brought your sorry ass along?”

And the whiff of an amiable characteristic in Morgan went out the window, and Link almost paused to wave it goodbye. He pulled out a Kevlar vest – military issue – from Morgan's backpack. Was Morgan in the military prior to Mythical Intelligence? A demotion, if he asked Link, but he kept his mouth closed.

“You'll have to ask her that one.” Link replied, bitterness in his tone. Morgan heaved a sigh at him over the earpiece. He could hear Stevie's voice there, fueling his determination to put an end to this personally, pulling his jumper up and over his head and replacing it with the vest. He had been wearing a similar outfit to Stevie; a black woolen jumper over dark jeans and combat boots, dressed for the field despite being glued to a computer screen for the morning.

He could hear Jen in his ears scolding him, warning him against what he was planning to do, but he ignored the voice of reason and settled for thinking of the good it would do and the people he would help; the lives he would save. He had to prove himself to Stevie so she would trust him, so he would
be privy to the details of whatever the heck was going on with the agency, with Rhett.

He checked his phone a total of three times, nothing. No mystery messages, nothing.

He was ready to go.

The communication channel sparked to life at around noon, spluttering out static which rang in Link's ears, hearing it over his own earpiece and cringing at its volume. Morgan's pained groan in his ear confirmed that it really had been that loud, and not just an audio bug. The terrorists could be messing with them, which was a high possibility considering the last time this happened it turned out to be a set up resulting in Rhett being cornered and beaten, but no casualties suffered. He was dressed the same way as before, save for being a bit bulkier around the torso, the Kevlar vest snug against his lithe frame.

He had sneaked out of the hotel undetected, much to his surprise, and it wasn't until he was nearing the station that Morgan's alarmed voice was in his ear, asking what the hell he was doing. And if he was honest, he had no idea. All he knew was that he couldn't just sit there this time. He had to be in on it, he had to experience it first hand, and he would not let any of the terrorists slip through his fingers like Rhett had. Arguably intentionally, but it wasn't the time for that debate, it was time for action and Link was in the thick of it.

“Agents K, L and M, permission to move,” Stevie's voice was in his ear, directing agents through the earpiece, obviously keeping an eye on the camera feeds like Link had before. Which meant she would spot him soon, and he would let her. But it was Morgan who saw him first, all but spitting into his mic in surprise.

“Neal!” Morgan shouted in his ear once more, so loudly Link was sure the other agents were getting tired of him already. “What are you doing?”

At the same time, Stevie had chirped in and interrupted Morgan's outburst, sounding much more furious than surprised, “Agent Neal, what do you think you're doing?”

“Not sitting in a hotel room barking orders, that's for sure.” Link responded, climbing the steps to Sunset Station Hotel and spying two agents to his left down a narrow corridor, gathered around one of their checkpoints. The lobby area was peculiarly quiet for the afternoon, which meant it would be a much simpler task of evacuating. No casualties yet, but no suspects either. Link escorted an old couple back out and down the steps, shushing their questions and directing them to another agent in charge.

“You better quit while you're ahead, agent Neal.” Stevie's voice sounded frightening, but there was nothing she could do and she knew it. Link was out of her hands.

Link pressed his fingers to his earpiece to speak clearer as he made his way back into the building to aid the evacuation process. “Keep me posted,” He told her, making his way up to the reception to flag down the employees and inform them of the situation, “I'll help evacuate until we find out where
the you-know-what is.”

“We're not even sure there is a bomb.” Morgan grunted. When he spoke again he sounded further away, “Are we?”

“I don't know.” Stevie sounded irritated; beyond that, close to enraged that Link had the audacity to defy her. Perhaps she wasn't used to people challenging her. She most likely always got her way and was never questioned on her methods. Link was a glass of fresh water straight to her face, soaking her and waking her up from her entitlement.

“Neal, uh, what are you doing in there?” Noah's startled voice sounded in Link's ear as he was making his way into the dining area, directing agents to cover the upper floors. The concern in Noah's voice warmed Link to the core, and for a moment he felt a pang of guilt for putting his colleagues through the additional stress of an unplanned field assignment.

“Change of plans.” Link explained, “I'm on the field now.”

“When did that happen?” Noah asked, then asked again, suspiciously, “You're telling me Stevie passed on this?”

“Noah laughed, and Link was ultimately surprised at how well he was taking it. But the more people on his side the better, so he cherished the acceptance while he still could. “Nothing suspicious yet, no one's really jumping out at me.”

“Me neither; things look quiet.” Morgan replied, and Link had trouble keeping up with their conversation on top of explaining to an upset mother that they had to vacate the building, that he was a federal agent and she just had to trust him on it. People were good at placing their blind faith in strangers once they displayed authority, and it would get them killed one day. Link knew that all too well.

“Neal,” Morgan's voice sounded in Link's ear after a long time spent attempting to herd together groups of individuals, startling him, “Come in, Neal.”

“Go ahead.” Link looked up and around for a nearby security camera, holding up a hand so Morgan could spot him on there. He recalled what it was like to be on the other side and feel the pressure of locating dozens of agents within a strict time limit, to keep track of them and ensure their safety. He would make Morgan's job as simple as he could.

“I see you. A transmission just came in,” Morgan sounded nervous, then quoted, “Attention, preparations commence now. RMC and CMC in position. Begin assault at 1300 hours.”

Link recognized the message instantly, “It's virtually the same as last time. Any idea what RMC and CMC are?”

“No idea.” Morgan admitted.

“Maybe not what, but who,” Noah spoke up. It was the first Link had heard from him since their brief greeting. “They said that last time, right? 'RMC and CMC in position' sounds like the placement of agents.”

“He's right,” Stevie's voice sounded stressed, upset and angry all at once. Link put it down to the situation topped with his direct disobedience to her. “He's right,” she repeated, mostly to herself it seemed, “Start scanning for inconsistencies in the building, Noah. Morgan, focus on the code. Find
“Last time there was a bug in the comments section. A red flag.” Link recalled, remembering sitting behind a desk and trying to think about everything and anything that wasn't Rhett's safety. He wondered if Stevie was feeling the same right now but about him, given that she was his responsibility and he had run out on her. He got hurt, and she would go down for it. He had multiple reasons to be careful.

“Neal,” Stevie addressed him sternly, making Link shift his weight under the scrutiny of the surveillance camera above his head, “You know how to disarm the bomb, if that's what we're dealing with. Don't go anywhere. I'll send for another agent to escort you.”

It took a total of five minutes for another agent to show up; a shorter guy with a scruffy beard and styled hair, glasses framing his face and causing Link to squint when the light reflected off of them. They shook hands once; all business and no pleasure, both knowing fine well what was at stake. No small talk, no nothing. They were too focused on the task at hand, playing the waiting game whilst they cleared the remainder of the rooms on the third floor.

“Agent F, come in,” Stevie sounded in Link's ear after the third floor had been cleared. He watched as F turned his head to the side and spoke firmly into his mic, voice deep and focused.

“Affirmative,” He greeted her, and Link listened for what Stevie had to say.

“We've isolated an alien signal to the fifth floor laundry room,” She told them hurriedly and Link took off running for the stairwell, completely dodging the elevators. He wouldn't be caught in one of those for a long time, not after his last escapade inside one. But that wasn't important, what was important was the capable agent at his heels, guarding his back as they hurried to the fifth floor, gripping onto the hand rails of the staircase for support.

“What sort of signal?” Link asked, panting between breaths as they climbed the last set of stairs. F grabbed onto his arm to signify he would go first, being armed with a handgun. Link stayed back as F moved down a long corridor, clearing the room before Link could proceed.

“Some warped version of a vestigial side-band,” Morgan informed them, to which Noah cursed in response, “This could be it, Neal.”

“You think it's another bomb, don't you?” F spoke up, sounding more disappointed than frightened. Link really had to hand it to the guy for keeping himself together. He had recalled reading F's name on the transfer list Chase had given him; a newly transferred agent to Nevada, and already he was adapting to his environment. The agency sure did something right during their screening process; every agent Link had met was capable in one way or the other.

“Think so,” Link replied solemnly as F pushed open the door to the laundry room and raised his gun. He shielded Link behind him until the small room was cleared.

“Clear. Go ahead.” F cleared his throat as he stepped to the side to let Link snoop around. F took out a small handheld device and pointed it at Link, who raised a brow at him until he explained, gesturing to his earpiece, “I'm using the camera. So they can see you.”

“We can see you, Neal.” Stevie's voice confirmed what F had told him, “Now, do you see anything that could be used as a bomb?”

“The safe is open,” F noted absently, drawing Link's attention to the small box on the floor, door laying ajar. He crouched down onto his hands and knees and shifted the steel box out of its place in
the corner and dragged into the middle of the cramped room. He reached inside it, F moving around him to angle the camera better. Inside was a smaller, red box decorated in suede.

“Get it,” Link announced, amazed, “Stevie, we got it.”

“Be careful,” came the response.

When the box was opened, Link’s face fell upon realization that it was a similar design, if not identical to the same bomb as last time. The same wiring, the same labeling, the same reaction time. What were the terrorists thinking? What if this was a distraction, and the real threat was still to come?

“It’s the same.” He stuttered, “As last time. It’s exactly the same.”

“Another hoax?” Morgan voiced his shock, heaving a sigh into his mic at the same time Noah cursed loudly.

“We can’t take that chance.” Stevie, the voice of reason, stated and then instructed Link to go ahead and disarm the bomb. She reminded him of what had happened previously; a small pocket exploding inside the main compartment and effectively engulfing her and another agent in blood – well, officially it was just her, but Link knew the truth.

“You might want to stand back,” Link warned F, who took a cautious step towards the doorway and closed the door as to obstruct the blast zone, effectively sacrificing himself and his suit for the inevitable. “Okay,” Link breathed, thinking his nerves aloud. He basked in the silence the others were offering him. His palms began to sweat as he reoested the colour combination, searing it into his mind, “Yellow, red, blue, green. Yellow, red, blue, green.”

The wires weren’t as tough as Stevie had made it seem that day, years ago in Link’s mind, but the image of her drenched in blood stuck to him like glue, singed into his mind to torture himself. He removed each wire easily, carefully and delicately, using his thin fingers to maneuver between where they crossed each other and overlapped. A small cloud of vapor exploded from within the compartment, startling both Link and F, who let out a startled grunt.

“Neal?” F asked, at the same time Stevie demanded, “Status report.”

“Fine.” Link reassured them, using his hand to wave away the cloud gathering around his head, “I’m fine.”

Which lasted all but two seconds before the second compartment exploded within the bomb and suddenly all Link could see was red. A mirage of color assaulted his vision and the distinct scent of blood engulfed him, weighing heavily on his shoulders and filling his lungs like poison. There was a hand on his shoulder, pulling him backwards and away from the blast. Link retreated easily, crab crawling backwards until his spine connected with something solid - F's chest. The smaller agent had an arm around Link's midsection, trained to protect him. Both men were drenched from head to toe in a thick, dark red liquid. It saturated their clothing and sunk into Link's skin, dried under his nails and filled his mouth with bitterness.

He thought in the midst of the chaos, that if he looked half as bad as F did right then, he might have laughed.
“You could have compromised the entire mission,” Stevie was shouting and no one else was speaking, all sitting down and looking away like the wounded animals they were. But it was Link she was directing her anger towards, and with good reason, “You could have gotten yourself killed. You could have gotten F killed.”

“I don't think –” F started, but Stevie interrupted him with a harsh, “Shut your mouth.”

Link picked desperately at his nails, willing away the dried blood from his hands, wishing it would disappear when he closed his eyes so he wouldn't have to keep reliving the night his family was taken from him. He had nothing to say in response to Stevie, having already said his part, already plead his case, and was now simply taking it. He and F had to be analysed, swabbed and poked and prodded, clothing confiscated and bodies hosed down before they were released back into Stevie's care, which could arguably be viewed as much, much worse. Both men were now dressed in navy overalls, having been given to them by the DNA analysis team.

Stevie had, however, granted them time for one shower each before she tore into them, knowing what they had been through having experienced it first hand. But it made her no less furious with Link.

“I'm the one in charge here, not you,” Stevie barked at him, an ugly expression on her face which gave Link the impression she wasn't accustomed to yelling at someone. “You disobeyed a direct order from me, and you knew exactly what you were doing –”

Much to his – and everyone's, probably – surprise, Morgan spoke up, meeting Stevie's volume head on, “With all due respect, S, he did what no one else was willing to do.”

“Running head first into danger is not something which should be praised, Morgan.” Stevie glared at him, but he simply stared her down, rising to his feet much to her distaste, “Take a seat.”

“He saved your ass and mine, and probably everybody else's in the goddamn room,” Morgan stated, gesturing around the room, pointing at Noah and F who were perched awkwardly on the desk where Link had been working at hours prior. F's hair was flattened and wet, and he looked positively deflated by the turn of events. Link didn't blame him, but he'd had to make sure he thanked the guy personally for protecting him.

Link was isolated from the group on the other side of the room, sitting glumly on the edge of Stevie's bed while she chewed at him. Morgan had been sitting across from him in a small arm chair until he had risen.

“We didn't know what the situation was, or what it could have been.” Morgan continued, “You were going to send inexperienced, newly transferred agents into a firefight without ammunition.”

“I will not have my methods questioned in front of me, Morgan,” Stevie warned him, “F knew what he was in for and he accepted his role with valor. And here he is, alive and well.”

“Thanks to Neal.” F said and gained one of the most terrifying looks Link had ever seen on Stevie's otherwise timid face. Yeah, Link definitely had to thank F somehow, take him out for a beer or something if they survived this. Morgan jumped at the chance, benefiting from F's response.

“Exactly, thanks to Neal.” He repeated, glancing at Noah who was being uncharacteristically silent, “Who knows where we'd be if Neal hadn't taken some initiative and went down there.”

There was a long moment of silence, the tensing of the air around them impossible to ignore as Stevie's eyes slowly traveled from Morgan to Link. Link looked up at her with tired eyes.
In the end, Stevie sighed and shook her head, offering a small nod towards Morgan who took it as his cue to leave the room. He was excused.

“Neal,” Stevie addressed him as the other agents were returning to their own rooms for the evening, “Morgan is right. As much as you should have stuck to my orders, you really held your own down there.”

“Thanks,” Link responded, sounding sincere and meaning it. Stevie watched him for a short moment before she smiled suddenly. It touched her eyes and warmed something in Link's chest, similar to when Jen would smile at him.

“I think I understand H's admiration for you,” Stevie spoke fondly, as if it were the most casual thing in the world and not like it would send Link's already tired mind into meltdown, reeling with possibilities and endless lists of questions he had for her. But, they were for another time and he decided to take it as a compliment because it was as close as he was ever going to get to one.

“Thank you.” He replied politely, then added as an honest afterthought, "Maybe you can share that understanding with me sometime."

Stevie laughed sweetly and shook her head at him. "You two are more alike that I thought."

Link didn't get a chance to respond before she dismissed him, biding him a good night's sleep for his early rise in the morning. Link had never been more pleased to return to his room.

Morgan was nowhere to be found, which suited Link just fine; he'd most likely gone somewhere to cool off, to calm down so he wouldn't nit pick at Link's every movement, or every breath. He had stood up for Link when no one else did and everyone in the room was surprised, shock evident in their faces when Morgan had raised his voice. He had to thank Morgan somehow, shake his hand and proclaim a truce, or something. But he had plenty of time to think about that, an entire evening to dwell over unimportant social aspects of his job.

He helped himself to a whiskey from the mini fridge and poured himself two fingers, downing it without thinking and pouring another after he removed his boots. A soft knock at the door echoed in his ears and tugged at his retinas, creating a pain behind his eyelids. He rubbed at them to rid himself of it, assuming that Morgan had returned and couldn't get into the room. Link had locked it behind himself without thinking, an automatic action, too cautious for his own good. The last thing he needed was Morgan going off at him for locking him out of his own room.

Link opened the door, rubbing at his eye with his free hand before it dropped to his side, a sharp inhale of breath sounding in his ears and burning his throat at the figure standing in the doorway.

“Rhett?”

*tbc*

Chapter End Notes

Bon soir! Totally a rollercoaster for this chapter, whoop-de-doo! Apologies for the delay in updating, I was held up at work. Nothing much to say really this week, except that readers might be glad to know that Rhett will now be featured much more often in this story since the plot is picking up. And he is a very valuable asset to the plot, trust me.
Oh, and brownie points to those who recognized who Agent F was. Hint: he was mentioned in chapter nine. Let me know if everyone enjoyed this week's chapter and if anyone is confused about anything!

You know the drill: if there are any mistakes I will get to them momentarily. Feel free to critique, comment and review. All are welcome. This story does not have a beta. See you next week! Merci et prends soin de toi!
JUNE 30TH 2007, present day

There was a beat. A delicate second of shallow breathing, locked gazes and shaking hands before the word was out of his mouth. “Rhett?”

Instantaneously, there was a strong hand covering his mouth, cracked lips against calloused skin as Link’s eyes widened in alarm and Rhett pushed his way into the hotel room. The taller man's heel connected with the back of the door and he kicked it closed behind him, hand fixed on Link's mouth, his other hand pressing a finger to his own lips in a shushing motion. That was when Link realized his mistake, his brief hiccup of judgement calling Rhett by his name without considering the possibility of passersby. There was also the likelihood of Rhett not wanting the others alerted to his presence.

Rhett gripped Link's jaw, fingers digging into the bone and troubling the skin there. His eyes were like stone, solid and motionless, free of feeling as he looked at Link. Link felt transparent under his gaze and wriggled away from him. Rhett thankfully released his grip on the smaller man, hands hanging in the air as if he wasn't quite sure what to do with them next.

“Rhett?” Link announced again, quieter this time and close to a whisper. It came out as more of a hiss and with good reason; just what the hell was Rhett doing there? His handler – well, ex-handler now – looked livid, eyes on fire.

“Neal,” Rhett said, the absence of Link's nickname igniting the air, heating up the pale skin of Link's forearms. “You're safe.”

Link blinked at him. “Yeah?”

Abruptly, Rhett's fist collided with Link's shoulder, forcing him to jolt backwards and lose his footing, effectively toppling towards his bed in the midst of his domino effect. Rhett pushed forward and gripped his elbow to steady Link, who had half the mind to rip his arm away and glare. His handler was watching him with guarded eyes, and Link finally got a good look at his face, no longer engulfed with shock at his presence. Rhett's left eye was battered and bruised, a dark purple and blue ring around the socket, skin sunken and deflated. His upper lip was busted and sported a thick line of raw skin ascending into his beard, highlighting the identical gash across his right cheek, shallow and...
pink and stretching up to his earlobe. He looked like he'd been through Hell and back again, taking a short detour to Link's hotel room before going back in for more.

Link's stomach began to bubble, a painful twinge of fury erupting within him at the thought of someone doing this to Rhett. Of someone doing this to Rhett again.

“What the hell happened to you?” He demanded, skin on fire, at the exact moment Rhett spat, “What were you thinking?”

There was a tense moment of silence, both men waiting for the other's response, stubbornly refusing to back down. Ultimately it was Link who succumbed to Rhett's powerful gaze, painfully aware of the way his skin itched where Rhett grasped his elbow. It had been a mistake to roll up the sleeves of his overalls.

“Oh, I don't know, Rhett,” He began, trying to forcefully shake his elbow free, “Trying to stop people from being killed?”

“Your job is to monitor channels –” Rhett started, grip tight on Link's elbow, but the shorter man interrupted him.

“Try to protect people.” Link barked, raising his voice because to hell with Rhett and his secrecy, “And figure out what the heck is going on since no one seems to be letting me in.”

“You could've been killed.” Rhett statement was a meager attempt to keep his voice flat; vulnerability seeped through and made Link feel weak at the knees, feeling his resolve crumble.

“Save the speech. I already heard it all from Stevie.”

“I know.” Rhett told him, being uncharacteristically informative. Typically he would shy away from the idea that he and Stevie had been in contact when they shouldn't have been. Link was afraid to accept the progress in the likely event that it was sucked out from under him, so instead he raised a brow and once again attempted to break the hold Rhett had on his elbow.

“Let me go.” Link demanded, but there was a small glimmer of don't let go in his words, in his eyes and his heart, radiating from his chest and travelling down his arms, warming his skin and flowing into Rhett's fingertips. His handler looked down at his hold as if he hadn't any idea he was still manhandling Link, then hastily let go and let his arms fall to his sides, limp and lifeless, shoulders slumping. Link felt something break within him.

“What happened to you?” He asked softly.

“Nothing.” Rhett grunted.

“Rhett.” Link snapped back.

Rhett heaved a sigh and looked at Link like...like something, as if he was his only link – pun not intended – to the world. As if he would lose touch with reality if Link hadn't been standing there in front of him, eyes wide and chest heaving, ready to jump at the chance to get answers once and for all. But the raw anguish flickering in Rhett's eyes made his determination waver and wobble, and he watched as it toppled over and landed at his feet.

“This is,” Rhett began, raising his hand to pull at the collar of his hoodie, displaying the skin of his neck, battered and bruised and discolored, “the outcome of a disagreement. And this,” he pointed to his black eye, “is from a different disagreement, albeit regarding the same thing.”
Link's palms felt clammy and his heart hurt, beating against his chest and threatening to break free from his rib cage. Rhett was definitely in the habit of getting himself into fights, both violent and verbal, but he was just that kind of guy. Right? He wouldn't be involved in something much more dangerous and daunting, a bigger picture that Link had yet to see. Right?

In another world, another life, Link hoped that was the case. But not in this world, not here and not now, not in the world where Rhett was standing in front of him, half beat to Hell and still managing to irritate Link with his smart-ass comments.

“They're not trophies, you know,” Link spoke quietly, crossing his arms over his chest and looking everywhere but Rhett's eyes, taking in the damaged flesh on his neck and face and wishing things could have been different. “The bruises. They might be enough to fool other people, but they're not enough to fool me.”

“I ain't proud of them,” Rhett replied, irritated, turning his back on Link and moving as if he wanted to leave. He inched towards the door but seemed to think the better of it, turning his head to the side to peer at Link over his shoulder. “Maybe you should transfer some of that worry for me to yourself. What you did today was stupid and reckless –”

“What's done is done,” Link interrupted, “Save me the lecture, Rhett. Look at you.”

Rhett scoffed at him, and suddenly the atmosphere in the room wasn't something Link wanted it to be. Apathetic and withdrawn, and he could read it all on Rhett’s face. “Bruises heal.”

“Yeah, but they keep reappearing on you.” Link reminded him just as Rhett sighed and put his face in his hands. Link ached to comfort him, to touch his handler – ex-handler – and offer some kind of emotional support. Rhett's blue hoodie looked crumpled and worn, as if he'd slept in it the night before, and he might have. Link had no idea what the taller man was into, and he was slowly becoming skeptical about it; did he even want to know? If it was something as terrible as he and Stevie were making out to be, what would Link do? What would he have to do?

Furrowing his brow, he took it slowly. “What happened, Rhett? You disappeared.”

“I know, I –” Rhett began, then grunted in pain suddenly, rolling his shoulder and turning back around to face Link. “I was transferred.”

“I heard.” Link intoned, but he knew Rhett could tell from his expression that he really didn't believe that.

“I got an email about it the morning after we, uh. We –” Rhett fell over himself like a teenager, and if it were under any other circumstance Link might have smiled or cracked a joke, but he didn't. He simply watched as the taller man attempted to make sense of his thoughts. “After I left your place. And I guess I just,” he paused, looking away from Link towards the bed, “decided to give you space.”

Link almost scoffed, almost sucked his teeth at the stupidity of it. But he didn't, and he remained as polite as he could, because he had gotten Rhett talking and he wasn't about to screw that up. Not after the struggle to get him to open up in the first place. Link wasn't stupid. The small lamp on Link's bedside table illuminated the side of Rhett's face, changing the hue of his bruises, making them look much worse than before. Link's heart thumped in his chest, a shallow thud, thud, thud ringing in his ears when Rhett winced and shifted his weight from foot to foot.

“I'm stationed in Nevada, actually,” Rhett continued when it became apparent that Link wasn't going to back down, “It's been a trip.”
“Funny.” Link glanced towards the door, worried that Morgan could come back and discover Rhett there, discover them together and implicate them further. He looked back at the taller man with a raised brow and asked, “Why were you transferred?”

“It's a long story.” Rhett stated. “A lot of agents were transferred, it wasn't just me.”

“It's unusual for an agency to transfer a handler, you know,” Link mentioned offhandedly and enjoyed the way Rhett's nostrils flared in response, “Yeah, I've been doing some reading. It's actually, you know, pretty damn rare that a handler will be stripped of his agents and transferred to another state.”

“Listen,” Rhett began, as if to explain, but Link cut him off.

“No, you listen. I'm tired of being thrown around from state to state, I'm tired of people straight up lying to my face.” Link was unable to keep his voice calm. His hands began to shake. “I'm not going to ask again, Rhett. What's going on?”

A long moment of tense silence stretched through the room. It engulfed Link as it spread and swept him away with it, creating pressure in his chest and a tightness between his shoulder blades. Rhett's eyes were downcast and somber with amber specks dancing in them from the dim lamp beside him. The light cast shadows on his face, partially obscuring it from Link's view. Once Link was certain he wasn't going to get a response, Rhett's voice broke through his thoughts, quiet but stern.

“It's a long story,” he repeated, but Link could see the cogs in his head turning, “There was a hiccup during a business transaction here in Nevada. I'm overseeing it.”

“What kind of hiccup?” Link asked despite his certainty that he wouldn't get an answer. And he was right because Rhett simply shook his head and made a break for it once more, moving towards the door. In a blind panic, Link blurted, “I ran into the head of Myth Int.”

For whatever reason, Rhett stopped dead in his tracks and Link could feel his blood run cold, could feel the tension rolling off of the other man's shoulders in waves. There was a beat before Rhett commented, “You did.” It wasn't a question.

Link hesitated. Did Rhett already know about it? Was he the one Stevie had been arguing with on the phone? “He used the emergency override in the elevator we were in. He threatened me, told me to pick my battles.”

“Did you hurt you?” Rhett asked instantly.

“No, he – he barely touched me.” Link reassured him, remembering what it felt like to have Mr. McLaughlin close in on him, corner him and turn him into nothing but a whimpering and wounded animal, tail between his legs as he exited the elevator.

Rhett turned around and his expression was pained, brows furrowed and lips pursed, one hand raised as if he was readying himself to approach Link. Or perhaps to stop Link if he moved forward; Link didn't know which possibility was worse. All he knew was that something serious was going on, something serious enough to cause Rhett to make that expression, to feel the anguish he was feeling.

“He give you a name?” Rhett asked suddenly. Link got the impression he already knew the answer.

“Yeah, McLaughlin.”

Rhett looked up at him, wide eyed and guilty, but Link couldn't figure out why until the words were out of his mouth, “He's my uncle.”
Link blinked once, twice, but it wasn't until the third time that he realized he hadn't put two and two together having been too wrapped up in self pity and confusion. *His father plays baseball with the head of Myth Int.* He heard Chase's voice in his ears, sounding almost scolding and disappointed. *Basketball, actually.* Rhett's voice accompanied his, sounding farther and farther away, slipping between his fingers like liquid.

“Your father plays basketball with the head of Mythical Intelligence,” Link stated slowly, thinking out loud.

Rhett cracked his knuckles on one hand in response. “And the head of the agency is my uncle.”

“Does he know about us?” Link asked suddenly, panicked and sweating. *Us.* It felt surreal saying it aloud, having only really informed Chase of the development. But it gave Rhett the opportunity to back down, to voice his opinion and tell Link whether or not he had listened to Stevie's advice and decidedly ended their relationship. Or whatever the hell it was.

“I don't know,” Rhett replied, sounding unsure of himself. Link felt nausea creep up on him. “I was careless. I should have been smarter, I should have –” he paused, as if to gather himself and his thoughts, backing up a step with a shake of his head, “This shouldn't have happened.”

His words cut through Link like a knife, the blade carving into his skin and ripping him in two. His surroundings became circumstance, no longer important; nothing was as important as the man before him, shaking his head and balling his fists at his sides. *This shouldn't have happened.* The words echoed through Link's mind, repeating over and over until he wasn't even sure if Rhett had spoken in the first place. His mind was torturing him, poisoning him and rendering him helpless.

Weakly he asked, “It shouldn't have?”

Rhett looked away from him and towards the door, “I should go.”

Link opened his mouth to speak but suddenly there was nothing else to say, his previous drive to find answers now disintegrated, pushed into a dark circle in his mind. Rhett remained motionless and Link had never seen him so look so fragile, so conflicted that he couldn't move. Cautiously, Link took a step forward, but Rhett shot him a look of warning. It was obvious he didn't want Link coming any closer, but to hell with that. Link had spent enough time crippled by the idea that Rhett had left him, left him alone in the midst of the chaos of the agency without so much as a word of goodbye. No, there was no way he was letting Rhett walk away from him, not when he'd started whatever this was in the first place.

Just because Rhett was second guessing himself didn't mean what they were doing was wrong. Poorly timed, perhaps, but not wrong.

He continued forward until he and Rhett were centimeters apart and Link could take in the discoloration around the taller man's eye. He was going to kill whoever did this to Rhett. Whoever was doing this to them. Rhett raised his hand and put it on Link's shoulder, a firm pressure applied to clothed skin to hold him back, but it seemed halfhearted and only fueled Link's confidence.

“Rhett, I –” Link began, voice soft and questioning, looking up at Rhett's damaged eye and seeing the conflict there. The usual veil concealing Rhett's emotions was gone and replaced with a sadness that shook Link to his very core, heart beating irregularly.

The hand Rhett had placed on Link's shoulder ghosted over his body until it connected with his chest, fingertips just grazing his collarbone. Rhett wasn't holding him back anymore and allowed Link to close the distance between them. Conflicted, Rhett spoke quietly, “We shouldn't do this,
“I know.” Link replied, voice barely a whisper. It was maybe the most honest thing he'd ever said to Rhett. But it didn't matter; what mattered was the man in front of him, towering over him and looking like he was preparing to commit a terrible crime. Eyes riddled with sadness and guilt and Link couldn't figure out why.

“Link,” Rhett began, his voice ridiculously tender. He opened his mouth to speak again, but whatever words he had been about to vocalize were swallowed up when Link closed the space between them and kissed him. He didn't think he'd ever get used to kissing Rhett, not really. But it was definitely something he'd be willing to try and get used to. If they had the chance.

Rhett made a small noise in the back of his throat somewhere between a grunt and a groan, letting his fingers tighten around the fabric of Link's overalls. Link was overwhelmed by the heat coming from the other man's mouth, and even more overwhelmed by the corresponding heat rising in his chest. Rhett was like an irrepressible force of nature, a heatwave encompassing Link and melting him. Whatever reservations Rhett had about them being intimate had apparently shriveled into nothing given the way he wrapped an arm around Link's waist and deepened their kiss, licking his way into Link's mouth.

Link's hands gripped Rhett's shoulders for balance, trying not to lose his footing along with his mind. The taller man's beard scraped away at his chin and Link couldn't find room to care, too captivated by the kissing and touching and Rhett in general. He slid his hand up to Rhett's hair and tugged, forcing his head to tilt and giving Link more control. He had initiated this after all, and he wasn't about to let Rhett think he was going to win, not this time.

To his surprise, Rhett pulled back. Link caught himself before he pursued Rhett's retreating lips. Warm breath hit his lips and made Link's head swim, eyes closed and breathing heavy.

“Link, I – we –” Rhett started, stumbling over his own words and causing Link to huff a laugh.

“If you stopped us from kissing to stutter uncontrollably, you're doing great.”

Rhett smiled and kissed Link softly, so tender that it caused his knees to go weak. Rhett didn't stop there, lips moving to Link's cheek and kissing before trailing a line down his neck. If it was some form of payback for the smart ass comment, Link would have to mention that it didn't feel like payback at all. Or maybe that he should make smart ass comments a lot more.

He and Rhett had come a long way, at times feeling helpless and crushed, but bouncing back victorious and marginally happy, for want of a better word. Link squirmed when Rhett nosed along his jaw and hit a ticklish spot on his neck, breathing out a surprised laugh. He could feel the other man's grin against his skin.

“Sorry,” Rhett apologized and Link could hear the grin in his voice. “I didn't know you were ticklish.”

“I guess they failed to mention that in my file.” Link huffed, receiving a sharp bite to his neck from Rhett in response. Link might have let out an embarrassing, strangled noise, but he would deny it 'til the end because there was no way that Rhett had forced a sound like that out of him. It clearly affected Rhett in some way, hands sliding down to Link's hips and fingers digging into the bone there, thumbs against the tender flesh of his pelvis. This is where the overalls came in handy, that way Rhett couldn't lift Link's shirt and touch him further, because there was no way Link could control his mouth if that happened. He swallowed audibly just thinking about it.
“Your pulse is racing,” Rhett noted from somewhere at Link's neck, lips pressed against the skin and breathing warm air when he spoke.

Link fought a shiver and nodded sheepishly. “You make me crazy,” he admitted, surprising himself with the sudden honesty, “Seriously. I don’t know how you do it.”

Rhett pulled back to look at Link carefully, hands holding his hips in place. After an eternity, he smiled, but it seemed forced, “When Stevie told me what you had done, that you'd gone into that hotel, I felt crazy. I was so close to going in there after you.”

“I can handle myself.” Link protested sheepishly, readying himself for an argument that didn't come. Instead, Rhett leaned forward and rested his forehead against Link's. Rhett's skin was burning.

“I know that,” Rhett told him, eyes closed and face relaxed, prompting Link to close his eyes too, “But it didn't stop me from thinking it. If something happened to you, Link. I don't know. I just –”

When Rhett didn't continue, seemingly distraught, Link opened his eyes to watch him as best he could. “Nothing 

"Nothing did happen. That's what's important, Rhett.”

“I know that,” The taller man repeated, then heaved a sigh and pulled back to look Link in the eye, “Link, listen to me. There are things going on that you don't know about. Things you're going to find out eventually, and it ain't going to be pretty. I just want you to know that I – that I care about you. And I'm not gonna let anyone hurt you, you hear me?”

Link's brow furrowed in response, unsure of what Rhett meant. He had actually acknowledged the fact that he was keeping things from Link, but if he knew Link would find out anyway, why not just spare the game of cat and mouse and tell him what the big deal was? Rhett's face looked serious, genuinely concerned for Link's well-being, causing him to nod slowly in response. Because, yeah he could hear what Rhett was saying. Not that he fully understood, but that was another story.

“Rhett –” Link began, but the sound of someone knocking at the hotel room door made him jump. Four knocks in quick succession, followed by four more and then silence. Rhett's face contorted slightly in response.

“That's my cue. I gotta go.” He told Link, who was ready to ask who the hell was at the door, but Rhett's lips shushed him before he pulled away, “Seriously, Link. Think about what I said.”

“I will.” Link promised, watching Rhett's back as he turned away with one last fleeting look. As an afterthought, Link asked, “When will I see you again?”

Rhett appeared to hesitate, hand on the door knob as he looked back at Link longingly before saying, “Soon.”

And then he was gone, and Link was left to his own devices. Who the hell had knocked at the door, and why? Morgan? Stevie? Someone who knew Rhett would be there, someone warning Rhett that it was his time to leave. The reason was clear as day once Morgan came to the door not five minutes later, wondering why the hell the door was locked.

Link had to choose his battles, and fighting with Morgan about a damn door wasn't one of them. He had too much to think about.
JUNE 31ST 2007, present day

Link had practically just been served in a small cafe when he felt a short vibration in his pants pocket. He pulled his phone out of his jeans and juggled the device in his hand, giving the barista his last twenty dollar bill to purchase his and Morgan's morning coffee. After commandeering his Kevlar vest and rummaging through his things without permission, Link figured he owed the guy. And Morgan was overly pleased about it, ordering the most obnoxious drink on the menu just to spite him. Had he mentioned Morgan was a jackass?

Neal, when do you get back? -C

Link frowned down at his phone, shuffling his feet along the floor once he accepted his change with a short nod of thanks. Morgan rolled his eyes at him and moved to the edge of the counter, leaning up against it and watching the girl behind the coffee machine pour ice into a blender. Link wasn't entirely sure what he had ordered, but he knew it was some form of opulent coffee, cold and unpleasant and with two ingredients Link couldn't even pronounce. He ignored Morgan and focused on the phone in his hands, answering Chase.

On the 3rd. Everything okay? -N

There was a long pause in texts afterwards and Link had almost forgotten Chase texted him, walking back to the hotel with Morgan at his side, complaining about how uncomfortable his mattress had been.

“Seriously, what do we pay for?” Morgan grumbled around his coffee cup. Link watched as he consumed the liquid that cost him six bucks.

“We don't pay for anything, the agency does.” Link managed to roll his eyes. “I paid for your coffee, I'll add. You didn't pay for anything.”

“Didn't know you were capable of jokes, Neal,” Morgan barked a laugh, mocking and irritating. It made Link want to strangle him, to grab the cup from his hand and soak him with it, watch as the liquid saturated his shirt and ruined it. In another world maybe he would have done it, but his phone buzzing helped him refrain from doing something stupid.

Call me when you get back in Los Angeles -C

Link felt his face pale. Chase had effectively avoided the question; something wasn't right. Maybe he'd figured out the code. Maybe they were a step closer to figuring out what the hell Rhett and the agency were up to, or maybe not. If it were that simple, why hadn't Chase just said so? Something had to be wrong, something bad must have come into the light. Something he couldn't discuss over text.

The sound of Morgan calling to someone made Link look up from his phone questioningly, following the other man’s gaze and spotting Noah making his way toward them having just exited the lobby of the hotel.

“Neal, you okay?” Noah asked, losing the spring in his step as his face fell when he caught sight of Link. “You look like you've seen a ghost.”

Link shook his head automatically, hardwired to hide his insecurities from people he didn't want prying into his social life. He needed to talk to someone, but that someone wasn't Noah. And it wasn't Morgan, who was looking at him flatly, coffee forgotten. “I'm fine. I just want to get back to L.A..”
“You and me both, brother.” Noah replied, seeming to trust Link's bogus response. Morgan, on the other hand, looked a little miffed, if not nauseous. And all Link could think was yeah, he knew how that felt. Noah managed to keep him occupied, saving him from retreating inside and curling in on himself. “You guys got coffee without me?”

“You were sleeping.” Morgan offered.

“Next time, wake me.” Noah scowled back at the larger man, but everyone knew he couldn't take Morgan if he tried.

“Let's hope there won't be a next time.” Link spoke, humming a little afterwards to indicate Noah's mistake. Like hell would he be back here, like hell would he let the terrorists one up them again. He was so close to the truth he could taste it, feel it ghosting his fingertips. He was determined to see this one out 'til the end.

AUGUST 19TH 1998, 9 years ago

“You're coming to the game this week, Neal,” Jen informed him, and Link knew she wasn't going to back down, “Whether Eddie has to drag you by your hair or not.”

“Leave my hair out of this,” Link smirked a bit, handing Jen her coffee – black, two sugars – and sipping at his own. He took his coffee with milk simply because he couldn't handle the bitter taste of it otherwise, but Jen seemed used to it. Link knew she had experienced enough bitterness and hardship in her life to handle it, and he admired her for that. Even if she scared him, just a bit.

“I'm surprised Kim even allows you to grow it that long,” Jen mused, sipping at her coffee before spluttering because it was too hot. She never paced herself, always throwing herself into things and getting injured. *What doesn't kill me makes me stronger,* she'd always say. Link wasn't too sure about that, but he humored her regardless. “You have *wings,* for god's sake.”

“She likes it,” He explained, chuckling at the description of his “wings”. His hair was long enough to curl at the ends, shaping around his ears and the arms of his glasses, gaining him the nickname Wings in the office. A sheriff's deputy with Wings for a pet name was embarrassing, but he didn't mind, not really.

Jen spotted a table open near the corner of the cafe, adjacent to a small screen television where a bunch of people were watching a cooking channel, sighing over sandwiches and chatting over the steam of coffee, a waitress meandering through them. Link never paid them any mind, settling down into a soft chair and allowing Jen the chair facing the entrance. She preferred to be able to see who entered and exited; it kept her calm and gave her a small sense of control.

“The beard, on the other hand...” He offered, well aware that the woman before him was simply itching to poke fun at him.

Jen let out a deep belly laugh that warmed Link's heart, “I can only imagine. Seriously, dude, you ever heard of a razor?”

“My electric one is busted,” Link sighed and took a sip of his coffee, relaxing into his chair and listening in on the chitchat behind him. People arguing over which station to put on, sports or cooking. Someone wanted the news report on. Link was never big on television.
“Disposable razors, meet Lincoln Neal,” Jen mocked absently, eyeing up the people behind his head, far away and not worth noting. “Ask Kim to come to the game, she'd enjoy it.”

“I'll ask her,” Link took another sip of his coffee, fingering the lid and looking out the window. “She's working all week, so she'll be tired.”

“Good thing all she has to do is watch the game, not play it.” Jen retorted, then smiled when Link laughed and nodded, taking her point. “How are things?”

Link swallowed the liquid in his mouth, letting the heat soothe his throat, “Actually, uh, that's why I asked you here.”

“And here I thought my company was the reason,” Jen replied easily, but the concern was evident in her shoulders. Link was quick to ease the rising tension by raising a hand in defense.

“Don't panic,” He smiled softly, “We're actually, you know, trying.”

Jen blinked at him. “You're trying.”

“Yes.”

“Trying, trying?” She asked again, leaning forward with her elbows on the table, whispering as if it was a secret. Like they were two kids in the middle of the lunch hall discussing something they shouldn't. “For a kid?”

Jen's smile was enough to make Link's face break out into a grin, teeth shining white, “Yeah. We have been for a while now. I thought you'd like to know.”

“You're damn right I wanna know,” Jen said as if it were the simplest thing in the world, pausing to shove his shoulder affectionately across the table, before settling back into her chair. Link watched as she adjusted her hat in thought, wondering why he'd waited so long to tell her. It was pretty nerve-wracking for him even thinking about it, considering the possibility that he could be a father soon.

“Well, now you do.” Link offered a short smile, but obviously it conveyed his nerves because Jen's face suddenly hardened. She was looking away from him, past his head towards the crowd behind him who were now murmuring quietly to themselves. Link raised an eyebrow at her in question. “Hey, what –”

“Is Kim working today?” Jen asked suddenly, voice grim. Link recognized the fear in it instantly, having known her long enough to notice when something frightened her.

“Yeah, she is, she – ” Link stumbled over his words, watching Jen's face pale. Numerous gasps echoed behind him, erupting from the crowd of people and causing Link to follow Jen's gaze and look at the television.

“...the current status of the hostages are unknown, but police reports state that the situation is being controlled and none of the persons inside the building have been harmed.” A woman – short and middle aged – spoke frantically on the television, one hand holding a microphone up to her mouth and the other putting pressure on her earpiece. Link's face paled, recognizing the location like the back of his hand. “I'm getting word that we have a live feed on scene, we're cutting to it now.”

There was a moment of dead silence. No one in the room spoke; no sound was made aside from the waiter hopping over the counter to see what the commotion was. The television flickered and the picture changed, as did the volume, increasing and making a few people grimace. A tall man appeared on screen, a mic attached to his pale green coat with something that looked like duct tape.
“The terrorist attack on the Hampton Inn has come as a shock to the state, and to the nation. Myself and the other specialists are on scene and doing everything in our power to prevent the situation escalating further.” The guy sounded sure of himself, all tough and businesslike, but he wasn't fooling anyone. The news always plastered these types of people over the television, acting as the strong-faced front man in the midst of the chaos to give people false hope.

Link couldn't breathe; it felt like the world had been sucked out from under him and he was free falling into madness. Everything was in slow motion, the gasps among the crowd, the cynical comments at the television, Jen's strong hand grasping his shoulder as he rose from his seat. It felt like a panic attack; the familiar loss of breath, the pain in his chest, the disassociation to his surroundings. Nothing mattered, nothing except the fact that he had to get the hell out of there.

He had to do something. He had to get out, he had to run, Jen on his heels, only a few blocks away. He would make it, he would do something. Anything. He had to be sure, he had to know, he had to make sure his family was safe. He had to, he just had to.

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**JULY 3RD 2007, present day**

The first thing Link did when he landed in Los Angeles was drive to Chase's apartment. The check-in at HQ could wait and so could Stevie; Link had more important issues to address. Important issues such as what the hell Chase had figured out, and what the hell Rhett's mystery note meant. The humidity in the air did a number on his hair, curling and complaining about the change in atmosphere. He had found it a little difficult to breathe since he had landed, either due to the weather or the fact that he was actually about to get some answers. It was most likely a mix between both the former and the latter, but Link didn't waste time pondering the possibilities.

He could hear his heart race in his ears, drowning out the unpromising sounds coming from his car engine. *Rentals*. His next move would be to take his “hunk-o-crap” – nickname trademarked by Noah – back to the shop and exchange it for something better. At least something that didn't sound like it was going to die out on him at any time. The last thing Link needed was a repeat of the escapade a few weeks back when Rhett had come to the rescue, fierce and vexatious in his Camaro. Link couldn't help but cringe at his own stupidity; his magnetic pull towards trouble was going to be the death of him, but without that pull he would never have felt drawn to Rhett, captivated by his every word and breath. Maybe it would have saved them a lot of problems had he been more cautious, had they both been more cautious. But Link didn't regret a thing, not really.

He was in too deep, too submerged in the mess the agency had left him to drown in.

Alex's car wasn't in the parking lot next to Chase's apartment when Link got there, reversing into a parking spot near Chase's door. Interesting, but not abnormal. Link had the impression Alex pretty much lived there; he knew his way around and helped himself to food in the kitchen. He had even offered to cook Link something once, standing in the doorway to Chase's office with a dish towel in his hands. Domesticated, comfortable, and making Link miss Jen a lot more than he wanted to admit. They used to stay at each other’s apartments too, nights with beer and Bugles when they could unwind and forget the world. Nothing was like that now; there was nowhere Link could relax and there was no time for it. He had to email Jen soon, or call her, or both. She would chew him out for not keeping in touch and he knew it, but he couldn't involve her too much in his life anymore. Link didn't want Jen wrapped up in anything; it was bad enough facing it alone without having her to worry over.
Chase answered his door after Link's third attempt at knocking. He looked apologetic and overly flustered as he ushered Link inside, the tension in his shoulders and the rugged beard growing on his cheeks creating a knot in Link's stomach. Chase seemed to be in a constant state of control, never a hair out of place, and seeing him disheveled made Link feel like he was with someone else. Perhaps he knocked on the wrong door by mistake.

“Chase, what are you –” Link began but was cut off by Chase pulling him by arm the moment his apartment door was closed and locked. He led Link into his office without a word, face and neck tinged red. He looked like he was on fire, sending ripples of fear up Link’s spine. He was sat down at the computer desk on the left hand side of the room, squinting at the light coming in from the window. Unsure, he asked, “Is this about H’s note?”

“No.” Chase replied. It was the first word he had spoken to Link since he had arrived. Chase leaned over Link and commandeered the computer mouse, waking up the screen and clicking a few files. They opened with a moment’s delay and splayed over the entire screen, an array of words and numbers that Link had trouble taking in. When Chase spoke again he sounded distant, “I was going over some reports whilst you were away. Initially I intended to track your progress, you know, see if you guys actually managed to stop the bombing like you did last time.”

“We did. It was another hoax.” Link replied, irritation evident in his voice. Chase seemed to understand the feeling.

“Right.” Chase typed some passwords into the keyboard in front of Link, “But I did some digging into old case files, incident reports, that kind of thing. I looked at some things I probably shouldn't have looked at, things that the agency definitely should have superior security to. Look,” he nodded towards the screen so Link would know which file he was referring to, “there's notes on different agents. I drew up H's file for you, and a few others. Take a look.”

Link raised a brow curiously and took control of the computer as Chase stepped back to give him space. Rhett's – or H's, considering there was no name listed yet again – file was surprisingly informative compared to the ones Link had previously uncovered. This one included two photographs which looked like mugshots, one profile and one head shot. Link almost smiled at how displeased Rhett looked in them, face stoic and lips twisted into an almost-scowl. Link knew that look; he'd seen it on Rhett's face before. Chase looked at him oddly but chose to remain silent as Link read over a few things. Nothing new - most of the information confirmed what Rhett had already told him. Huh, maybe he really was telling the truth that night on the beach.

“No name.” Link commented absently.

“No name.” Chase confirmed, then hesitated, “Although I'm sure that's information you already know.”

Link let his silence be his answer, which evidently was okay with Chase who shooed Link's hand from the mouse and took back control of the computer.

“As much as I appreciate you finding this for me,” Link began, leaning back in the chair and folding his arms over his chest, “I don't see what the importance of it is. Or how the note from H isn't a more pressing issue.” When Chase chose not to respond, Link furrowed his brow and asked cautiously, “What aren't you telling me?”

The way Chase closed his eyes and exhaled a quiet breath heightened the fear in Link's mind, circling his head and making him feel dizzy. Something was definitely wrong, and it was something serious. Chase moved away from the computer, distancing himself from Link whilst he fetched a folder hidden in a desk drawer on the opposite side of the room. He placed it on the desk in front of
Link and opened it, revealing a single sheet of paper. A file of some sort, riddled with information and dates that Link had trouble focusing his eyes on.

“This is the incident report from August 19th, 1998.” Chase explained, and Link looked down at it sadly, “The real incident report. Not the one that we looked at before, and not the one that was doctored by the agency. I had to dig real deep into the source code lining the firewall to get this, so something tells me they don't want it getting out. And I mean serious coding, I'm surprised I still have my job after breaking into it.”

“Why go through the trouble?” Link asked in a small, distant voice. He knew Chase hadn't fetched the file simply to hurt Link, so why?

“Neal,” Chase sounded far away, “You need to read it.”

Link swallowed a mouthful of air and opened his eyes, not having realized he'd even closed them, then looked down at the file in front of him. Memories flashed in his mind, all dark and unpleasant, smoke entering his lungs and restricting his breathing. Re-opening old wounds like this couldn't be good for him, but Chase seemed to think it was important, so he managed to concentrate on the words before him.

Incident #02129520

Agents involved: [see reverse]

Casualties: [see reverse]

Incident description:

Scheduled destruction of Location #03 Hampton Inn, Dunn, North Carolina.

Link gaped at the words before him. Scheduled destruction. Scheduled? Link shook his head without thinking, hair falling over his forehead and into his eyes. No, that couldn't be right. There was an attack by terrorists, resulting in the explosion destroying the building, burning alive those left inside. Wincing, he re-read the words before him, unsatisfied when they were still the same. Scheduled. What the hell did that mean?

Investigative notes:

Assignment failure, agents returned to base. Terrorist agent tasks momentarily postponed until case is investigated. Agents L & B suspended from active duty under direct order from McL as of Aug 20 th , 1998. Loss of equipment in the fire (surveillance cameras, microphones) resulted in significant loss of capital for the company, to be taken from agent salaries. Select funds from agents L, B, H & J to be transported throughout company as payment for miscalculations.

“Embezzling?” Link thought aloud.

“Without a doubt.” Chase responded harshly, sounding tense and bothered by something. Link could understand it; this was way out of their pay grade. The goddamn agency was responsible for the bombing that tore Link's life apart, the bombing that claimed the life of his family. But Kimberly wasn't the only innocent in that building. There were around half a dozen civilians still inside when the bomb had gone off and engulfed the place in flames, effectively murdering both the hostages and the terrorists still inside. Fury entered Link's veins and rushed through him like poison, reaching his heart and aching in his chest with every heaving breath.
“I can’t believe this!” Link barked at the paper in his hands as if it were personally responsible for tearing the woman he loved away from him. “They were in on it this whole time? And for what? Surveillance cameras?”

“Neal,” Chase warned him, but his face revealed that he was just as peeved as Link was, “Keep your voice down. They clearly want to install surveillance throughout select businesses across the States. North Carolina wasn’t the first hit. Remember Washington? New York?” Link nodded absently, prompting Chase to continue, “That was Myth Int using bomb threats as cover-ups to install surveillance cameras in the buildings.”

“For what?” Link had trouble controlling himself, hands shaking and voice raised, anger rolling off him in waves and heating up the room, “What good are surveillance cameras if the whole place goes up in flames?”

Chase looked at him, pained, and suddenly Link got the feeling the worst was yet to come. Chase told him bleakly, “Keep reading.”

So Link did.

Further details:

[Classified Information; Passed on to McL]

Owner of Location #03 proved troublesome, threats were made against company to allow the installation of surveillance cameras. Owner refused offers as well as additional threats. Terrorist threat made; Homeland Security alerted followed by the Mythical Intelligence Agency arriving on scene. Attempts to coax company into allowing surveillance camera installation fruitless. A call was made under direct supervision of McL. Location #03 Hampton Inn destroyed.

“So if the owner has something against what they’re doing they just destroy the business?” Link asked, appalled. To think his family, the woman he loved and intended to spend the rest of his life with, was murdered over a business dispute was almost laughable. Link almost did laugh at the absurdity of it all, half in denial and half in shock. Re-opening old wounds had been the understatement of the year. This was a whole new laceration to his heart and mind, tearing him wide open and leaving him for dead, curling in on himself like the wounded animal he was. There was a soft and gentle hand on his shoulder, Chase’s hand, but Link found himself transported to the night where his life fell apart. When it was Jen’s strong hand clasped on his shoulder, shaking him back into consciousness, concern glittering on her features.

He had lost everything thanks to this agency, and now he was working for them. He had been well and truly manipulated and played right into the agency’s hand, right into McLaughlin’s hand. McL. No doubt that stood for the head of Mythical Intelligence, Rhett’s uncle and undoubtedly the man Link wanted to hurt the most. He wanted to torture McLaughlin for ripping his life away and make him pay for all of his suffering.

“Neal,” Chase spoke sternly and looked at Link with a careful expression, “Turn over. Read the reverse.”

Link had half a mind to shred the document and be done with it, be done with everything and just go home. Back to North Carolina, back to living in ignorance. But he didn’t and he couldn’t. Not now, not when he had gotten this far. There was no going back now.

Casualties:
Gilley, Louise (19) – death by smoke inhalation
Neal, Kimberly (22) – death by smoke inhalation
White, Wendy G. (82) – died in ambulance, cardiac arrest
Pruitt, Ryan S. (33) – died Aug 20th, 1998, health complications due to third degree burns

Link felt the corners of his eyes sting, the threat of tears physically paining him as he forced himself to continue. He ran his fingertip along Kimberly's name, full of regret and sadness, wishing things could have been different. Wishing it was him and not her. But that sort of thinking would get him nowhere and he knew it. He knew it damn well.

Agents involved:
L, G, B, J, C, H

Full names of agents involved:
Lawrey, Sarah; Graham, Will; Boyd, Vernon; Scott, Jessica; Peterson, Cole; H (information withheld upon request from McL)

Roles of agents involved (includes reasons for promotions/suspensions):
L – surveillance installation (bogus terrorist); salary deducted for use within agency/suspended from active duty
G – ground support (bogus terrorist); status pending
B – surveillance installation (bogus terrorist); salary deducted for use within agency/suspended from active duty
J – ground support (bogus terrorist); salary deducted for use within agency/transferred to Los Angeles unit
C – eye in the sky; salary deducted for use within agency/status pending
H – blast initiator, responsible for destroying Location #03; salary deducted for use within agency/promoted to primary asset

Link’s blood ran cold. He felt anger bubble within him, building in his stomach like an unstoppable force. It felt like indigestion, an upset stomach, but his brain latched onto it and suddenly it was all he could think about, all he could see, hear and feel. He poked and prodded at the feeling, unable to let it go, feeling cold and numb. He was unable to move his fingers, and the paper slipped out of his hand. It fluttered safely onto the desk like a feather; it was nothing compared to the pile of bricks landing on Link's shoulders and compressing his chest, making his breathing harsher and panicked.

Rhett had been involved. Rhett had been more than involved; Rhett was there and had watched as Link's family burned to death. No, no, that wasn't all. His eyes traveled back down to the paper before him in an attempt to re-read the words, but all he could see was white as he grimaced at the migraine tugging behind his eyes. Rhett, he... no. It couldn't be right. It couldn't, could it? All this time Rhett knew and...for what?

“Neal.” Chase's voice momentarily grounded him, but the thought of Rhett’s involvement overwhelmed the other man’s presence. Chase was forgotten, swept away in the chaos of past memories, undecipherable notes and incident reports circling Link's mind and disorientating him. H – blast initiator, responsible for destroying Location #03. It felt surreal. Link couldn't tell if it was really happening. Responsible for destroying Location #03. Hampton Inn Hotel, the hotel where Kimberly worked. The place that burned to the ground after the organized terrorist threat.

A hand was on his shoulder in some distant reality, but not the current Hell he found himself in. It
felt like he was being compressed, pushed down and squeezed him into a small ball. He couldn't breathe.

Rhett - the man who had cared for Link when no one else had, the man who held his hand laying on the beach, looking up at the sky and revealing themselves, who'd kissed him under the moonlight and who'd sworn to protect him from whatever dangers they had coming - was the man responsible for murdering Link's family.

Chapter End Notes

*drops the mic*

The big reveal! Did anyone expect it, or is anyone completely surprised? I have to say it pained me to write this chapter, because things started out so promising and then slowly declined into disaster. I would apologize but I feel it would be incredibly premature. Anyway! The plot holes should be filling up quite nicely now with only a few still remaining, which will be filled pretty soon. I'd say this story is about 60-70% complete? I have no idea how many chapters there will be or if there will be a sequel. OR if this will be incorporated into some kind of series since the prospect of it was recently brought to my attention. It's a possibility. Let me know what you think! Oh, and brownie points to those who recognized a few of the agents mentioned in the file.

My intention is to eventually include some artwork in this story, but that will be further down the line (when I actually get around to finishing painting). So I'm looking forward to that!

I'd like to thank my kind and patient beta, Quend, for helping me out a great deal!

See you next week! Merci et prends soin de toi!
**Tromperie Tactique**

Chapter Notes

**Story Title Translation:** Opération Clandestin - Clandestine Operation (An intelligence operation designed to remain secret)

**Chapter Title Translation:** Tromperie Tactique - Plan of Deceit (or lit. Deceit Tactics)

**TRIGGER WARNING:** There are descriptions of a panic attack in this chapter. If this is disturbing or will bother you in any way, please proceed with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**JULY 3RD 2007, present day**

The first thing Link could identify was the accent of a familiar voice, calm and collected, speaking gently into his ear. It counted down from five and instructed Link to exhale until zero, then the instructions reversed, telling him to inhale to the count of five. Link felt himself shaking, squeezing his eyes closed at the warm arm around his shoulders. His senses returned to him as he gulped down mouthfuls of air in time with the count, tasting salt from the sweat dripping down his face and seeping between his parted lips.

A panic attack. Link hadn't had one of those in years.

“Relax, Neal,” The voice sounded somewhere close to Link's earlobe, and it was then he realized that it wasn't who he thought it was. It wasn't who he wanted it to be, despite himself. It wasn't Rhett's arm around his shoulders shielding him from the world, and it wasn't Rhett's voice in his ear. “Come on. Breathe with me, okay? One, two, three...”

Link managed to obey the voice he now identified as Chase’s, regulating his breathing and flinching at the throbbing in his temples. He struggled to get his eyes open; the room was too bright and too overwhelming. Nothing felt real; nothing was real. It couldn't be. He couldn't...it couldn't have been Rhett that did this to him. It couldn't have been. The report had to be wrong, or he had read it wrong, processed the information incorrectly in his fragile state. It wasn't true. It wasn't.

“Neal, concentrate on my voice. You're doing great.” Chase assured him as he loosened the arm around Link and then resumed counting to five. Link breathed in time with the count, in and out, in and out. It took what felt like an eternity until his heartbeat finally steadied and allowed him to absorb his surroundings without a sharp pain flaring in his chest, disabling him. At some point during his confusion, Link had managed to make his way to the floor and curl up on himself, knees to his chest and arms wrapped around them. Chase was situated behind him, a strong arm circling his shoulders, bracing Link against his body.

Link felt paralyzed, his mind reeling and jumping through loops in an attempt to correct itself, to navigate its way back to moderate sanity. *Responsible for destroying Location #03.* It was all he could see; it was all he could understand. The short sentence, the fine print on a piece of paper, had crippled him and rendered him helpless. He had fallen for a murderer, but not just any murderer. Link had known Rhett was dangerous since the beginning—everyone had told him so, warned him about his notorious handler—and he had done nothing but sink deeper and deeper into their
relationship. Link should have known. How could he have? Were there any signs? Had Rhett given it away at any point?

The short answer was no. But that didn't stop Link from hating himself.

Chase wiped at Link's face with a paper towel, wiping the sweat and stress from his skin as Link struggled to make sense of the situation. His fingers were tingling, the skin of his arms sporting goosebumps and twitching. He felt cold despite his skin being on fire. His chest was frigid, making it difficult to heave in shaking breaths as Chase instructed. But he managed, because Link always did. He always got through things. Typically on his own, but he certainly appreciated Chase's company.

“Look at me.” Chase instructed, and Link had no choice but to obey. “Your pupils are dilated. Can you see me okay?”

“Yes,” Link tried to say, but the sound that came out of his mouth was unintelligible, a slur of the word on his tongue. He tried once more, concentrating on his pronunciation, “Yes.”

Chase looked at him strangely, and Link could only assume his second attempt at speaking had gone as well as the first.

“Do you have panic attacks often?” was Chase's next question. Link shook his head glumly in response, and the other man seemed to mull that one over. “They're nothing to be ashamed of, especially in light of this new information.”

“I'm not ashamed,” Link managed, and watched as Chase's eyebrows shot up in surprise at how well he could understand Link all of a sudden. He had regained his ability to enunciate words. “I'm just...stuck in a state of repudiation.”

“Understandable.” Chase replied, offering him a small and sad smile. Link stumbled to his feet, Chase's capable hand grasping his elbow much like Rhett's had a few nights prior. Before everything had gone to hell and Link's reality had shattered around him.

“I got them when, you know,” Link stuttered and hoped Chase wouldn't ask him to elaborate. The smaller man gave him a knowing look until Link continued, “This is the first panic attack I've had in years.”

Chase chewed at his bottom lip in thought as he escorted Link into the living room and watched as he all but threw himself down onto the sofa. After fetching a glass of water from the kitchen and handing it to Link, Chase spoke again, “I got them when I was a kid.”

Link took a sip of water, letting the cool liquid soothe his throat and dissolve the lump forming there. Weakly, he asked, “You did?”

Chase nodded in response, taking a seat next to Link and crossing his legs. His posture was straight and elegant, holding himself high and confident compared to Link's slumped shoulders and stretched out legs. “When I lived with my father,” Chase continued, “Money was tight. My father worked two jobs to support my sister and I, but the stress got to him in the end and he took out his anger on us.”

Link blinked at him, “Physically?”

“No,” Chase replied instantly, and Link noted the way his hands balled into fists in his lap, “But sometimes I think it might have led to that if we hadn't gotten out of there. I had to take my sister away from that life, to show her something better. My father is a good man and she thought the world of him. I didn’t want that to change.” He paused before adding quietly, “He writes to me from time to time.”
“What about your sister?” Link asked, cradling the glass of water in his hands like it was keeping him from turning fluid himself.

“She lives nearby.” Chase told him before he took the water from Link’s shaking hands and placed it on the coffee table in front of them. “We go out for lunch every Wednesday afternoon.”

Link’s hands had stopped shaking by then, distracted by what Chase was sharing with him. Deep down he knew it wasn’t a sudden change of heart that prompted Chase to open up to Link; it was a calming technique and he could recognize it from a mile away. Intended to distract him from the horrors of his mind and involve himself in something else, someone else. More specifically, someone who wasn't Rhett.

Chase had certainly chosen a vaguely inappropriate topic to share with Link, but he appreciated the conversation, at least. It reminded him that the world didn't revolve around him and his problems, even if that's what it felt like. Chase had been through so much—everyone had—and they had all wound up working for the same company in the end. The hardships from throughout their lives brought them together, wrapped them up in each other’s problems. Link wished they’d met under better circumstances.

“So that's how you knew to count to five,” Link commented absently.

“Yes,” Chase confirmed, “A popular breathing technique when combating panic attacks.”

Silence enveloped the two men after that, but the air was comfortable and calm. Link's mind had skidded to a halt, rich with denial and disbelief as he tried to piece back together the fragments of his thoughts. *I'm not who you think I am.* Rhett's note suddenly made a hell of a lot more sense, but Link wished he couldn't make sense of it. He wanted to wish it all away and watch his reality fade to black, replace it with something sweeter and kinder; a could-have-been involving his ex-handler and himself laying side by side on the sand, talking into the night.

But the real world had other plans. And in the real world, Rhett definitely wasn't who he said he was, and he wasn't who Link thought he was. He wasn't who Link wanted him to be. Rhett had played him from the beginning, enticed him into something next to love when his ex-handler had been responsible for murdering Link's wife. His family. Rhett knew *all along* and still played him.

His handler would pay.

“Neal,” Chase sounded marginally alarmed, causing Link to glance over at him. The other man wasn't looking at him, instead observing the way Link's hands had balled into fists, fingers clenching the loose fabric of his jeans. He was shaking. “You alright, man?”

“Yeah,” Link lied. No, he wasn't alright; it was a stupid question.

“Probably a stupid question.” Chase saw straight through his lie and read Link's thoughts. “What are you going to do?”

Link hesitated, because what was he going to do? He had no idea of Rhett's whereabouts, or any way to find him. He had to wait for Rhett to contact him, not the other way around. His handler always had to be in charge. Jackass. Link admitted, “I don't know.”

Chase seemed torn, face contorting as he looked away and down at his feet. His socks had holes in them, and Link could see him wiggling his toes absentely. “I don't know if you've thought about it, but,” Chase started, pausing and exhaling before returning his gaze toward Link, “what if your, uh, relationship with H was planned?”
Link blinked. “What?”

“What from the very beginning,” Chase explained, waving his hand emphatically. “What if H was ordered to initiate a romantic relationship between the two of you?”

Link felt numb. His hands were shaking and he was slowly losing feeling in his fingers. “Why would he do that?”

Chase shrugged. “Maybe to distract you from discovering the truth behind the fire. If you were hung up on H and swamped with work, you wouldn't have time to dig around looking for answers.” The other man cleared his throat awkwardly, as if the topic of Link being in a relationship with Rhett was bothering him. Then again, Link had to remind himself that he had indeed been in some kind of relationship with his ex-handler. The same ex-handler who was responsible for all of this. Link figured he couldn't blame Chase for feeling uncomfortable; it was better than wallowing in self-hatred like Link was. Chase continued, “You wouldn't want to look for answers because you had H—you would have moved on, theoretically. He could have been assigned as a distraction.”

“A distraction?” Link mused, but it came out as more of a question. The man beside him nodded as Link mulled it over.

“How did it start?” Chase struggled with his words, “I mean, how did the two of you—”

“Become intimate?” Link finished for him, watching as the other man nodded. “I don’t know. I guess we just...we just worked. He was a breath of fresh air in the middle of the shit-storm we found ourselves in.” He paused, shocked at his own language, but Chase didn't seem to mind, “There was the earthquake—”

“Back at the end of May?” Chase interjected, sounding surprised. Link hadn't realized he and Rhett had known each other for so long.

“Yeah, you felt it?” Chase hummed in response, then gestured for Link to continue.

“We had been speaking over text—yes, outside of work hours—and then the earthquake hit and I did this,” Link raised his hand up towards Chase and pointed to the scar stretching across his palm to his thumb, “H seemed real worried about it, about me. Then one night my car broke down and he gave me a ride home.” Link almost added “and the rest is history,” but he wasn't exactly feeling the joke. He wasn't sure Chase would appreciate it either.

“He's been in your apartment?” Chase asked in surprise. When Link nodded, he let out a small whistle, “I hadn't figured you two were so close. How serious were you?”

Link noticed the past tense of Chase's wording and figured, yeah, things were definitely over between he and Rhett. Link couldn't even face the thought of looking at his ex-handler anymore. “Serious,” he admitted quietly.

“Oh. I'm sorry, Neal.” Chase sounded sincere, but Link didn't look up from his hands to make sure, “As much as it doesn't help anything.”

“Yeah.” Link nodded, knowing saying sorry to someone in his position was simply a formality. A hey, sorry you lost your entire family and sorry you fell for the guy who's responsible wasn't exactly what Link needed to hear. He shook his head. “He did seem to take a liking to me real quick.”

“And it's certainly not a coincidence that he was assigned as your handler.” Chase reminded him,
making Link feel like he was turning green with nausea, “It's possible the agency kept tabs on you after the bombing in North Carolina, then placed you under H's care when you got to Los Angeles. If he could get close to you, he could find out what you knew. And he could stop you if you got too close to the truth.”

“Stop me?”

“The guy isn't exactly a stranger to ignominious work practices.” Chase cleared his throat, implying that Rhett would hurt him, or worse, had Link dug deep enough and made this revelation on his own. Link had known from the beginning H, his infamous handler known for his brutality during assignments and questionable work practices, was dangerous and his mistakes were swept under the rug, buried deep within case files. Link had been so blind. “I'm glad you got out when you did, Neal.”

“Yeah.” Link replied, but he wasn't sure he agreed with Chase. He lied, regardless, “Me too.”

“I don't understand the meaning behind the note he left for you,” Chase added after a moment of silence, brow furrowed, biting his lip. “It feels like he was attempting to confess to you.”

“Why would he?” Link asked. “If he was faking the entire time, with caring for me, why bother confessing to what he's done?”

“Guilt, maybe,” Chase offered, but Link could tell it wasn't all the man had to say. After a short moment, Chase added, “Or maybe he got too close. Maybe he tried to give himself an out with his transfer.”

“Too close?” Link parroted. He couldn't keep up with the conversation, thoughts branching off in different directions and turning his mind into a sea of turmoil.

“What about Stevie?” Chase asked suddenly, changing the subject before Link could pry further, “You said you thought she was in on it, right? You feel like you can trust her?”

“I don't know, Chase,” Link sighed and rubbed his hand over his eyes, willing away the dark thoughts circling his head, “She lied to me about everything. She backed H when she knew I knew the truth. What if she is in on it? What if she had something to do with killing my family too?”

Chase appeared momentarily taken aback by Link actually acknowledging what had happened in his own words – Link was equally as surprised—but the other man shook it off speedily, as if he didn't want to disturb Link's healing process, if that's what it was.

“She's too young, for one,” Chase raised a brow, “She's barely older than me. Around a year, if that. She couldn't have been involved.”

“What if H briefed her on it?” Link demanded, grunting, “She's read my case file; she knows about what happened. It wouldn't take a genius to put two and two together.”

“It took us this long,” Chase reminded him, and Link had to admit that was true. But surely Stevie had better resources than they did. She was clearly of a higher rank than Link, using her authority on their assignments to order agents around and keep them on track. What if he did tell her? What if he confided in her about H and hoped for the best? Was it wisdom or was it downright stupidity and hopelessness that was making Link consider it? Chase’s voice prodded at him, “It's your choice, Neal. But we need to do something.”

“I know.” Link assured him, head in his hands. Because, yeah they had to do something, but he just didn't know what. “I know.”
July 4th, 2007, present day

If Mythical Intelligence Headquarters looked intimidating before, it was downright daunting now. Link peered up at the building with a grim expression, hands balling into fists inside the pockets of his jacket. The cloud cover made it feel later than it really was, casting a dull hue across the city and forcing Link to use his headlights on his way to HQ. But now that he had arrived, the sky had become darker and rain seemed inevitable. He made it inside the lobby just minutes before the downpour began, only being caught in the beginning drizzle. If it were another day, he might have thought luck was on his side. But it wasn't; his days of good fortune were long gone.

The elevator ride to his floor was delightfully uneventful. A few agents accompanied him, exchanging pleasant and polite small talk during their ascent. Nobody worth noting, and certainly not the head of Mythical Intelligence. Link wasn't sure he could handle meeting Mr. McLaughlin again without punching him in the face, if he could get away with it. But he knew he couldn't, so maybe he was still kind of lucky considering he hadn't caught a glimpse of McLaughlin since that day.

When the elevator doors slid open on Link's floor, he was greeted by Noah who held two mugs of coffee in his hands, a smile on his face. He offered one to Link as he stepped out of the elevator, startled.

"Candace saw you coming," Noah explained as Link took the mug from him, "Surveillance cameras. She's a devil with those things."

If Link heard the term 'surveillance cameras' again he was going to vomit. He settled for taking a long, much needed drink of his coffee whilst fighting the urge to dry heave. "Thanks," he grunted around the mug, "For the coffee."

"No problem," Noah responded cheerfully, but it was too early in the morning for Link to meet his enthusiasm head on. Link felt more like he'd had the wind knocked out of him, struggling for breath as he matched the other man's stride on the way to their office, "What're you doing here, anyway? I didn't expect you to come in so soon."

"You're here." Link noted.

"I am," Noah laughed easily as they rounded a corner, making their way down a narrow corridor, "But I wasn't on the field back in Nevada. I was tucked away behind a screen, like usual."

Something about Noah's words felt bitter, as if he wanted to be in on the action too. But Link wasn't going to humor him and his desire to be appointed field work. It was a lot worse than being assigned to communications, stuck behind a computer the entire assignment. Being doused in human blood then violated by the DNA analysis team wasn't something Link looked forward to reliving—he hoped he never had to go through that again. Noah could take Link's place whenever he so wished.

"I actually came in to speak to Stevie," Link admitted as they came to a stop outside the decryption team's door, "Is she in her office?"

"Should be." Noah eyed Link carefully, causing Link's palms to sweat, "Everything cool?"

"Yeah. Everything is cool."

"Alright," Noah grunted, evidently not believing Link but not pursuing the matter further. "Don't be
Link watched as Noah disappeared inside the office—Link's office, too—and wondered if he should follow, but the task of locating Stevie was much more important than Link's guilty conscious. He should be in there helping his team, working with them and bonding with them like people do, and instead he was wrapped up in a business of misery and deceit. He only had himself to thank for that.

Sighing, mug still in hand, he continued down the corridor until he came to Stevie's office. The door was closed—which was expected, really, since Stevie was a private person—and he settled for knocking twice before twisting the handle and letting himself in.

Stevie was leaning back in her chair, phone in hand as she looked up at Link. Her eyes immediately became guarded, shoulders tensing when Link closed the door behind him and took a step further into the room. The woman was dressed in her customary white blouse and black pants, blond hair pulled up and into a small bun on the top of her head. Her face was now free of bruises—visible ones, at least—and Link could appreciate the wrinkles decorating her forehead, presumably the result of concomitant stress from working for the agency. Or perhaps she was worried by Link's presence, but, given their last exchange, he wasn't entirely sure.

"Agent Neal," Stevie greeted carefully, gesturing for Link to take a seat in front of her. Once he had settled down and placed his coffee mug on her desk, she continued, "How are things?"

"Your face has healed up nicely," Link responded icily.

"Yes, it...it has." Stevie seemed startled by Link's offhanded comment, as was he, but he wasn't playing any games. He was done playing and Stevie seemed to pick up on that. "Why are you here?"

"You've read my file, so you know what happened to me," Link began, drumming his fingers against his forearm. It was straight to business this time, no dancing around what mattered. "And you know what happened to my family."

Stevie hesitated before saying cautiously, "Yes, I am aware of the incident."

"Then you're aware that I spent months out of work afterwards. I dedicated my time to trying to understand why it had happened and who was responsible." Link played the sympathy card, revealing something intimate and hoping to tug at Stevie's basic human decency, if she had any, "In the end, I accepted that fate and circumstance were the only things to blame."

"Fate and circumstance are subject to human intervention," Stevie commented absently, as if she already knew where Link was going. He was counting on that.

"It was foolish of me to leave it all to chance. Stevie," Link leaned forward and put his hands on the woman's desk, watching as she looked down at the phone in her hands, "I read the case file, the real one. I know what happened, and I know who's responsible."

Stevie looked up at him in alarm, eyes wide and fingers curling around the device in her hands. "You broke into the case files again?"

"I had help," Link noted, being careful not to incriminate Chase, "I assume you've read over the files, since you and H are close."

The implication was evident in his words, but the woman before him seemed shocked at what Link had to say. It was not the reaction he had been expecting; he had assumed Stevie would appear solemn and guilty, perhaps marginally surprised that Link had discovered what she had been trying to hide.
Instead, he was met with the face of a woman who looked like she had no idea what horrors awaited her.

“What are you saying, Neal?” Stevie asked shakily, making Link falter. He leaned back slightly, now less in the woman's space.

“You don't know?”

“I don't.” Stevie sounded sincere, placing her phone on the desk before her and sitting up straighter in her chair. “Are you saying H had something to do with what happened to your family?”

Link nodded, his previous drive to antagonize Stevie now gone and replaced with the sadness that consumed him. “He didn't just have something to do with it, Stevie. He's responsible for it. He was one of the agents on scene. He triggered the bomb.”

Stevie looked as if someone had slapped her in the face. Neither of them spoke for a long moment, Link studying the woman's countenance like it was a puzzle he couldn't figure out. She looked distraught, devastated and most of all surprised. Maybe Link had gotten it all wrong; maybe Stevie hadn't been involved. But that didn't explain her secrecy and her lying on Rhett's behalf. Everything was all muddled up, blurred in a chaotic mess of thoughts and feelings circling Link's mind.

“And you think I was involved,” Stevie spoke, ending the silence between them. It didn't sound like a question, but if it was, Link wasn't sure how to respond. He had assumed she was involved in some way, aiding Rhett's disappearance and the cover up, but even Chase had pointed out that she had been far too young at the time to do something like that. Link was positive she was in on it, but he trusted her enough to know that she hadn't taken part in the execution of his family.

“No, I don't.” Link replied, then paused before admitting, “I did for a while.”

Stevie nodded once, shortly, before taking a deep breath and pressing a palm to her forehead. “That explains a lot.”

“What?”

“H seemed to know everything about you before he was assigned as your handler.” Stevie told him, and Link felt like he'd already heard this from Chase, “And he took a liking to you. I couldn't understand it until I saw how brave you could be, back in Nevada. Your complete disregard for your own safety and well-being is a trait you share with H. He and I have fought over it many times, but seeing you throw yourself into things like he does...it made sense why he'd pick someone like you.”

“Pick me?” Link asked, brows furrowing as he attempted to ignore the throbbing in his chest. Stevie sighed.

“Why he'd want to be with you.” Stevie swallowed, “But, now—now it seems more plausible that guilt was the main reason for his insistence that you be assigned to him.”

“You don't think it could have been a set-up?” Link asked, watching as Stevie's face turned into a grimace, “The relationship, having feelings for me; do you think it could have been faked so he could distract me from finding out the truth?”

“When you say it out loud it seems likely. But I saw the look on his face every time he'd come to me after being with you.” Stevie sounded sad all of a sudden, looking up at Link with sympathetic eyes. Sympathy was what he had been going for in the beginning, but now it felt like a curse. He didn't want her sympathy; he didn't want anything like that. He didn't know what he wanted. “I don't know, Neal. If it was a set-up, then it was a damn good one.”
“Good enough for H to fall for me?”

“I'd say so.” Stevie agreed with him, and Link really didn't know what to think about that. He was angry, of course he was, but if Rhett's feelings were real then that posed a bigger problem. It was one thing that his ex-handler had tricked Link into a romantic relationship, but it only became more complicated if it turned out Rhett had become ensnared by his own lies and fallen for Link in the process. Rhett had torn down everything Link was, only to build him back up again in hopes that they could be together; was that it? Was that what Rhett wanted? What if the bombing had been intentional in that aspect? Had Rhett noticed Link beforehand and taken out his family to appease his...attraction to Link?

Link had to fight the urge to slam his fist on the desk.

“Neal,” Stevie's voice tore him from his thoughts, “I can't imagine how this feels, and I just want you to know that I'm—”

“Spare me the apology,” Link interrupted, bracing himself against the desk, “I've heard enough of those.”

Stevie seemed slightly offended, but Link couldn't find it in himself to give a damn. “I wanted to say I'm sorry for lying to you.”

Link blinked. “What?”

“You were right.” Stevie told him, causing Link to sit up straighter, eyebrows raised, “About a few things – not all, but a few. H and I are closer than meets the eye – not romantically, before you ask—and I do know more than I've told you.”

“I'm guessing H told you about that?” Link grunted at her, recalling a simpler time when he'd let Rhett know his concerns about Stevie. Link had assumed she and Rhett were together or something, but his handler—at the time, at least—had shut him down and told him otherwise. Rhett must have told Stevie about it.

“He did.” Stevie admitted, then smiled a little, “But not in bad taste.”

“I figured.”

“As you already know, H has been in the center of previous violent incidences within the company. His temper can get the best of him, and it gets him into incriminating situations, as I'm sure the reports will tell you.” Stevie leaned forward and began typing on her computer as she spoke, sounding businesslike and no longer in a state of shock. Link had to hand it to her; she was taking it a lot better than he was, but he guessed he had a lot more reason to be distraught over the new information. “Because of this, he needs constant supervision—orders from above—so I've been taking care of that. But I trust him to make his own decisions, so I don't control him as much as I should. We have had this arrangement for some years now.”

“And now you think you're regretting that decision,” Link offered.

“Precisely,” Stevie confirmed grimly.

“Look, Stevie,” Link sighed to himself, wishing he could simply go home and go to sleep, wishing he could just sleep the year away and things would fix themselves during his unconscious state. Of course, that wasn't an option; nothing easy ever was. Breaking the news to Stevie would not be easy. Link didn't look forward to informing her that the agency itself was responsible for the attacks and the bombings, responsible for murdering innocents and wasting away resources on wild goose
chases like the one in Nevada, preced by the one in Utah.

Link let out a shaky breath he hadn't realized he was holding and told her everything he knew. He told her everything he and Chase had worked out, on top of the news Chase had dealt to him when he'd returned from the airport. Stevie sat and listened, interjecting words of disbelief and occasionally anger, but for the most part she remained silent. She let Link tell her the company she was working for was involved in embezzling, with full disregard for its employees as well as the public. He told her about the surveillance cameras and how the agency was hiding behind terrorism threats to install security across America. He told her why his family had been murdered in the first place – that if the owners refused it would lead to the destruction of property. Property management at its finest, he thought about saying, but even he wasn't feeling that dark. Stevie looked like she was about to be sick, grabbing Link's half-empty coffee mug and downing the remainder of its contents after he finished speaking.

Mythical Intelligence was a feral dog that had to be put down before other people got hurt.

“If only there were whiskey in this.” Stevie murmured to herself, eyeing the mug in her hand as if it had all the answers. Link understood her desperation.

“Yeah.”

“This is all very...” Stevie trailed off, closing her eyes with a pained expression, “Forgive me, I'm having trouble taking all of this in.”

“I know it isn't exactly what you want to hear.” Link reached forward and touched her hand. He curled his fingers around hers, both of them holding onto the mug.

“The last thing I want to hear is you comforting me, when it should definitely be the other way around.”

“I'm beyond comfort,” Link admitted. I'm beyond help, he wanted to say but managed to keep his mouth closed. Stevie opened her eyes to observe him carefully.

“Moved beyond comfort, straight into bitterness,” she replied, eyes falling to Link's hand touching hers, “I know the feeling.”

Link offered her a small, sad smile because she was right; he had rejected all forms of comfort in favor of letting his work consume him. He retracted his hand and returned it to his lap, scratching absently at his forearm whilst the woman before him resumed typing something up.

After a small moment of silence, Stevie bit her lip and turned the computer screen around towards Link. “Read this report.”

Link raised a brow at Stevie and reached forward to turn the screen further so he could read whatever she'd put in front of him. A report on a recent terrorism incident somewhere in Colorado. Link almost scoffed in disgust, but read it anyway. If Stevie had shown it to him it had to be of some importance.

Incident #17046033

Agents involved: L, M, A

Full names of agents involved: Hale, Laura; Caulfield, Maxine; Argent, Allison

Casualties: L (MIA), M (KIA), A (MIA), numerous civilians [see reverse]
Incident description:

Terrorist assault on Location #17 Lodge Casino & Hotel, Colorado

“So what?” Link demanded, shaking his head, “Another hoax.”

“No.” Stevie replied sternly, “Read it.”

Investigative notes:

Assignment failure, agents MIA/KIA. Previously installed surveillance cameras destroyed along with other agency equipment. Fees for gear deducted from deceased/missing agents' insurance funds. Surveillance footage erased by Resistance, possible inside job. Awaiting further details.

“Resistance?” Link thought aloud. Abruptly, Stevie swiveled the computer screen back around to face her, away from Link's grasp. He looked at her curiously, brow raised as she clicked around, presumably closing the document. “What is the Resistance?”

“Something the agency has been breaking its back trying to cover up. It started as a small group of rebels—I suspect led by someone on the inside—but it’s grown in size. They have been attacking locations previously targeted by the 'terrorists', but now that we know the agency was behind those attacks I'm thinking the Resistance group knows something they shouldn't,” Stevie replied, pushing away from her computer and crossing her arms over her chest. She looked miffed, uptight and most of all confident. Link wasn't sure he liked that look on her. “Note the casualties. That's a lot for one assignment, right?”

“Maybe this rebel group took them out?” Link offered, having trouble wrapping his head around everything. If this Resistance, or whatever—Link wasn't fond of the name, it was too Terminator for him—was the real deal, then they were just another problem to add to the mix. They had to have someone on the inside, Stevie was right. Someone who knew what the agency was up to with the surveillance cameras, and someone who didn't agree with it. It would explain the destruction of security equipment...but it didn't explain the disappearance of agents.

This was a whole new recipe for disaster.

“I thought that would be the case, but then the DNA results from the threat in Nevada came back this morning,” Stevie stated grimly.

Link blinked at her, feeling the color drain from his face. “And?”

“And the blood belongs to both of the missing agents,” Stevie told him, voice bleak and shoulders tense. Link didn't know what to say. “A mixture of both Agents Laura Hale and Allison Argent's blood was inside that bomb, Neal. This report is from months ago. They've been missing for three months, and now their blood was used in a set-up.”

“What the hell for?” Link asked suddenly, finding his voice somewhere in the midst of his confusion, “You think they're alive?”

“Yes, or they were. That's a lot of blood to lose and just walk away afterwards.”

“Wait,” Link interrupted her in alarm, fingernails digging into the pale skin of his forearm in attempt to use pain as an anchor to wrap his head around the new information, “What does this have to do with H?”
Stevie seemed distant. “H and I have been monitoring the situation for months now, in secret. H was the one who told me about it in the first place, and I had no idea how he found out considering the amount the agency has done to keep it under wraps.”

Link looked at her silently, realization hitting him all at once. He shook his head, then suddenly he couldn't stop shaking it, “No.”

“I think H is involved with the Resistance somehow,” Stevie informed him, confirming Link’s fears, “I’d been scanning for a possible inside man—someone who had access to the agency's files—and naturally I’d skipped over H's file, having trusted him. But now...”

“Now you think he's involved,” Link stated, voice hard and cold.

“Now I know he's involved,” Stevie corrected, rising from her chair. A loud beep from the printer to Link's left startled him and he jumped, shifting in his chair to watch Stevie. The woman retrieved the newly printed document and handed it to Link. “Here's the case file. You told me you had some help figuring out what happened to your family; I'm sure your 'help' will want to see this too.”

Link took the document easily, finding comfort in the warmth of the paper, fresh from the printer. “Stevie,” he began, folding the paper into a small square simply for something to do with his hands, “What if you're right and H is involved? What are we doing to do?”

Stevie sat back down before responding to Link’s abundance of questions, seeming calm and collected in comparison to before. Perhaps the realization had done her some good; perhaps she finally had her answers. The same couldn't be said for Link.

“I don't know,” she told him, sounding both sincere and disappointed.

“We have to stop him.”

“How?”

Link shook his head, running his thumb along the sharp edge of the paper in his hand, wishing for a paper cut. Anything to distract him from the topic at hand. “We could capture him somehow. Find out what he knows. You're close to him and he trusts you; you can help bring him in.”

“You want to capture him like a wild animal?” Stevie laughed bitterly, “With what, a net?”

“No – we could use his attraction to me to get to him.”

Link's response appeared to hurt Stevie in some way, but she quickly masked it. Link was reminded of how alike she and Rhett really were, masters of disguise when it came to their emotions. Link had to learn their tricks some day.

“What are you proposing?” Stevie asked, all work and no play. Link appreciated it, on top of hating himself for even suggesting anything in the first place. Stevie chewed her bottom lip and offered, “We could schedule a hostage situation, you being the hostage. Send H a text under the pretense that you're hurt, then we grab him.”

“No,” Link replied instantly, not really knowing why. It would be a slap to the face for Rhett and Link knew it, but he couldn't do it. He couldn't put the other man through that no matter how much he deserved it. “No, not that. He'll know if something is off if I contact him. He always contacts me.”

“We have that in common,” Stevie noted absently, “So, we wait for H to contact you...and then what? You're capable, Neal, but H is quick on his feet. He'll outrun you.”
“I didn’t say I would chase him.” Link retorted in defense, recalling when Rhett had managed to
floor him on the beach during their childlike battle. The way Rhett had towered over him
menacingly, gun to Link’s face, panting and with sweat dripping off of him like rainwater. Rhett had
looked so beautiful under the stars, and—

No, that was the kind of thinking that got him into this mess in the first place. Link couldn't let his
personal feelings get the best of him anymore, not when things were just coming into the light.

“Your ‘help’,;” Stevie spoke up, interrupting Link's descent into self-hatred, “Seems quite capable. It
would be wise if we spoke together, all three of us. I'm sure three heads will be better than two, and
frankly I'd like to meet whoever discovered what you've told me.”

“I don't think that's –” Link protested, but Stevie interrupted him with a wave of her hand.

“Do you have a better idea, Agent Neal?” Stevie asked, and again, always with the Agent Neal card.
Link shrunk back in his chair and mulled it over. He guessed it couldn't hurt; talking to Stevie had
been Chase's idea after all.

That would be the excuse he used when it all went to Hell.

Stevie wants to meet with you. With both of us. -N

You told her I helped you? -C

Link feared Chase would assume he had incriminated him in some way, but he was quick to
disprove any worries the other man might have held on the matter. No. I told her I had help. -N

And she wants to meet me. -C

Link climbed into the driver's seat of his rental and pulled the door closed behind him, shielding
himself and his phone from the drizzle outside. He pushed his hair back and away from his eyes,
then patted his hands dry on his trouser legs before he could respond to Chase.

She wants to talk to both of us. To find some way to capture H. -N

Chase didn't respond instantly, but Link expected him to be hesitant. Capturing Rhett was a whole
new ball game; Rhett wasn't just a regular guy, he was a respected agent within Mythical Intelligence
and quite possibly a member of the Resistance—a terrible name for the people acting against the
agency's plans. Link certainly knew how to pick 'em, that's for sure. His phone buzzing prompted
Link to raise his head from where he’d rested it against the steering wheel.

Okay. Find out when she's available, and we'll all talk. -C

Link groaned and shoved his phone into his jacket pocket, returning his forehead to the steering
wheel. Things were about to get interesting. Maybe together they could stop Rhett from hurting
someone or worse, hurting himself.

Chapter End Notes
So after last week's bombshell, this chapter is a lot slower paced but it certainly doesn't do any hand holding. What does everyone think of the Resistance? Brownie points this week are for recognizing the Terminator reference, and recognizing the names of mentioned agents. I'm sure I'll include some form of Trivia at the end of this story, as well as an actual timeline of events so people can follow them. Remember it's only 2007 in this story (for now!) so keep an eye out for changes in dates. Please let me know in the comments what you guys think, and if you have any questions I'd be more than happy to clear them up for you!

Thank you to Quend for being my kind and patient beta! Thank you for peering over my shoulder.

See you next week! Merci et prends soin de toi!
JULY 5TH 2007, present day

Link’s fingers curled around the steering wheel in anticipation, the familiar fifteen minute drive to Chase’s place causing him more anxiety than it was probably worth. He fought the urge to put his foot down and speed the entire way there, but being pulled over by the cops wasn’t exactly at the top of Link’s to-do list. Neither was a meeting between Stevie, Chase and himself, but what was Link about to expose himself to? Exactly that. It was a bad idea and he knew it, however Stevie had managed to manipulate him into agreeing because it was the right thing to do, regardless if Link wanted to or not. It seemed imperative when Stevie coaxed him into it, but now Link felt nauseous at the concept.

Straightening his back, he pulled into the small parking lot outside Chase’s apartment like he had countless times in the past. This time felt different, like he was painting himself into a lurid picture of lies and shame. He was probably over-thinking the entire thing—they needed a meeting if they were ever going to get to the bottom of what was going down at the agency. He just had to suck it up and get used to it. Chase had already been briefed on the situation, and Link had informed him about the Resistance and how they were involved. Chase hadn’t seemed surprised that Rhett was implicated somehow, but perhaps it went without saying that his ex-handler would be in the middle of everything.

Link stepped out of his car and into the warm air, the humidity creating small beads of sweat on his forehead as he jogged across the street and up the stairway leading to Chase’s apartment. He collided with someone half way up the stairs which prompted him to grab the railing to steady himself, muttering a short apology. His mind was elsewhere.

That was until he realized who he had bumped into.

“Did you sleep in your car?” Stevie asked, concern in her eyes as she scanned Link’s unkempt appearance. He hadn’t showered, nor had he shaved. He hadn’t really done anything except toss and turn on his sheets the entire night, battling vivid images of the fire flashing behind his eyelids. Miraculously, he had managed to climb out of bed, shrug on clothes from the day before and make it out of his apartment before he keeled over. It was a surprise he had even made it to Chase’s at all, really.

“No,” Link replied, but had to clear his throat and repeat his response, his voice being groggy during the first try. Stevie gave him a sympathetic look and Link wanted to tell her to stop caring for him in such a way. His mind was elsewhere.

“As you wish,” Link replied, but had to clear his throat and repeat his response, his voice being groggy during the first try. Stevie gave him a sympathetic look and Link wanted to tell her to stop caring for him in such a way. He didn't desire sympathy. “I haven't showered.”

“Trust me, I noticed,” Stevie told him, the hint of a smile upon her thin lips. Link’s brow furrowed before he lifted his arm to sniff under it. Damn. Yeah, he should have showered.
“Sorry,” he offered with an embarrassed grimace.

Stevie waved a hand at him. “Come on. I was waiting for you.”

“Why didn't you just go in?” Link asked her as they climbed the stairs together, stopping in front of Chase's apartment door. Link knocked three times—his customary number—and waited.

“It wouldn't have been appropriate without you present.” Stevie replied as the door opened and Chase greeted them. Link felt tension rise in the air and he had to grip onto the doorway for support.

“I should have known it was you,” Stevie commented lowly, surprising the hell out of Link. Did they know each other? Had Chase already mentioned that? The man before them took a step back to allow them inside, a small and polite smile on his face. Stevie nodded to him as she entered, “Chase.”

“Stevie.” Chase responded, and Link got the awful feeling he was missing something. “Neal, hey. You look like hell.”

Link shot Chase a look, and then there were no further comments made regarding Link's appearance. He was thankful for that; he didn't need his instability brought into attention. Chase's home looked exactly like it had the previous times Link had been there, but it felt different now. Life had a funny way of doing that, of warping places into somewhere detestable once he'd had an unpleasant experience there. This was one of those places. Link didn't want to go into Chase's office again.

Chase ushered them into the living area and instructed them to take a seat, disappearing into the kitchen to fetch them refreshments. It felt awkward; like a family reunion Link had been forced to attend. He sank down onto the couch and Stevie took a seat next to him, crossing her legs elegantly. It felt surreal to have her there; Link was so accustomed to Alex occupying the sofa alongside him, barking obscenities at the television when someone failed to kick or throw a ball, or something. Link wasn't that big on sports, but he enjoyed Alex's company enough to endure it.

“So.” Chase re-emerged with two glasses of water. He placed them onto the coffee table before taking a seat across from Link in a small armchair. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Link raised a brow at him, noticing the similarity between the way Chase was speaking and how Stevie typically addressed Link. What was going on?

“Do you two know each other?” Link asked suspiciously. Stevie huffed out a short laugh, nodding.

“Yes, we do,” She told him, reaching forward to fetch her glass of water from the coffee table, “We've worked together numerous times. I should have guessed Chase would be the one to outsmart the agency.”

“I'll take that as a compliment,” Chase replied, but he seemed a little tense. Link didn't like it at all. “Why did you want to have this meeting?”

Stevie took a sip of water before speaking, cradling the glass in her hands as if it were sacred, “Why are you asking questions you already know the answer to?”

“Hey,” Link interjected, not appreciating the rude tone in her voice, “This was your idea, Stevie.”

“You're right.” The woman admitted, then turned her eyes to Link. She seemed distant, withdrawn and sad about something but Link couldn't understand what. “Neal and I have discussed scenarios that would result in H's apprehension.”

Chase was quiet for a short moment before he looked down at his hands. “It won't be easy. H is a
“Precisely why Neal's role in this is crucial,” Stevie replied, “He has the potential to manipulate H by using the intimacy of their relationship as leverage.”

“Wait,” Chase sounded surprised, eyes travelling to Link who was squirming in his seat, “She knows?”

“He knows?” Stevie inquired instantly, and Link felt like crawling into a hole and hibernating for the next few years. Having his personal life—or worse, his love life—placed under scrutiny was certainly not something Link wanted, but he had walked straight into this one. Rhett only seemed to get Link into trouble; he should have that realized sooner.

“Yeah, at this point I'd be surprised if it wasn't public knowledge.” Link grunted. To his surprise, Stevie smiled at him before catching herself, her normal stoic expression returning. Chase made a face at Link which conveyed his distaste. Yeah, Link could understand that. He was beginning to regret telling anyone of Rhett and his relationship. If that's what it was.

“It's irrelevant who told who. What matters is how we're going to catch him.” Chase stated, and Link watched the wheels turn in Stevie's head. “And how do we know that the Resistance is responsible for the bombs? What if they belong to Mythical Intelligence?”

Stevie pushed her hair back and tucked a few loose strands behind her ear before she replied, sounding so sure of herself that Link couldn't bring himself to doubt what she was saying, “The explosives at each location were hoax bombs, and while that implies that they belong to the agency, it doesn't explain the hidden canisters filled with blood.”

“You don't think the agency is capable of murdering its own agents?” Chase grunted in response, evidently unwilling to trust the agency. Link didn't blame him.

“That's not what I said,” Stevie corrected him, “But why would the agency murder its own agents—more importantly, agents who were aware of the fabricated terrorism threats—and use their blood in the hoax bombs?”

“She's right,” Link agreed with her, because as bad as the agency seemed, going to that kind of length would prove more trouble than it was worth. “The agency didn't even need bombs in the first place, real or fake. All they needed was the pretense of a threat for an excuse to send its agents into the buildings.”

“Exactly.” Stevie glanced at Link with an appreciative expression. Link had her back; it went without saying.

“You're right,” Chase agreed after a small moment of silence as he thought it over, biting his bottom lip. “Okay, how are we going to do this?”

Stevie set her glass down on the coffee table upon Chase's agreement to help them. She sat forward and leaned her elbows on her knees, chin resting on her hands. Link leaned forward himself subconsciously, as if to listen in to what the woman was about to say.

“Ultimately, we can't do anything until H contacts Neal.” She admitted, side eyeing Link as she spoke, who shook his head in response. He had no way of contacting Rhett even if he wanted to. His ex-handler had always been that way, perhaps to help keep Link at arms length, for what good it did.

“Yes, I assume contacting H would only cause suspicion.” Chase mused.
“Even if it wouldn't cause suspicion, I can't contact him,” Link told them, sighing and rubbing a hand over his face, “His cell phone blocks incoming calls and any messages I send just give me failure notifications.”

“Have you attempted to contact him at all recently?” Stevie asked suddenly, straightening and giving Link her full attention.

Link shook his head slowly, “No, didn't you hear what I just—”

“I heard you,” Stevie interrupted him, brow furrowing in thought.

“Could it be an automated response from H's cell phone?” Chase asked suddenly, drawing both of their attention to him.

Link blinked. “What?”

“You mean, so H can receive Neal's messages but his phone automatically triggers a failure notice?” Stevie asked, and Link fell silent upon hearing her, “It can be done. I don't doubt H is capable of programming his phone to do it.”

“But what's the point?” Link asked, feeling like he was a third party to their conversation. He had thought he was skilled enough to help them, but they had only proved him wrong. Link had worked for the government for over ten years and already people younger than him were proving themselves more knowledgeable. It wasn't exactly confidence-boosting. Why had Rhett even fallen for him in the first place?

“To fool you into thinking you can't contact him, when you can,” Chase offered, voice thick with distaste. Rhett was someone to fear and someone to despise, and Link knew that. He just couldn't shake the feeling something was wrong here. “Power play. It's what H thrives on.”

“We don't know that for sure,” Stevie shot back, as if she was still hard-wired to defend H at any given moment, before she caught herself and then sank back against the couch with a frown, “I mean, it's a possibility.”

“It's worth a shot, if we can use it,” Chase offered, gesturing towards Link. Link wasn't exactly fond of the idea of using himself as bait, but he knew it was unavoidable. Rhett wouldn't meet with anyone else, much less speak to anyone else. Stevie had told him she hadn't heard from Rhett since Nevada, and it was the same for Link. Was Rhett okay? What if something had happened to him?

“What do you think, Neal?” Stevie asked, breaking Link's train of thought. “Considering you're in the middle of this.”

“I think we need to be careful,” Link admitted, looking down at his hands and wishing they weren't having this conversation, “I might know H better than you do, but...at the same time, I don't feel like I know him at all. All this time, and he's the one who—who—”

“I know,” Stevie spoke quietly and placed a gentle hand on Link's knee. He flinched in response, having not expected the sudden contact, but the woman didn't remove her hand.

“If Neal agrees to go through with this, he should wear a wire,” Chase suggested, forcing Stevie to tear her gaze away from Link so she could watch the younger man while he spoke, “For his own safety—in the event H realizes what he's up to—and for the sake of gathering information. Anything H says might provide enough ammunition to implicate him, but we can't comprehend him without concrete evidence.”
“But we know he—” Link started, but couldn't bring himself to finish the thought. The other two agents looked at him in sympathy which didn't make Link feel any better.

“Yes, but it was years ago and we know the agency buried the incident,” Chase spoke slowly, as if he was readying himself to break some bad news to Link, “All evidence we have so far is circumstantial.”

“But, the incident report—”

“Illegally obtained incident report.” Stevie interjected.

“Exactly,” Chase agreed, eyes hard as he looked over at Link's slumped form, “There's no way we can use it against him. Even if we obtained it legally, there's no telling what the agency would do to keep it under wraps. We can't take H down for the murders, Neal. I'm sorry.”

Link looked away from Chase after he spoke, falling into an uncomfortable silence and ignoring the sting in his eyes. Rhett was responsible for ripping Link's life apart piece by piece, and he wasn't going to get justice for it. The system was all kinds of messed up, with Rhett and Link in the center of its chaos. What would he even say to Rhett when they met? Would he be able to conceal his true feelings, the rage he felt? Maybe this wasn't such a great idea after all.

“If you agree, Neal, know that once you're alone with H we won't be able to protect you,” Stevie informed Link gently, aware that he was damaged beyond repair. She squeezed his kneecap gently and Link was reminded that she was even touching him in the first place. “We can be close-by, monitoring the wire, but if he hurts you—”

“He won't,” Link told her, straightening his back and finding the courage to look Stevie in the eye.

“How can you be so sure?” Chase asked, appalled at Link's sudden burst of confidence, “This is the guy who—”

“You think I don't know that?” Link shot back, anger flaring in him and causing Chase to shrink back in his chair. Stevie squeezed Link's knee in warning, and he managed to put a pin in his fury, for now. Rhett wouldn't hurt him; he wasn't even sure Rhett could hurt him even if he wanted to. Link was in the same boat as his ex-handler and he hated it—he hated the control Rhett had over him. He wanted to tear Rhett apart and watch him squirm just like Link had years prior. He wanted Rhett to feel the pain he forced upon Link. But could he do it? Would he do it?

“Neal can handle himself,” Stevie spoke through Link's thoughts, quoting him with a guarded expression as if she saw where his train of thought was leading him, “He proved himself quite capable during our time in Nevada.”

Chase didn't respond, settling for pursing his lips in concern. There was an unspoken threat spreading between them which Link was able to pick up on. Something along the lines of: if he gets hurt, I'll kill you. Link appreciated the hell out of Chase for that.

The plan sounded pretty simple once they had it down on paper. Link was to contact Rhett and attempt to arrange a meeting, and if his ex-handler took the bait, he was to contact Stevie the minute he heard word so she could wire him. Chase would monitor Link and Rhett's conversation from a discreet location, although Link wasn't exactly confident that Rhett would reveal anything substantial. He'd done a great job at hiding the truth from Link before, now should be no different.

“We need to remain discreet,” Stevie told them once they had all their cards on the table. Link was hugging his knees to his chest, a cup of coffee in his hands as he peered over at the woman.
“McLaughlin cannot find out about this. I'm sure I don't need to tell you that.”

“Goes without saying,” Chase replied with a wave of his hand, far too immersed in the papers on his lap to say anything more. They had been working for a little over an hour, planning and bickering, and for a short while Link had actually felt normal. Like this was only a work thing, and he was actually getting along with his co-workers, whereas the reality was much more vulgar than that. He found comfort in the facade, though.

“Yeah,” Link agreed, mouth around his coffee cup.

“Good, then we're all on the same page.” Stevie nodded quietly, shuffling a couple of sheets of paper in her hands. Link recognized the shift in her expression instantly; *business mode*. “So, here’s what's going to happen. Chase, I need you to dig up any information you can about the Resistance. Newspapers, online articles, even Mythical case files.”

“You got it, boss,” Chase agreed sarcastically, and Link shot him a look.

“You can bring in Alex, if you wish,” Stevie added, making both men turn and look at her. She shrugged in response, then continued, “You trust him, don’t you? Another head won't go to waste.”

“I'll talk to him,” Chase replied, but Link got the impression he had no intention of mentioning it to Alex. Link was skeptical about it, too. He didn't want to drag anybody else into his problems, least of all one of his friends. After a moment, Chase asked, “What about Ben?”

“Unfortunately, Ben is too emotionally involved in this to bring in,” Stevie responded easily, and Chase opened his mouth to speak but Link beat him to it.

“Because of Lizzie, right?”

“Correct.” Stevie confirmed.

“Oh,” Chase looked back down at the papers on his lap, brow furrowed. Link could understand it, even if he didn't like the idea of hiding this from Ben. Lizzie —Ben’s girlfriend—had been amongst the agents on the MIA list from the agency, and recently her blood had been used in a hoax bomb. Things didn't look too great for her, but no one had informed Ben of this news. No one wanted to, and Link sure as hell wasn't going to do it. He knew what it was like to lose someone close to him, and he didn't want Ben to have to go through it. Ben didn't deserve to feel that way—no one did.

“Link, I need you to stay put and continue working as normal,” Stevie continued as if the discussion regarding Ben's deceased partner hadn't happened, “If H agrees to meet with you, it's likely he'll double check your whereabouts. If he sees you somewhere you shouldn't be, that'll be a red flag.”

“Okay,” Link nodded, ignoring the fact that he would have to meet Rhett face to face once more. Last time they met they had kissed, and Rhett had seemed so...sincere and affectionate towards him, but now Link knew the truth. There was nothing but salt between them now, even if Rhett wasn't aware of it yet. His ex-handler would be cognizant of his mistakes soon enough, and Link would be there to do something about it. He just didn't know what yet.

*Hot ash was scattered around them, embers clinging to Link's shirt and tie as he heaved in air through corrupted lungs. The edges of Stevie's nostrils were tinged black from soot and whatever the*
hell else was in the air, slowly killing them. They covered their mouths in an attempt to filter the poison surrounding them. There was the distinct sound of fire to his right, the crackle of flames prominent in the silence of the room. The air was tinted black, fog seeping in through the cracks in the doors of the office, and Link was panicking.

“Neal, through here,” Stevie croaked, her voice struggling in the hot air that seared both of their throats. She was shouldering a door, trying to force it open and hopefully lead to their safety. Link moved to help her, sacrificing his hands to push at the wood as opposed to shielding his nose and mouth from the harmful smoke entering the room.

“Oh, okay? One, two,” Link commanded Stevie, who was nodding like her life depended on it. Except this time, it really did. If they didn’t get out of the building, they were both going to die.

“Three!”

The door burst open much easier than Link thought it would, but immediately he regretted the decision once they were greeted with a gust of hot air, scolding his skin. Stevie's eyes were watering, and Link couldn’t tell if she was crying or if it was just her body reacting to the soot in the air. Probably both, he imagined, thankful that his glasses were at least easing the way just a little bit.


Link nodded and put his arm around the woman before him, ushering her around a small table typically used for meetings. Link could imagine a group of agents sitting around it, discarded coffee mugs and half-eaten Danish pastries surrounding them—the image acted as a sorry reminder of the chaos they were now in. The table was turned on its side, presumably from the panic the fire had erupted in the building. Link did his best not to stumble over it as he helped Stevie get the door at the other side of the office open so they could get out and into the corridor.

There was a sharp bang in front of them, both of their eyes snapping to the door they were headed to. If it caved and the flames burst through, they were done for. When the door swung open, Link instinctively shielded Stevie with his body to take the brink of the damage, but it never came. He looked up to see someone standing in the doorway, panting, dropping a large piece of metal to their side.

“Link, thank god,” the person exclaimed, and when they emerged further into the destroyed room, Link could finally make out their face through the smoke.

“Rhett,” Link croaked, full of relief and gratitude. He had never been more relieved to see his handler. Rhett wrapped one arm around Link's shoulders and gave him a single, desperate squeeze, and Link could feel the worry radiating from the other man. He could feel the tensing of Rhett's shoulders under his hand. They were in trouble.

“Glad you could join us,” Stevie managed as Rhett helped her stand up straight, keeping a steady grip on Link's arm as if he was afraid of letting go.

“The corridor is clear, come on,” Rhett told them shakily, voice deep and forced out from his charred throat. They had to get out of there.

Exiting through the door Rhett had barged through, they came into a familiar corridor that Link frequented whilst at the office, but it didn’t look like the same place anymore. There were discarded pieces of paper all over the ground, some charred and some with foot prints on them, the ghosts of panicked feet rushing to safety. The walls were beginning to turn a dark shade of grey, becoming darker and darker as they neared the elevators.
“Bad idea,” Link thought aloud, because no one was stupid enough to use an elevator during a fire, right? Rhett nodded and looked around, seemingly losing his composure as his fingers tightened around Link’s forearm.

“The stairway,” Stevie grunted, before coughing into her hand and grimacing when her palm became covered in soot and saliva. Link spun around and led the way, prying Rhett’s fingers off of his arm so he could join their hands together, because to hell with hiding whatever they had right now. Stevie didn’t care, and Rhett wasn’t pulling away—it wasn’t important.

The door for the stairway was jammed open, as if the agents who had filed out before them had purposefully kept it open to aid other survivors. Link attempted to have Stevie go before him—protect the girl first, it was how he was raised—but she refused, forcing Link to take the first step. The stairway was a mess; the building was falling apart. Pieces of rubble were dispersed all over the ground, the railings no longer looking as trustworthy as they had before. They would probably crumble under his grip. Cautiously, he took a step forward and tested the ground of the first step; it was fine, immobile. He took another step, down another stair and then another, until he managed to carefully and slowly turn around and offer Stevie his hand.

“Come on—” He tried to say, but that’s when the ground shifted beneath him, and his foot went straight through the cement like it was water. He stumbled forward, attempting to grip onto the railing and stop himself from falling eighteen stories. As expected, it shattered beneath his hands and he had to settle for hanging onto the remainder of the step that had given way beneath him. His legs were hanging in mid air—when did that happen? He looked up at the other two, now looking down at him from the safety of the floor.

“Help,” he tried to say, but his throat constricted in fear when he caught sight of Rhett’s expression. He was smiling. Not the smile Link was accustomed to—not the smile from the night on the beach, and not the smile from when they had first kissed—this smile was unpleasant, perhaps destructive. Rhett watched Link struggle from the sidelines, Stevie behind him, neither of them moving to help him.

“Sorry, Neal,” Rhett sneered through his smile, baring teeth and looking more and more like a monster with every blink. “Your time’s run out.”

On cue, the step Link was clinging onto for his life fragmented audibly and his stomach churned. It felt like riding a roller-coaster, the way his heart jumped into his throat. He was going to die, and it was all his fault.

JULY 7TH 2007, present day

Link jolted upright, soaked in sweat and panting for breath. He clawed at his throat as it constricted, chest heaving and lungs burning with every gulp of breath. A bad dream—no, a nightmare. Link pushed the heels of his hands against his closed eyes and groaned loudly, both in frustration and in agony. There was a sharp pain in his temples, and it radiated down the back of his neck and along his spine, forcing him to roll his shoulders for something close to relief.

The situation with Rhett was getting to Link. He had been having nightmares for days, some nights he hadn’t bothered going to sleep and simply stayed awake wondering how the hell he’d gotten himself into this mess to begin with. Four cups of coffee usually did the trick, then he was awake
enough to face the day ahead and pretend he was coping just fine. But Link couldn't fool himself, and he wasn't exactly positive he was fooling anybody else either. Stevie hadn't spoken to Link since their meeting—something Link was perfectly fine with—but Chase had been messaging him back to back, checking up on him in case he'd done anything stupid. Chase was beginning to sound like Jen. Hell, Link missed her, but he couldn't contact her now. Not when things were so complicated.

He heaved a sigh and rubbed at his eyes once more, irritated when his palms came away wet from his own tears. He wiped his face with his sleeve furiously, then swung his legs around so he could sit straight on the sofa. He hadn't even made it to the bed the night before, his caffeine buzz finally dissipating the second his feet made it into the living room of his small apartment. It was still dark outside now, and a quick glance at the clock hanging on the wall confirmed it was very late in the evening. The balcony doors were open—Link having opened them before he collapsed—and the cool night breeze caused goosebumps to form on Link's forearms. His skin felt cold and clammy, and he was in desperate need for a shower, but it could wait.

Especially since Link wasn't confident his legs would support him if he attempted to stand.

Exhaling shakily, he leaned back against the sofa and patted down his sweat-soaked jeans, searching for his phone. There was a siren outside, probably miles away, and Link glanced over at his balcony door before turning his attention to the device now in his hand. A message from Chase was the first thing he noticed, asking for an update on Link's well-being. He really had to hand it to Chase for his consistent check-ups, even if it was becoming something of a bother. Link could tell his friend cared about him. It was more than could be said for other people, so Link figured he would take what he could get.

He had contacted Rhett the previous day, pertaining to his whereabouts and if he was alright, that sort of thing. Regular stuff. Not hey, you killed my family and now I'm coming for you kind of stuff.

At least, not yet. That kind of exchange could wait until Stevie gathered enough information on Rhett to make an arrest—but that was if the agency even allowed Rhett's apprehension. Link felt like he was trying to catch smoke with his bare hands; Rhett was a talented agent, no stranger to avoiding the rules of the agency. Why should this be any different? They were never going to catch him.

And maybe, although Link hated himself for thinking it, maybe he didn't want to catch Rhett. Because maybe standing face to the face with the man who tricked Link with romance to hide the fact that he had murdered Link's family didn't exactly sound desirable.

Then, as if on cue, Link's phone buzzed.

You don't sound too good, Link. -R

Link dropped the phone onto his thighs in surprise, hands shaking and tensing so much that he had count to ten before he was able to pick the device up again. Rhett had actually replied to him, despite being a day late. Would Link's reply even go through? Didn't Rhett have the ability to trigger failure messages, or something?

I text you. You don't know how I sound. -N

Miraculously, Link didn't receive a failure message immediately after clicking send. He chewed at his thumbnail anxiously, waiting for Rhett's response and wondering when he should contact Stevie.

You know what I mean. -R

Link typed his response easily, appalled at how natural the conversation seemed. I was worried about you. -N
Something flipped inside Link's gut and it felt someone had punched him in the chest, knocking the wind out of him and sending him tumbling to the ground. He remained motionless for a short moment, staring at the words on the screen in his hands before furrowing his brow and willing away whatever feelings he still had for Rhett.

I can handle myself. -N

I knew you'd say that. You're predictable. -R

Not as predictable as you think. -N Link sent his response without stopping to think, then proceeded to worry he'd perhaps said too much. But Rhett's response came back almost instantly, causing Link to raise an eyebrow.

You at home? -R

Self-consciously, Link looked around the room as if Rhett was there, peering over his shoulder or perching at the kitchen bar, head buried in a book. Wishful thinking, maybe. No, definitely not.

Yeah. Where are you? -N

Not far. -R

Suddenly Link was reminded of all the reasons Rhett was a jackass. Wasn't the other man supposed to be in Nevada for his 'transfer'? Close enough that I could see you? -N

It's a possibility. -R

This was too easy. What's the catch? -N

No catch. Suspicious as always. -R

With good reason. -N Link shook his head at Rhett as if he were in the room next to him, because their conversations really were ridiculous. It felt normal...it felt like nothing had happened, and Link hadn't discovered the grim truth about his ex-handler and the agency. Why did Rhett have this hold over him?

Tomorrow night? -R

Link looked down at the text for a long moment, nerves bubbling in his gut and sweat re-forming on the back of his neck. He could do it, he could. He could meet with Rhett and pretend like everything was okay, he could. He had to.

Where? -N

Somewhere secluded. We can't risk being seen with each other. I'll send you the location tomorrow morning. -R

Link huffed in response, because of course Rhett was withholding information from him again. He always had to hold the power, didn't he? I don't like it, but okay. -N

You should get some sleep. -R

So should you. -N
Rhett didn't respond instantly, which gave Link a chance to test out the durability of his legs in the mean time. He scrambled to his feet and grimaced when both of his knees cracked in the process, but he was up and he could walk. It was something. He was in the middle of pouring himself a bowl of cereal for dinner when his phone buzzed again.

_I have to go. Tomorrow._ -R

Link swallowed audibly and quickly typed his response so he could bury himself in his food and forget about the entire thing.

_Tomorrow._ -N

**JULY 8TH 2007, present day**

“Pico Boulevard, in an alleyway between the rental place and the farmers market,” Link spoke urgently, reading the note he had scribbled down once Rhett had given him the location of their meeting. _In the alleyway between the dealership and SM Farmers market, ten pm._ Rhett had arranged the meeting and now Link was doing what he had to do. He had to tell Stevie.

“An interesting location,” Stevie mused on the other side of the line, “What time?”

“Ten.”

“Okay, then you'd better get over here for six o'clock sharp to go over everything.” Stevie told him, and Link could hear the faint sound of typing on her end of the call. He cleared his throat in response, suddenly feeling anxious about the entire thing.

“I, uh, yeah,” Link struggled to form a sentence, “Okay, I can do that.”

“Don't lose your nerve, Neal,” Stevie commanded, and suddenly Link felt like this was just another assignment and he was going to get his ass handed to him if he screwed it up. “We need you focused.”

“I'm focused.” Link lied.

“Six o'clock, sharp,” Stevie repeated before ending the call, leaving Link standing alone in his bedroom, hand shaking around the note he had written. It was only a matter of time before he would meet with his ex-handler and...what? What if Rhett tried to kiss him? Would Link let him? _Could_ Link let him? He was in no way prepared for the exchange, and he had to plan everything out. He couldn't slip up; the evidence depended on it.

...What the hell was he supposed to wear?

Chapter End Notes

Sorry if I scared anyone with that dream sequence... I scared myself a little. What does everyone think so far? Next chapter Rhett will be making an appearance (a pretty big
one), I promise! Some people were asking how Stevie, Chase & Link knew the hoax bombs belonged to the Resistance and not the agency, so I hope I explained that in this chapter. I swear, the text message dialogue between Rhett and Link writes itself. It's so fun to do!

After a request was made last week, I am going to post the method for deciphering Rhett's note from chapter 10! The note itself isn't spoiler-y at all, and will probably just leave you with more questions, but I am happy to answer any of them! If anyone manages to solve the cipher, please comment and let me know!

**The method**: use something called a Transposition Cipher (the columnar branch). If you search "Columnar Transposition Cipher" there are multiple walkthroughs on how to solve it. Remember: you will need a key word to crack it, which Rhett has already given Link (he just doesn't know it yet). I'm not going to tell you what the key word is, but it should be pretty easy to figure out if you read Rhett's note carefully. Happy solving!

I'd also like to thank everyone for their support! I have received a lot of love regarding this story and I am joyous that people are responding to it the way I had hoped. Thank you so much!

No beta this week, so like normal I will get to errors momentarily! See you next week! Merci et prends soin de toi!
July 8th, 2007, eight hours ago

The remainder of Link's day passed by in a languid manner. He did his rounds of the apartment, reassuring himself the place was clean, that objects had a place and were in their place. He busied his hands, cleaning here and there and anywhere he thought needed cleansing. His apartment's pristine appearance did not reflect Link's own condition, which was anemic at best. On one of the many times his feet led him into the bathroom, he'd caught sight of his own reflection in the mirror and barely recognized himself. His face, with its wrinkled and pallid complexion, made him look like a pasty-faced youth. His beard had grown in unevenly and created dark patches around his chin and neck which disappeared into his collar. His hair was a mess of dark curls, pointing in all directions and falling over his sunken eyes.

Link's reflection put a lot of things into perspective for him, and helped solidify his attitude towards the situation he had allowed himself to be yanked into, as well as the evening ahead of him. He was going to meet Rhett in a secluded alleyway—a narrow path, wedged between an apartment building and the farmers market. The cloistered alleyway provided the two men with enough shelter to converse freely, or whatever else Rhett had planned, without interruption or intrusion. What would Rhett want to talk about? What was there to talk about? It was possible Rhett didn't intend on talking, that he wanted something more and something Link wasn't sure if he could give. After everything—everything he had discovered over the past weeks—could he even look his ex-handler in the eye and pretend everything was okay? Link wished he couldn't imagine what kissing Rhett felt like now considering they had been apart for so long, but he remembered all too well. He remembered what it felt like to have warm, soft lips pressed against his, the friction of Rhett's stubble on his cheeks and chin causing a tingling sensation across his skin.

Link remembered everything, but he wished he could forget. He didn't want to recall a time where everything seemed to be looking up for him; like he finally gained his peace in the world after the hell his life had spiraled into. But of course, the universe just wasn't on his side and he had fallen for a monster. A talented, charming, and extraordinarily astute monster. Perhaps he couldn't exactly blame himself for being deceived by Rhett, considering the man had clearly known what he was doing from the very beginning. With hindsight, Link should never have fallen for Rhett's delusions, but that didn't mean he was less of a person because of it. He was aware of his mistake, and his mind had a way of reminding him of it every minute of the day.

So he had to keep himself busy, and that was exactly what he had been trying to do. But when the skin of his hands became scraped and sore, he knew he had to stop and take a breath, or let out a growl of frustration. He did both.
Eventually, Link's eyes had wandered towards his phone. Before he could stop himself, he grabbed the device and scrolled through his messages to read and re-read the texts from Rhett. He thought that maybe, just maybe, there could be some hidden message in them, something that revealed that maybe Rhett wasn't responsible for the air of melancholy that surrounded Link.

*I found a place. Pico Blvd & Main St, between Santa Monica Farmers Market & Midway Rentals. The Volvo place, right? 2200 hours. -R*

Link felt his lips curve into a smirk, finding humor in Rhett's nudge at the excuse for a vehicle currently parked across the street. His *hunk-o-crap*, affectionately named, hadn't exactly been faithful to Link since he had rented it. It was the reason he and Rhett had really clicked in the first place, after the engine conveniently gave out on Link in the middle of an unknown neighborhood. Simper times, perhaps, but Link wasn't about to dwell on it. Instead, he returned his attention to his phone and willed the minutes to go by.

*You'll never let me live that down, will you? -N*

*Not until you get a new car. -R*

*I'll get one. It's not exactly a priority. -N*

*Your safety is the number one priority, Link. -R*

Upon re-reading Rhett's text, Link felt a shiver form at the back of his neck and radiate down his spine. It traveled along his thighs until he was positive he could feel a tingling in his toes. He'd had a similar reaction that morning when he'd first received the text and had to grip onto the edges of the bathroom sink to steady himself. It was absurd; the hold Rhett had over him, that so much as a few simple words could affect Link in such a way. Rhett had a way of eliciting both raw emotional and physical responses from Link whenever he'd say or do something remotely affectionate. Link hated it; he hated the way his ex-handler made him feel, and how he made Link second guess himself. Was Rhett really faking it? Was it really that easy for him to falsify emotion?

Heaving out a sigh, Link locked his phone and threw it on the couch next to him before putting his head in his hands. His fingers worked at his temples, both massaging and urging away the undesired and redundant thoughts that plagued his mind. Link couldn't go back to what he and Rhett were before, and he couldn't move forward without some kind of closure. He had to know the whole story —there had to be more to it than what he'd read in the case files, right? Rhett had to know more than he was letting on, both about Link's family's death and the hoax bombs.

If Rhett was really involved in the Resistance, would he even tell Link? Could his ex-handler trust him with something like that? Link would be wearing a wire that night, so anything Rhett said would be both recorded and used against him. It left a bitter taste in Link's mouth and created a bubble in his stomach, similar to feeling like a tattle-tail. He hadn't felt that way since he was young, having tattled on his step-sister for something he couldn't remember. But the situation with Rhett wasn't that simple; Link wasn't *tattling* on Rhett, he was turning Rhett into the authorities, which was strikingly more serious. Link could go through with it. He *had* to go through with it.

He didn't have a choice.

When it neared five o'clock, Link took a shower and washed away his anxiety under the warm spray of water. He scrubbed at the skin of his arms, trying to rid the feeling of Rhett's touch, but it proved pointless when his skin only turned red and raw. It felt like his ex-handler was right there next to him in the cramped shower, running his hands over Link's body. There was the ghost of a mouth at his ear, hot and wet and whispering things he couldn't understand. Link fought a shiver, but it was all in
his head; Rhett wasn't there and his mind was simply torturing him, his body betraying him at the idea of sharing a shower with the other man. The mist filling the bathroom did nothing to clear Link’s head, and nothing to erase the mental images forming behind his eyelids.

He stumbled out of the shower in a daze, feeling around for a towel and wrapping it around himself protectively. He knew Rhett wasn't really there, but the impulse to cover himself with something was very much real. Link allowed himself a quick glance around the room, followed by a peek out of the bathroom door and into the living room of his apartment just to reassure himself. Rhett wasn't there, and Link was alone. The realization hit Link harder than he thought it would, the tension in his gut dissipating and turning into an odd sense of disappointment. Ultimately, he excused the feeling as hunger, given that he had yet to prepare himself a meal that wasn't cereal.

Link towel dried his hair thoroughly until it was almost dry, then brushed it to the side to get it out of his eyes. He shaved twice, the first time having missed a couple of spots here and there. If they were to pull this off, Link had to look like he had when Rhett had last seen him. Rhett couldn't detect the stress behind Link’s guarded eyes, or the rigidity of the muscles in his arms, or the plan would be a bust. It was nothing to do with looking good for his ex-handler, not at all. Not at all.

Link settled for wearing something simple—a checkered gray and blue shirt, faded. Nothing exciting, but it wasn't exactly boring either—it was a shirt he’d wear any day. He slid into an old pair of jeans easily and fetched a belt on his way back to the bathroom. There, he decidedly put on his glasses as opposed to wearing his contacts, unsure if his tired eyes could bear it. After finding the frames shattered at the bottom of his backpack, he'd since gotten them repaired instead of taping them back together like he normally would have. Appearance wasn't everything but it was to other people, and Link couldn't turn up to work with white tape in the middle of his eyes.

Once he'd gathered everything he needed—phone, car keys, wallet, dignity—Link shrugged into his jacket and exited his apartment. It was time to visit Stevie.

**JULY 8TH 2007, four hours ago**

To Link's surprise, Stevie had actually given him the address of her own apartment and not Chase's, like he had assumed she would. This left him feeling a little apprehensive considering he and Stevie had never been alone together outside of work. And in the few times they had, specifically in Nevada, Stevie had brought up his situation with Rhett—or H, as she called him. Did Stevie know Rhett's real name? It seemed likely, but if so, why didn't she address him that way when she and Link were alone? Link made the mental note to ask her at some point as he pulled into a small parking garage and keyed off the engine.

Stevie lived close to Jessie's apartment, so close that Link could just make out the corner of Jessie's building when he exited his car. He hadn't been in contact with Jessie for a long time, and he felt moderately guilty about it. He was losing touch with everybody, it seemed. First Jen and now Jessie; Rhett was isolating him from everyone. Shaking his head, Link stepped around his vehicle and made his way up and into Stevie's apartment building. He knocked three times on room twenty three, the number Stevie had given him, and waited outside, shifting his weight on his feet in anticipation.

The door swung open momentarily, Stevie behind it as she beckoned Link inside. She was wearing a sleeveless shirt which hung loose at her sides, tight jeans clung to her legs and combat boots decorated her feet. There always had to be some aspect to the woman's appearance that conveyed her
strength. Link let himself inside wordlessly, allowing himself time to take in the small apartment. It was larger than his place, but not by much. Pale, cream walls surrounded him, some decorated with expensive paintings of landscapes and others entirely bare. There was a fireplace to his right, adjacent to a small window which overlooked the parking lot across the way. Above it was a long mirror in which Link judged his own reflection before Stevie interrupted him, ushering him further into the room.

“Make yourself at home,” She told him, but her voice sounded strained, “Do you want something to drink?”

“Uh, coffee would be great,” Link replied hesitantly, following her through a door to his left and into what looked like a kitchen. There were boxes on the floor in the corner of the room, implying that Stevie hadn't unpacked yet. Curiously, Link asked, “You just move in?”

“What? No,” Stevie answered quickly, searching a cupboard above her head. She closed it and moved to another, a frown in her brow, “No, I've lived here for over a year now.”

“Oh, it's just, the boxes—”

“They're full of files. Work files.” Stevie answered, then murmured to herself, “Where did I put the mugs?”

Link watched her curiously, thinking of how he could pinpoint exactly where he kept his silverware, cups, plates, anything like that and he'd only been living in Los Angeles for around six months. If Stevie had lived here for over a year, wouldn't she know where she kept her own mugs?

“Here,” Stevie announced, having found the mugs in the fourth cupboard she looked in. The two maintained comfortable small talk whilst Stevie boiled the kettle, mostly about the weather and some event that was happening in a few weeks. A beach volleyball tournament which meant traffic, and Stevie was mentioning how they would have to leave for work over an hour early in order to make it.

Once the woman had maneuvered some work things into the living room, they had settled there. Stevie balanced her laptop on her knees whilst fishing through some files she'd gotten Link to bring with him. Link sipped at his coffee absentmindedly, biting his cheek to hide his anxiety. Only a few hours left until he would meet with his ex-handler, and already Link was considering abandoning the entire plan and going home. But he couldn't do that, and he was reminded of the fact when a loud siren sounded from outside of the apartment and drew both of their attention. The sound faded in and out, the familiar noise of an ambulance driving by the building.

Link couldn't give up. He had to think of his family, and of all the families he would save if they brought Rhett down.

“Okay, so,” Stevie began, chewing the tip of her pen and peering down at her laptop screen, “Pico Boulevard and Main Street, right? That would put you...right there, between the Midway Rental place and the S.M. Farmers Market.”

“That's what he said,” Link confirmed absently.

“When you leave tonight, we'll have this,” Stevie gestured to the bundle of wires in the middle of the coffee table by Link's feet, “attached to you. It will record whatever conversation you and H share. Chase will be monitoring the channel from a nearby location.”

“Nearby location?”
“There's a campus library a couple of blocks away where he can listen without being disturbed,” Stevie told him as she set her laptop down onto the coffee table, “I will meet him there once we're finished here, and we'll let you know when you're ready to head out.”

Link nodded and looked down at his coffee, watching the liquid swirl around in the cup in time with his shaking hands. They were really doing this.

“I'm sure I don't have you tell you this, but you are not permitted to go out of the range the wire allows,” Stevie continued, rising to her feet and gathering up the tangled wires in her arms before taking a seat next to Link. They were squeezed together on a small sofa, and Link was made uncomfortable by the woman's close proximity, conscious of the coffee on his breath. Stevie ignored his turmoil, expertly undoing the knot the wires had found themselves in, “Although, the range is a good few miles so it shouldn't be a problem.”

“I'm not sure if—” Link began, having to pause and clear his throat, groggy from the coffee, “I mean, I don't know what H plans to do with me.”

Well, he could have worded that better. Stevie glanced up at him briefly before returning her attention to the small device in her hands.

“Are you worried?” she asked quietly, voice tender and sincere. The intensity of it startled Link and prompted him to place his coffee mug onto the table before he dropped it. “About seeing him again, I mean.”

Link didn't respond straight away and instead retreated in on himself, taken back by how easily Stevie had looked right through him. He felt as transparent as glass, as exposed as a sweatshirt worn inside-out. He could go with the truth and tell Stevie exactly what he was thinking, about how his feelings for Rhett hadn't disintegrated like he wished they would. That they had evolved into something raw and new and unavoidable. In the end, he went with a condensed version.

“Yeah,” Link admitted quietly, “Yeah, I am.”

Stevie looked up at Link for a long moment, eyes soft and understanding. But there was something else, too. She looked like she wanted to say something more, or perhaps comfort Link, before thinking better of it and politely asking Link to take off his jacket and shirt so she can apply the wire. Link stripped easily, slightly thankful to get out of his clothes before he sweat right through them.

Stevie's fingers were cold when they pressed onto Link's chest. After a moment, he moved to help her, holding the wire onto his skin whilst she applied a small piece of tape to it to help it stick. They didn't speak for quite some time, both silently contemplating the evening ahead of them. Only Link was also wondering what would happen if Rhett discovered the wire and what he would do. Would he hurt Link? Would he feel betrayed—would he even have the right to feel betrayed? Link wasn't too sure, he wasn't sure about anything anymore.

“I really thought, you know, when I met him,” Link heard himself say between shaking breaths. Stevie's hands paused on his skin, fingers brushing a sensitive area of his breast where she was holding the wire to his body, “that the world had given me a break. A silver lining. But he only twisted the blade deeper.”

To his surprise, Stevie exhaled and said, “I know the feeling.”

“You do?”

Stevie closed her eyes in response, and when she opened them the softness was gone, replaced with
something hard and bitter. She looked back down at her hands and resumed wrapping the wire around Link's slim torso. “Blame has a habit of not sticking to H,” she told him, changing the subject, “You won't pin what happened on him, you never will. It'd be wise if you moved on from it.”

Link's brow furrowed with hurt, “I can't just—”

“You can,” Stevie interrupted him, “And you will.”

And maybe, in her own way, Stevie was right. Link would move on like he knew he could. He'd done it before, and he'd buried his family six feet under along with his feelings on the matter. But then Rhett had resurrected those feelings and started the viscous cycle of self loathing all over again. Link had to forget. Maybe he could do it, maybe. He could forget, but he could never forgive.

They fell into an uncomfortable silence after that, Link falling short on things to say. Stevie's fingers made him squirm whenever she applied pressure, reminding him how inconveniently ticklish he was. It prompted the memory of Rhett's face buried in his neck, teeth scraping the tender skin along his jaw and drawing a breathy laugh out of Link when it had tickled. Link lost himself in the memory, staring off into space and trying to imagine a scenario where he and Rhett could be like that again. Without the grim reality of what his handler had done hanging over Link's head, the two men could be happy. At least for a little while, right?

If Link could apply that train of thought to the task this evening, things would go smoothly.

Warm breath hitting his face roused him from his daydream and his eyes refocused on the woman before him. Stevie was grimacing softly, appearing to be in some form of discomfort, but before Link could inquire what was wrong she spoke before him.

“I apologize if what I said came across as insensitive,” she told him, giving him a quick pat on the side to indicate he was all set, “But we need you at one hundred percent on this, Neal.”

“I understand,” Link replied before finding his shirt and sliding his arms into it, busying himself with the task of buttoning it up. The wire was well hidden underneath the fabric, much to his surprise. Stevie must have had experience in wiring people.

“You look good,” Stevie noted, eyeing him carefully before reaching forward and straightening his collar, “Now, walk me through what you plan to say to H.”

Link hesitated visibly, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed the lump in his throat. What would he say to Rhett? His mind was a flood of bitterness, and came up blank when Link tried to think of something pleasant to say regarding his ex-handler. Weakly, he managed, “I don't know. I planned on letting him do most of the talking.”

Stevie looked like she understood. “Remember, H is under the impression things are still...the same between the two of you. You have to make it work if we're going to have a chance at getting information out of him.”

“Yeah,” Link exhaled slowly, “I can do it.”

Stevie made a move as if she were about to embrace Link, who braced for it, but she seemed to think better of it. She settled for squeezing Link's shoulder reassuringly before rising to her feet and making her way back to her laptop.

“Come on,” she said, picking up a couple of files and gesturing for Link to help her, “Let's go see how Chase is doing.”
JUNE 8TH 2007, present day

Link had driven Stevie to the library to meet Chase in a comfortable silence. Neither of them spoke to each other on the way there, and Link concentrated on the road. Their brief heart-to-heart back in Stevie's apartment had settled Link's worries just a little bit. He could act normal with Rhett and he would do it for the good of agents whose lives revolved around their jobs—the agents that would fall to their knees upon discovering what Mythical Intelligence was really up to. That was the real issue here, and not Link's scrambled feelings for a guy he barely even knew. It was much bigger than that and, if Link was honest, it scared him. Rhett had a lot to answer to.

Chase hadn't seemed himself when they had arrived on campus. He looked tired; dark circles around his eyes, face pale and lips pressed into a grim line. He had wished Link good luck before Stevie exited the car. Link decided to stay put since he was going to be late already without exchanging pleasantries. And if the expression on Chase's face only elevated the urge to put his foot down and get out of there, he didn't acknowledge it. Link felt himself pity Stevie, just for a moment, before his stomach began churning in anticipation. Chase was probably stressed; they all were, and it was understandable.

There were a couple of students hanging around the school parking lot, but none of them paid Link any mind. He could remember attending college and surviving numerous all-nighters during finals. The library Chase and Stevie had selected was currently open 24-hours for students suffering through the stress of studying for exams that would shape their entire future. Link didn't envy them, but he wouldn't mind swapping places with one of them tonight. Meeting with Rhett seemed like a terrible idea, but he had to do it. There was no turning back now, not whilst he was already wired.

It took Link ten minutes to drive to the farmers market, having deliberately driven slowly in hope that Rhett would make it there before him and Link wouldn't have a chance to chicken out if he was stuck waiting around. He keyed off the engine once he'd parked his car around the back of the market and checked his phone. Nothing from Rhett, but a small update from Stevie.

All good to go. You're late. -Stevie

Link noted the time on his phone with a frown. He was ten minutes late to meet his ex-handler, but it didn't worry him all too much. He figured Rhett would still be waiting. Fumbling, he typed a response quickly before taking a second to check his hair in the rear view mirror. *I'm heading there now.* -N

Naturally, when Link had walked across the street and into the alleyway, Rhett was nowhere to be found. It was dark out by then, the sidewalks were quiet and the roads were relatively clear. The air was dry and hot, and Link's palms were clammy inside his jeans. He had discarded his jacket in the car before he stepped outside, worried he would overheat inside it. There was shouting coming from somewhere to Link's right, inside an apartment complex, but he couldn't make it out nor did he want to. One thing at a time.

The alleyway was narrow and dimly lit, a flickering security light illuminating the path towards the entrance to a pool area of the apartment complex where the shouting was coming from. A couple arguing, it sounded like, but Link wasn't sure. He couldn't imagine living in a place like this; it felt like a sketchy neighborhood, the arguments and questionable smells only cementing his poor first impressions. Link felt his stomach drop briefly, a pang of worry hitting him square in the gut. What if
something had happened to Rhett on his way there?

It was ridiculous. Rhett would be able to outrun the best of people, never mind some hoodlums who were looking to cause trouble. Link shook his head briefly and adjusted his glasses, squinting through the dark as he stepped up and into the apartment complex, casting a shadow along the walls under the flickering light. There was a small archway separating the alleyway—presumably where the complex trash cans were kept—and the communal pool area of the complex. However, the pool was bone dry and instead the hole in the ground was filled with discarded furniture and pieces of trash like it was some kind of landfill. Yeah, Link thought, this place was definitely not somewhere he wanted to frequent.

There was a shuffling behind him, prompting Link to spin around in anticipation only to discover a raccoon rummaging through a discarded bag of garbage ahead of him. He felt his heart restart and closed his eyes, heaving a sigh. He was too wound up about this. It was Rhett, not...well, actually he was meeting with a murderer. He had every right to be uptight.

Link turned back around and continued into the pool area, side stepping over some questionable stains on the ground. There was a row of apartments circling the small square, an old and broken railing surrounding the room doors. Some of the windows were boarded up, and some were smashed in. Others looked normal. A strange area, that was for sure. Link made his way around the pool, careful where he put his feet, and came to a halt when he spotted a dark figure in the adjacent archway which led into another alleyway. Rhett.

The taller man's shoulders were slouched, and his hands were tucked into his jeans. Link could barely make him out from where he stood, his ex-handler looking like nothing more than a creepy silhouette. Fitting, Link thought, how mysterious Rhett seemed hanging around the area. Figures he would choose a place as sketchy as this, but it was secluded enough, so Link would give him that.

Rhett was leaning up against the small archway when Link took a cautious step closer, not noticing him. Link swallowed the lump in his throat and ignored the shaking of his fists, settling for dragging his feet forward and toward where the other man stood. Link felt a small sense of delight, given that he had kept Rhett waiting, but he pushed it to the back of his mind. His handler stiffened visibly when Link grew closer, obviously having heard his footsteps. But when Rhett's face came into view under the dim security light above them, Link could see the tenderness in his expression. It made him want to be sick.

"You came," Link heard himself say, having spoken without thinking as he came to a halt about a meter away from Rhett, standing just inside the archway. The taller man's shoulders remained tense, and his eyes were guarded, but Link could tell that wouldn't last for long. Rhett was wearing a faded, red t-shirt with short sleeves which drew Link's attention to his bare arms. It seemed Link had underestimated just how powerful Rhett was, both within the agency and physically. His ex-handlers arms were solid and strong, biceps were larger than average, but not excessively. They were...pretty perfect. Link shook his head.

"You didn't expect me to," Rhett noted once he'd given Link a once over. His voice sounded tired, but not distant. He watched Link with careful eyes as he used his elbows to push himself away from the wall behind him and straighten his back.

"I don't know," Link replied honestly, because he wasn't exactly sure if Rhett would show. Link wasn't even sure if he would show given the numerous times he had to talk his brain out of turning the car around on the way there. Seeing the taller man again, after everything being out in the open—on Link's part, at least—was a surreal experience. He felt his emotions flowing through him in waves, dragging him deeper and deeper into madness and drowning him. If the taller man noticed
Link's internal battles, he didn't acknowledge it.

Rhett didn't respond for a small moment as the two men simply stared at one another. It wasn't awkward, and it wasn't tense—it was therapeutic. The very sight of Rhett provided Link with a nourishment he didn't know he craved. Rhett had this aura about him that drew Link in and suffocated him, smothering any incoherent thoughts he had. Rhett's presence was both vexatious and enchanting—a dangerous combination, and one that Link was at risk of losing himself to.

Just as Link was attempting to force his thoughts back into some semblance of order, Rhett's hands emerged from his pockets and suddenly two large, and very warm, arms were wrapped around Link. The air escaped Link's lungs in one short burst, and he was certain the taller man would pick up on his distress. He made a feeble attempt to return the embrace, before eventually settling for curling his fingers around the thin fabric of Rhett's t-shirt on his back and clinging on for dear life. He felt a sob building in his lungs and tearing at his throat, the comfort that Rhett offered causing Link to crumble under his hands. But no, he couldn't allow himself to be weak in front of the other man. He couldn't allow himself to be weak at all. This was about getting information, not about visiting an old flame.

“I’ve missed you,” Rhett whispered into Link's hair and creating goosebumps down his spine. Link's heart felt like it was going to escape his chest, jumping around his ribs and trying to rip him apart. He inhaled slowly in response to Rhett's admission and turned his head to press his cheek against the other man's chest.

“You,” Link began, but had to clear his throat and try again, “You did?”

“I did,” Rhett replied in the same quiet voice. Link thought could hear the other man's heartbeat before Rhett pulled back to look at Link, arms still around him. Link pried his own fingers from his ex-handler's shirt and instead placed them gently on his chest.

“You're, uh, you're real hot,” Link said dumbly, feeling dizzy under Rhett's affectionate gaze. The taller man smiled in response.

“You're not so bad yourself,” Rhett responded, and Link pressed his lips into a firm line which caused the taller man to chuckle, “I know. I tend to run hot.”

Link looked up at Rhett carefully and said, “Oh.”

“Everything okay, Link?” Rhett asked, the smile faltering on his face. Link panicked, searching his mind for something to say to deflect the other man's question. He had to seem normal, he couldn't let it slip that he knew what Rhett had done.

“Yeah, I just,” Link feigned concern, “I was worried about you. Since Nevada, I mean.”

“Oh,” Rhett's arms tightened around Link's waist again protectively, and Link ignored the twinge in his heart, “I told you, you don't have to worry about me.”

“I still do,” Link replied, and was surprised at the honesty behind it. Okay, so he still felt some concern for Rhett; it was unavoidable. Link wasn't a monster and he didn't want Rhett to be hurt, even if he deserved it. “You scared me for a while there, man.”

Rhett's brow furrowed in response, as if what Link had said had upset him. “I guess I could have been a little more informative.”

“You think?” Link replied sarcastically, shaking his head and letting himself become marginally irritated. Because he had been irritated before, thinking of what both Rhett and Stevie were hiding from him. But it was different now. It wasn't as simple anymore. “I mean, you show up at my hotel
room out of the blue and then disappear afterwards.”

“Link,” Rhett began, the sharp tone of his voice silencing anything Link had been about to say, “We talked about this. I was overseeing a business transaction. I'm back now.”

“You're back, just like that?”

“That's what I said.”

“You're back in Los Angeles, just like that.” Link repeated, raising an eyebrow at Rhett's stoic expression. The arms circling Link began to loosen, and he felt himself wishing they weren't.

“I'm here, aren't I?” Rhett responded defensively.

“I know,” Link replied, leaning forward slightly so Rhett wouldn't let him go. The taller man hesitated, before his features softened and he pulled Link's body into his. Their hips pressed together gently and Link felt the skin of his neck turn red. “I'm just—I mean, you haven't been reassigned as my handler.”

Rhett's face seemed pained for a short moment before it disappeared and Link was left wondering if he'd even saw it in the first place. “I don't think that's something we should worry about, Link.”

“Because we would need to sneak around?” Link asked, honestly curious to what Rhett's response would be. He was aware that their conversation wasn't exactly informative for Stevie and Chase, but he had to warm his way up to it.

He also had to separate his feelings for Rhett from his obligation to avenge his family.

“That, but you've read the case files,” Rhett told him, leaning forward so he could nuzzle Link's jaw, “Romantic relationships between assets and handlers are strictly forbidden.”

Link blinked in response, fighting a shiver when Rhett nosed along his jaw, “Is that—is that what we are?”

Rhett hummed against his skin, “What, Link?”

“In a romantic relationship,” Link offered, breath quickening and mouth going dry.

“Aren't we?” Rhett asked.

_We could have been._ Link couldn't stop his brow from furrowing, and his eyes began to sting. No, he couldn't do this. This wasn't right. This was Rhett—this was the man who was responsible for killing Link's family. But the way the taller man's smile felt against Link's skin made him feel weak at the knees. Link couldn't respond because he honestly didn't know how to. The taller man pulled back and looked down at Link when he didn't reply.

“I have to go away again, longer this time,” Rhett said suddenly, drawing Link's attention to the task at hand and away from his messed up feelings for the guy holding him. “But I'll be back.”

“Where are you going?” Link asked, mostly for himself and not for Stevie and Chase who were listening in. Rhett made a face.

“Can you trust me on this, Link?” He asked, prompting Link to narrow his eyes, “Just trust me. I'll be back before you know it.”

“So, what's the purpose of this trip?” Link asked harshly, hating the way Rhett's eyes flashed with
hurt in response.

“Business,” was all Rhett said.

“Business,” Link repeated, and Rhett nodded in response. Link's legs began to shake. Even when Rhett had openly admitted to wanting to be with Link—in a real romantic relationship with Link—he was still hiding things from him. Important things, like where the hell he was going, what for and when he'd be back. What the hell was he up to? How was Link ever going to get information out of Rhett if he wasn't even willing to open up something as simple as where he was going?

Link could feel anger bubble within him, threatening to boil over the surface and force him to break the act. Rhett had the audacity to deny him simple information after everything he'd done to Link.

“Link, is everything okay?” Rhett asked, voice breaking through Link's turmoil and startling him. His fingers had curled around the front of the taller man's shirt and his fist was shaking. He was losing his mind. He couldn't do this. He nodded shakily in response, but Rhett looked determined, “Link, something's wrong. What is it? Did my uncle say something to you?”

“No,” Link replied.

“Did he hurt you?” Rhett's eyes turned dark, and Link wanted to slap him straight across the face for having the audacity to care.

“No,” Link repeated, not even bothering to think about McLaughlin and his threats.

“Link,” Rhett said sternly, moving his hands to grip at Link's shoulders and forcing their eyes to meet, “Talk to me.”

Link looked up at Rhett and saw the concern in his eyes, the raw emotion on his face, and suddenly Link knew he couldn't do this. He inhaled sharply, feeling his hands twitch in restraint as he pressed his palms firmly against Rhett's chest. This wasn't right. Rhett was a liar, and a murderer, and he had ruined Link's life. Link didn't belong with him—he deserved better. He didn't deserve this. And he certainly didn't deserve his own mind betraying him, aching for Rhett's arms to encircle him once more. It wasn't right, it wasn't. Rhett was bad news; Rhett was trouble. Rhett was so obviously infatuated with Link, holding him close with concern flickering in his eyes, and it was making Link crazy. There was no way Link could feel the same, there was no way.

“Link,” Rhett repeated, and opened his mouth to speak again but this time Link interrupted him.

“I know,” he said.

There was a beat of silence, both men staring at each other under the dim light. Then Rhett asked, “What?”

“I know, Rhett,” Link repeated, pushing firmly against Rhett's chest and forcing the taller man to let him go and take a step back, “I know what you did.”

Rhett looked taken back, mouth hanging open slightly and brow furrowed. His hands hung in the air as if he wasn't sure what to do with them after Link had pushed him back, frozen in time. He looked at Link as if he had grown another head. Link was panting, sweat dripping down the back of his neck and seeping onto his shirt collar. He made a snap decision and began unbuttoning his shirt, surprising Rhett whose face contorted in response.

But Link knew what he was doing. He unbuttoned his shirt all the way, fingers fumbling and shaking, until he could reveal the wire stretching around his body. Rhett stared at it for a long
moment before Link saw the realization flicker across his ex-handler's face. It was followed by hurt, anger, and something Link couldn't identify.

Abruptly, Link reached down and tore the wire from his body. He grimaced at the feeling of the tape ripping off parts of his body hair as he tore the device away from his skin in one swift motion, having watched it be assembled and therefore knowing how to safely remove it. He threw it on the ground at his feet and crushed the microphone under his shoe.

Rhett was looking at him with consternation, the shock evident in his expression. He wasn't making the effort to hide his true reaction, which was both surprising and exhilarating for Link. He had finally caught Rhett in a lie, and Rhett had taken the bait easily. But Link couldn't go through with it—he couldn't destroy the man before him. After everything Rhett had done to Link, from the lying and the deceit, to the deaths of his family, Link still couldn't hurt him.

Link felt a sense of disquietude—of alienation, even—from where he stood in front of Rhett. Everything was finally out in the open, everything Link had fought hard to keep at bay was now out. His cards were on the table, and he knew Stevie was going to kill him. No doubt that microphone would be coming out of his paycheck. But did it matter?

“Neal—” Rhett started, but Link was quick to hush him. His ex-handler had already dropped the nickname.

“Shut up,” Link spat back. He was tired of playing this game with Rhett. It was time for answers. “I know it was you. I know you're the one responsible.”

“I don't know what you're—”

“Don't you dare lie to me, Rhett,” Link seethed, so terribly close to initiating a physical altercation between them. Rhett's shoulders slumped in response and he looked away, towards the alleyway to his right. The dim light cast complex shadows on the taller man's face, making him look more frightening than they should have. But Link didn't back down. “You were involved in the bombing. No, you were more than involved, Rhett. You initiated it, didn't you?”

There was silence for a long moment as Link blinked furiously, trying to keep his tears at bay. Rhett wasn't looking at him; he seemed to be looking everywhere but at Link. Eventually, when Rhett spoke, Link almost didn't hear him, “Yes.”

Link hadn't expected it to be that easy. But the confirmation from Rhett only made things much, much worse. To hear it from Rhett directly, to hear yes, I killed your family and I still began a romantic relationship with you was agonizing. Link felt like falling to his knees and crumbling into nothing, disappearing into the cement and forgetting about the world, forgetting about himself. He had been living with the smallest possibility that maybe, just maybe, he had been wrong about Rhett and there had been a mistake in the case file. Maybe Rhett was innocent, and maybe he was just involved in a lot of other screwed up things.

But reality was cruel and did nothing but serve a firm slap to Link's face.

“And you knew,” Link spat out, eyes wide and probably frightening if Rhett's expression was anything to go by, “You knew this entire time and you still—you still—”

“Yes,” Rhett repeated quietly, gaze averted and shoulders tense. His fists were balled at his sides, his posture matching Link's. “You have to understand that I—”

“Understand that you took my life from me?” Link asked quietly, anger ebbing and flowing through
him, “And, what? You wanted me distracted so I wouldn't figure it out?”

“What?” Rhett asked, eyes flashing over at Link instantly.

“You murder my family,” Link watched Rhett wince in response, “And you had to make sure I didn't figure it out, so you started this—” he waved a hand between them emphatically, “—so I would, what, forget about it?”

“You think I seduced you to keep you quiet?” Rhett asked, or more hissed, “You think I would do that?”

“Well, you're not exactly giving me a lot of options here, Rhett,” Link spat back, then added in spite, “If that's even your real name.”

Rhett's anger seemed to dissolve as quickly as it appeared, and he looked away once more. “It's my name.”

Link looked at the other man carefully for a short moment before saying, “You're involved with the Resistance, aren't you?”
Rhett's eyes shot to Link's face as soon as he spoke. His ex-handler seemed surprised, eyebrows raised before he caught himself. He raised a hand to run at his chin, and Link watched the way the hairs of his beard moved in time with his fingers. It was soft, Link remembered, from when Rhett had kissed him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Rhett said plainly.

“Oh, you don’t?” Link scoffed when Rhett nodded, then continued, “Stevie thinks otherwise.”

Rhett's eyes narrowed, and Link could tell the other man was processing that Stevie had betrayed him. Not really, considering Rhett had been the one to betray the entire agency, but the other man could think what he wanted. It wasn't important. Link just needed to hear him say it, wired or not. His ex-handler appeared to weigh his options, before saying, “You took off your wire. Why?”

Link twitched. “I believe I asked you a question first.”

Rhett looked at him hopelessly, then rubbed the back of his neck and looked away in anguish. “I'm not involved.”

Link felt anger rise in him once more, “Rhett, we—”

“I'm not involved,” Rhett repeated, but something about it felt wrong. The taller man returned his gaze toward Link, who didn't like what he saw there. “I'm their leader.”

Link blinked at him for a long moment, stunned by the admission. If Rhett was the leader of the
Resistance it...it actually made a lot of sense. Rhett was the inside man Stevie had talked about, and Link already knew he was involved in the bombings. And it would explain his sudden “transfer” from Los Angeles to Nevada conveniently when the terrorist threats had happened. But that didn't explain why the Resistance would be working against the agency if Rhett took part in the bombing that killed Link's family. There had to be something else to it. Why had Rhett turned his back on the agency? Was he the one killing agents and using their blood for hoax bombs?

"You're the leader of the Resistance," Link spoke, mostly to himself. Rhett stared him down wordlessly as if he was letting the information sink in. “You are going to be caught.”

“Maybe,” Rhett replied, then straightened his back with pride, “Are you going to take me in?”

That was a question and a half, Link thought. The answer was ultimately no; no, he wasn't taking Rhett in. Not just because he simply didn't have the evidence to do it—a fact that Rhett was probably aware of—but because that wasn't what Link came here to do. The second Link had destroyed the wire he was wearing, Rhett could have run. He could have made a break for it and high tailed it out of there before Link one-upped him and arrested him. But Rhett was still standing there in front of Link, staring at him like Link was his entire world. A corrupted world, Link would add.

“No,” Link admitted, voice hard and steady. Rhett didn't move. “You deserve to be punished for what you've done; for what you've put me through.”

“But?” Rhett prompted, shifting on his feet as if he was getting ready to flee. Link could no longer spot any form of affection in the taller man's cold eyes, Rhett having built a wall between them that Link had no intention of attempting to climb over. It wasn't his job to do that anymore. Link stared him down, breathing heavily as he felt the weight of what he was about to do on his shoulders.

“You are going to be caught,” Link repeated quietly, “But not tonight, because I didn't see you tonight.” From the way Rhett's brow furrowed, it was evident he hadn't been expecting Link's response. It only prompted Link to continue, “Consider this...a head start. You are going to be caught, and I'm going to be the one to catch you.”

It seemed like all Rhett could do was blink and ask, “Why?”

_Because I'm in love with you, and I hate myself for it._ “You know why.”

Rhett's gaze softened for a second before the moment was gone and replaced with bitterness. Rhett hadn't forced Link into anything, and Link couldn't let him take the entire blame for their relationship. Link had fallen hard and fast for his ex-handler, and that had been his mistake. His mistake was always getting too close. Link knew what happened when he let himself get close to someone: he'd be disappointed. Depend on someone, and you might as well admit you're going to be crushed.

“Go,” Link told the other man, hoping Rhett would take the chance while he could because no doubt Stevie was on her way to rip Link a new one. Rhett looked conflicted, brow furrowed as he extended a hand towards Link to touch him. Link shied away from it and took a step back. He repeated himself. _Go. Please go._

One last fleeting look and Rhett was gone, disappearing into the darkness and leaving Link alone. Link's hands were shaking as he raised them up to his face to look at them. Had he made the right decision? Was letting Rhett go the right thing to do? Link would catch him, and he would stop the Resistance, even if he had just let it's leader slip through his fingers.

A new game had just begun between Rhett and Link, with no set finish line and no established rules.
The chase had begun.

Chapter End Notes

Eeek, I hope that ending was okay for everyone! I finally have Rhett present in another scene and he will now be featured in every chapter. (You can take that as either good or bad) Thank you for reading! Did anyone attempt to solve the cipher from last week? Also, I wanted to include some relationship/character development between Link and Stevie in this chapter so I hope I delivered on that. What does everyone think so far? I'd love to hear from you all!

A few things to note this chapter:
1) The line "Link knew what happened when he let himself get close to someone: he'd be disappointed. Depend on someone, and you might as well admit you're going to be crushed." is influenced by a quote from Jodi Picoult, *Handle With Care*, (2009).
2) The line "the very sight of Rhett provided Link with a nourishment he didn't know he craved" is a nod towards Hannibal(TV) and is influenced by a quote from this week's episode.

EDIT: This chapter is the first chapter to include artwork! There's more to be added, but my fingers ache. It was painted by yours truly, so be gentle. /sheepish thumbs up/

No beta this week, so like normal I will get to errors momentarily! See you next week! Merci et prends soin de toi!
JULY 8TH 2007, present day

Link had trouble keeping his mind in the one place from where he stood alone in the middle of a shady area, his ex-handler long gone. The apartment complex reeked of urine, and some other kind of odor Link couldn't identify. He could only assume it was some kind of drug—one of the residents smoking—but he was most likely just stereotyping. The sky seemed darker once Rhett had vacated the area, and more frightening, as much as Link hated to admit. The taller man had created a bubble around them—a safe place, warm and secure in his arms—and with the absence of Rhett's body, the apartment complex had become cold and damp, causing goose bumps to form on Link's forearms.

A plethora of irksome and disquieting thoughts had rushed through Link's mind and plagued his body. He managed to move forwards, burdened with the crushing weight of his decision to allow Rhett his freedom, but he willed his feet to carry him out of the area until he could make it to his car. The unpalatable fact that Rhett had confirmed what Link feared the most; that Rhett had been the one responsible for murdering all those people—including Link's family—made it progressively difficult to breathe.

The arduous journey to his car took Link a total of ten minutes, and a further fifteen to gather up the courage to key the engine and head back to campus. He stared at his reflection in the rear view mirror in distaste, removing his glasses to rub at his tired eyes and blinking so they could refocus. He kept expecting Rhett to turn up at his passenger door and knock on the window, prompting Link to let him climb inside. Maybe he wanted Rhett to come back, maybe he wanted to get the hell out of the city with the other man at his side. But that couldn't happen, and Rhett wasn't coming back. The other man was gone and it wouldn't be long before Link was on his heels, tracking him down.

Eventually, Link gathered his nerve and put his foot down. Stevie and Chase were already in the library parking lot when he approached, the woman perched up on a small wall separating the lot from the pathway leading to the main campus. Chase was standing next to her with his arms crossed, a frown decorating his brow as they spoke to one another. Link couldn't make out what they were saying. At least, until he pulled up next to them and took a step out of the car.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing, Neal?"

"Chase—" Stevie tried to interject, hopping off of the wall elegantly. Chase wasn't listening to her, eyes trained on Link.

"You let him trick you into letting him go," Chase spat in Link's face. Link shrunk in on himself once he could feel the other man's warm breath on his face, taken back by the sudden burst of anger. Rhett hadn't tricked him, and Rhett hadn't persuaded Link to let him go. Link let Rhett go of his own
accord—his ex-handler hadn't seemed eager to leave, but he did as Link ordered. The first time the other man had actually listened to Link, really. Perhaps Rhett was more reliable than met the eye, not that it mattered now.

"He didn't trick me," Link replied, and evidently it was the wrong thing to say because Chase's face contorted in response.

"He doesn't love you, Neal," Chase spat back, causing something to break inside of Link's chest, "It was all just—"

"Chase," Stevie interjected, stepping in between them, her back towards Link. She had her palm firmly pressed against Chase's chest and pushed until the man took a step back. Link was surprised Stevie wasn't angry like she ought to have been. He had expected her to raise hell and tear Link down until he crumbled into ashrivel ing mess on the asphalt. But no, the woman seemed much more upset with Chase than she was with Link. "We don't know what H feels and we don't know if he planned on initiating a romantic relationship with Neal."

"Everything we have points to it, Stevie."

"He's right," Link said quietly, not helping himself. But he wasn't about to lie and say it didn't look that way from an outsiders point of view. But to him, to see the way Rhett had reacted when Link accused him of faking their relationship, well...that was another story.

"Neither of you know H like I do," Stevie pointed out, glancing over her shoulder at Link, "Even if Neal knows him more...intimately."

"Oh, don't tell me you're taking H's side." Chase scowled.

"Chase, man," Link attempted to calm the other man down, to no avail. Chase shot him a look.

"How do we know if Stevie isn't in on it?" Chase asked, returning his eyes to the woman standing between them, "She's been pretty eager to help."

"Chase, what the heck—"

"No," Stevie interrupted Link's attempts to defend her, surprising both men as she shook her head and took a step to the side, "No, he's right. You're correct to suspect me, but you're going to have to trust me right now."

Link's eyebrow twitched in response, recognizing the words instantly. Was Stevie recycling what Rhett had told him on purpose? _Can you trust me on this, Link? _Rhett's words rang in his head and Link had to fight the urge to cover his ears. _Just trust me._

Link couldn't trust anybody.

"You sound just like him," Chase told her, and it was the truth. But Link wasn't a fan of the way the guy was talking to Stevie—it had to stop.

"Chase," Link began sternly, "I don't think antagonizing Stevie is the best idea right now."

Chase looked at him, betrayal flickering in his eyes, "Yeah, it is. Since you let the only evidence we had go."

Hurt flashed across Link's face because Chase was right, but that didn't mean he had the right to treat Link the way he was.
“Enough,” Stevie told them, raising her voice and reminding Link of back in Nevada where she had chewed him and F for not obeying orders. Chase fell silent, as did Link, both of them afraid to speak. Stevie's voice certainly didn't suit the anger in her tone, but Link figured he would get used to it. He was bound to cause them more problems, and he would have to hear her shout many times. It was inevitable. Link was an expert at screwing things up. Stevie turned to him and asked carefully, “Neal, what happened once you removed the wire?”

Link hesitated, the wound Rhett had opened in his chest still fresh and raw. He could still picture the look on Rhett's face; the hurt and deceit in his eyes. Link could feel the tail end of regret bubble in his gut, but if it was regret for hurting Rhett, or for letting him go, Link wasn't sure. Probably both.

Weakly, Link replied, “He admitted to killing my family.”

A moment of silence stretched between them afterwards, both Stevie and Chase in shock at what Link had told them. And with good reason—Link had trouble believing it himself. Chase looked rooted to the spot, frozen in time. His face displayed a mixture of discomfort and shock, and Link understood how he felt. Link had had a similar reaction, freezing momentarily in denial. But it was all out in the open now; Rhett had killed people. He was dangerous.

Link swallowed audibly and decidedly acknowledged the other elephant in the room, or the parking lot, as it were, “And he's the leader of the Resistance. Or so he claims.”

In a flash, Chase's anger returned, “I can't believe you, Neal.”

“It's plausible,” Stevie admitted.

“You're not exactly a great judge of character.” Chase spat back.

“Agent Hilt,” Stevie raised her voice, so much so that it startled Link and forced him to take a step back, intimidated. Chase froze again, proceeding to look like a kicked puppy. No wonder; Link wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of the glare Stevie was throwing his way. “Go wait by the car. That's an order.”

Chase didn't have to be told twice—a smart move, Link would point out—and left them alone. His shoulders were slumped as he disappeared to the other side of the lot. Stevie watched him go, silently seething by the looks of it, before she turned her attention back to Link.

“Tell me what happened, Neal,” she told him, and Link had no choice but to tell her everything. He told her what really happened, and what Rhett had informed him. There would be another attack, although Link didn't know the location considering Rhett kept it a secret. Typical jackass move on his ex-handler's part, but that was another story.

“He just said he would be back, and that I should trust him,” Link told her, and Stevie hesitated.

“And do you?”

“What?”

“Trust him,” Stevie said, and Link felt like she would have been better off punching him in the gut. Did he trust Rhett? Could he trust Rhett? The answer was quite obviously no, but that didn't stop Link from wishing things were different.

“No, I don't,” He told her, “Do you?”

“I don't,” Stevie responded easily, but Link wasn't entirely sure if she was telling him the truth or not.
Stevie was about as trustworthy as Rhett himself, and that made them both dangerous. It was a dangerous game Link was playing, but he couldn't stop now. It was kill or be killed, almost. “But I need to know where your head is, Neal. It's your business where your heart lies, but your head is what I need on my side.”

“I'm with you, Stevie,” Link told her, because he was. But his heart? Another story. “Trust me.”

Stevie looked at him for a short moment before nodding softly and looking off to the side towards where Chase was standing across the parking lot. “I heard rumors about where the next attack will be. I got a tip from one of our spies who haven't been captured.”

Link blinked. It seemed a little convenient, but he played along. “And? Where is it?”

“We heard Washington, but nothing concrete,” Stevie told him, “Chase is going to look into it...once he calms down.”

“Washington?” Link asked, surprised. The “terrorists”—Mythical Intelligence—had already hit Washington before. It was where Lizzy had disappeared. “Why are they hitting Washington again?”

“I don't know,” Stevie frowned, “But we need to get ahead on this. If there's a chance of recovering any of the missing agents, I want in on it.”

“Me too,” Link replied, but Stevie was quick to shake her head.

“No, I need you to stay put. You're far too riled up right now, whether you admit it or not.”

“Stevie, I can handle—”

“No, you can't,” Stevie interrupted him, and Link abruptly closed his mouth and quit his protests. Once Stevie had made up her mind, he couldn't do anything about it. He'd made the choice to disobey her before and he wasn't eager to do it again. “I need you to stay with Benjamin. You know what he's going to do when he finds out they're hitting Washington, right?”

Link paled, thinking of Ben and his reaction to the very thought of Lizzy being dead. He shook his head. “He'll want to go with you.”

“Not only that, he'll raise Hell when I say he's too involved,” Stevie continued, rubbing at her forearm against the cold wind. Link had to push back some hair that fluttered over his eyes. “He'll need support. That's where you come in.”

Link raised an eyebrow, “I'm babysitting?”

“Essentially,” Stevie offered him a lopsided smile in understanding, and there was an apologetic tone to her voice. Link appreciated that, at least. What he didn't appreciate was being undermined by his own feelings for Rhett. He was too entangled in this mess to survive without scars, that much was obvious. He was going to get hurt, and other people were too.

Link wasn't sure he could save himself, but maybe that was just fine.

JULY 9TH 2007, present day
Link had almost dozed off, basking in the serenity of sleep when he was startled awake by Candace slamming something on his desk. He opened his eyes abruptly, disconcerted until realization of where he was had time to sink back in. Link was getting into the custom of becoming drowsy and eventually nodding off in the middle of work. His sleeping problems were disrupting his daily routine, his nights plagued with poisoned thoughts and nightmares taunting him with every heaving breath. Ideally—in a simple world—he would ask for some paid vacation time, because everybody could tell he needed it. However, life was cruel to Link and he couldn't afford to take time to himself, both financially and physically. If he slipped up, even for a second, that could be the end of everything.

He couldn't take that risk. Slacking off had to stop and it had to stop now.

Candace was staring at Link, her hand pushing something towards him across his desk. The room was filled with a palpable sense of dread, alarming Link and prompting him to straighten his back and sit up properly in his chair. Candace had given him a newspaper.

“Look at this,” She told him, pointing at the headline, “Sorry to interrupt your cat-nap.”

“Glad you woke me,” Link grunted in response, shooing away her hand so he could peer down at the paper. He froze. In bold letters, the headline read “ACTS OF TERRORISM LINKED TO MYTHICAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY?” followed by a subheading reading “RELIABLE SOURCES CLAIM MYTH INT FALLING SHORT ON ITS OBLIGATIONS TO KEEP THIS COUNTRY SAFE”.

“What the hell, Candace?” Noah sounded from somewhere in front of Link, loud and irritating like he always was. Link was used to it, used to drowning him out. He had bigger problems. A reliable source, huh? As much as Link wanted justice for his family, he knew he wouldn't get it without a plan. And this—this newspaper headline—was not the way to reveal what the agency was really up to.

“It's probably just a tabloid scam,” Link offered, leaning back on his chair and shrugging, “Journalists plant stories all the time.”

Candace appeared skeptical, taking Noah's coffee from his hand and taking a much needed sip despite his protests.

“Hey, you know, the coffee is free,” Noah grumbled, taking the cup back, now half empty, “You don't have to take mine.”

“It tastes better when I don't make it,” Candace replied, wiping her mouth with her sleeve and slouching. She turned her attention back to Link. “The article said they have an “insider”. You think someone is snitching on the agency?”

“Don't tell me you believe this garbage,” Noah mused, raising an eyebrow. For once, Link was grateful for the guy's obliviousness.

“Although I hate to say it,” Link started, crossing his arms over his chest to stop them from shaking, “I have to agree with Noah on this, Candace.”

“I dunno, you guys,” Candace bit her lower lip, and Link wished she wouldn't. It only made him want to copy her, but doing so would reveal that he, too, was nervous about the entire situation. Stevie had to have seen the headline, right? He felt around his jacket for his phone whilst Candace continued, “We're going to have reporters outside all week now, you know that, right?”
“Really?” Link paused, phone in hand as he peered up at Candace.

“Yeah,” Noah replied nonchalantly, “Always happens when we get publicity like this. It's going to be a nightmare to get to the parking lot.”

“Maybe I'll hang back,” Link mentioned, mostly to himself as he turned his attention to his phone, “Wait for the smoke to clear.”

“Probably wise,” Candace agreed, before picking up the paper and returning to her own desk. Link looked up to watch her go and caught Morgan's eye from across the room. Morgan looked concerned, but Link couldn't hazard a guess as to why. But he wouldn't stop staring at Link, and frankly, Link was getting uncomfortable under the intensity. He mouthed a 'what?' at the other man, who responded by shaking his head and holding up another newspaper. Oh, so Morgan had read it too. Great, there was another problem. Link was positive Morgan would find some way to blame Link for the headline.

He didn't have time for it. He had to contact Stevie.

*Have you read today's LA Times? -N*

He got a response almost instantly.

*Unfortunately, I have. -Stevie*

As Link was about to text back, he was startled by the noise of a phone ringing. He was too jumpy lately—the lack of sleep was getting to him. He'd be hallucinating next. Morgan rose from his desk, cell phone in hand with a grimace on his face. Link raised a brow and watched as he jogged out of the room. A personal call, maybe. And Morgan gave Link crap about not doing enough work. Link shook his head, feeling his phone buzz again in his hands.

*Someone talked. This isn't good. The press will be all over this by lunch. -Stevie*

Link frowned.

*Who else knows? Who else could have talked? -N*

*I don't know. That's the worst part. -Stevie*

Link's eyes traveled to the doorway, thinking of Morgan and his haste to exit the room. Could Morgan be the one who talked? It seemed plausible, but it might have just been Link's wishful thinking to get rid of the guy. Getting him out of Link's hair would be something to celebrate, but it would be both cruel and wrong. He put a pin in it, for now, until he got more proof.

*I'll talk to Chase. -N*

*I advise going home early. The press will want to talk to you specifically. -Stevie*

Link blinked down at his phone, then glanced around himself to ensure no one was close enough to snoop. Noah was sitting across from him but he was concentrating on his computer, biting his lip in concentration. Slowly, Link typed back a response. *Why me? -N*

*It's a matter of public record what happened to your family. If one of them recognizes you—and trust me, the press are pros at sniffing people out—then you'll be bombarded. Just a precaution. -Stevie*

Oh, Link thought. Of course he couldn't escape his past and he'd been foolish to think otherwise. It was around every corner, taunting him and prodding him closer and closer to breaking point. He
hated himself for it, but he felt an itch; an itch to contact Rhett and confide in him. But he couldn't, he couldn't and he knew it. Rhett was probably long gone, States away, fleeing in his Camaro. The thought made Link smile before he could stop himself because, really, a Camaro? Rhett was a peculiar guy, but he was also a criminal and an assassin. Someone like that should not be messed with, nor approached, and unfortunately Link had done both. If only he'd known, if only he'd been clever enough to realize.

Link heaved a sigh and rubbed at his stinging eyes because there was no way in hell he was about to tear up in the middle of the office. He still clung to a shred of his dignity.

_I'm going to head home now. -N_

Link had packed away his things by the time Stevie had replied, wishing him good luck. He figured he'd need it, but he was hopeful he'd avoid the press. Link was good at making sure he wasn't noticed, he had plenty of experience being invisible. Now would be no different.

“Leaving so soon?” Noah asked as Link shoved his phone into his jacket and rose from his chair, a frown on his face.

“Figured I'd get ahead and beat the traffic,” Link lied, glancing over at Morgan's empty desk. The other man had disappeared, it seemed. Who the hell was on the other end of that call?

“You need a ride?” Noah asked, making a move to stand before Link shook his head, “Hunk-o-crap is still kickin', huh?”

“Sure is,” Link replied flatly, but he had to thank Noah for being considerate, at least. Noah was a good guy, friendly and charismatic, but Link rarely found himself in the mood to play along with him. It was a shame, really, but Link didn't feel guilty about it. The day Noah confronted Link's standoffish actions, then he would feel guilty. But not today. “I'll catch you later, man.”

“Yeah, you will,” Noah waved him off and returned to his work, leaving Link to go home in peace.

That peace lasted around thirty seconds before he bumped into Morgan in the hall. No, really, Link bumped into him. Morgan had rounded the corner and collided with Link instantly. Today wasn't his day. Was any day ever Link's day?

“Whoa there,” Link managed, straightening himself, vaguely aware of Morgan's hand gripping his waist to help steady him. His skin burned from the contact, body reacting negatively, readying itself for a fight that never came. Instead, Morgan withdrew his hand and flexed his fingers.

“Didn't see you there, Neal,” The larger man replied, voice rough and tight. He grimaced a little and shifted his weight on his feet. “Going somewhere?”

“No,” Link felt like he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar, “Home.”

“Uh,” Link felt like he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar, “Home.”

“This early?”

“Yeah. Figured I'd beat the press.”

“Probably a smart idea,” Morgan replied, much to Link's surprise. No fight, no smart ass comment, nothing. Link felt foolish for wishing Morgan would be hostile towards him, but it would mean nothing was wrong and that he didn't have to worry. Instead, Morgan shrugged and said, “See you around.”

“See you around,” Link replied as Morgan stepped around him and made his way back to the office.
No shoulder brush, no pushing Link out of his way. Nothing. Jack squat. Maybe something was going on. Maybe he should mention it to Stevie.

Link gnawed his lip the entire way down the stairs, still unable to use the elevator after his run in with McLaughlin, followed by the nightmare that still haunted his thoughts when he least expected it. He couldn't catch a break, and now his own mind was turning against him and making him weak. His feelings for Rhett were an inconvenience, and only made Link weak. If they hadn't been emotionally involved then maybe Link would have been able to go to Washington with Stevie in the coming weeks. But no, of course he fell in love with Rhett. Rhett was Link's biggest weakness, but perhaps his biggest strength, too. If worst came to worst, he could use Rhett's feelings for him as leverage. But that was a last resort, he told himself, definitely a last resort.

There was a crowd of people hovering outside of the Mythical Intelligence building. Link would normally have disregarded them as tourists, but as he grew closer to them he could see that they had cameras. Photographers. Great. He couldn't avoid his photograph being taken, but he did his best to shield his face from view. A few people shouted at him to comment, others to get him to turn around and give them a good shot—he granted none of the requests. They felt like demands, and Link felt incredibly sympathetic for celebrities trying to leave their homes. Did they have to deal with this every day? Link didn't know how the could stand it.

No doubt his picture would be somewhere the next day, be it on the internet or in a newspaper, and there was nothing he could do about it. Well, nothing he could do but complain, which he fully intended to.

**JULY 10TH 2007, present day**

An insistent knocking at Link's apartment door roused him from his sleep, having dozed off reading over some files from work. He had been trying to figure out the next location for the agency to hit, to no avail, and obviously had conked out in the middle of it. His mind was too exhausted to dream, it seemed, which suited Link just fine. The person behind the door did not stop knocking until Link had unlocked it and swung it open in irritation, only to be greeted by a flustered looking Stevie.

“Uh,” Link managed before the woman pushed her way past him and into the apartment, inviting herself inside without asking. Link watched her, standing with the door open in surprise, “Just come in.”

“Turn on the news,” Stevie commanded, before deciding to do it herself before Link had a chance to gather himself and close the door. She searched around for the remote after she’d turned on the small television in the corner of the room. Link fetched it from where it had fell down the side of the couch and turned on the news. Stevie look paler than usual, eyes flickering between the screen and Link, “Chase told me. I was close by.”

“Stevie, what—” Link was in the midst of asking what the hell was going on, and just what Stevie had been doing that made her close by to his apartment. *I was in the area.* Rhett's voice sounded in Link's mind and disorientated him before the sound of a reporter on the television brought him back to reality.

“...We're just getting word now that the head of Mythical Intelligence himself is prepping to address the press,” A reporter said, fingering his earpiece. He was a short man, middle-aged and balding.
Link got the feeling the lack of hair had something to do with the stress of the job. He could see himself balding some time soon.

“Turn up the volume,” Stevie commanded, and Link obeyed without question.

“It's been a hot topic in the United States for a while now, and I, for one, am pleased to hear that Mythical Intelligence is finally going to set the record straight.” The man reporting continued, but Link had a hard time believing that. What, was McLaughlin going to appear on live television and admit that he was purposefully bombing places for the sake of surveillance? Please. “Ah, we're getting the feed now,” The reporter gestured to someone behind the camera, “We're cutting to it now.”

On cue, the news flicked to a different camera in another location. A large hall filled with photographers, some holding microphones, some holding bright lights that caused Link to squint whenever they created a glare on the camera. There was a podium at the front of the room, similar to a press conference. It was unoccupied, but from the hushing among the crowd, Link could tell it wouldn't remain that way.

He spotted McLaughlin as soon as he walked into frame, standing tall in an expensive-looking brown suit, hair slicked back elegantly, acting like he owned the place. He probably did. Link heard Stevie inhale sharply upon the man's entrance. He looked over at her to see her completely focused on the screen in front of them. She looked terrified, and that terrified Link. If Stevie was afraid of McLaughlin, then that spoke volumes to what he was truly capable of. What had he done to her? What caused Stevie to be so spooked by his very presence? Link was going to find out, and he was going to punish McLaughlin for everything he'd done.

“Thank you, thank you,” McLaughlin's voice cut through Link as if he were paper, slicing him in half and leaving him vulnerable and weak. Now that Link knew they were related, he could see the resemblance between McLaughlin and Rhett. The sharpness of the jawline, the large eyes, the towering and intimidating height. How did he not notice before?

“I've called this press conference because I am led to believe that my company has been the subject of many harmful and hateful rumors,” McLaughlin continued, completely owning the room and intimidating Link, who was currently in the comfort of his own home. Link impulsively took a hold of Stevie's arm, feeling the urge to protect her, but also to clutch her for balance. Stevie broke eye contact with the screen momentarily and pried Link's hand from her forearm so she could link their fingers together and squeeze his hand. They both returned their attention back to the television.

“I speak for the company when I say that yes, there have been outrageous and unacceptable failures on our part,” McLaughlin went on, and Link basked in the sound of him admitting he was wrong, “But that ends today.”

Abruptly, the crowd erupted with a sea of questions and demands, some cheering and a lot of pictures. Link felt himself scoff and Stevie squeezed his hand, shaking her head.

“It is my job—no,” McLaughlin paused dramatically, raising his hand emphatically and Link wondered if the guy had ever taken drama lessons, “My duty to inform the public that we have identified the threat that is plaguing our beloved country. An anti-American terrorist organization, known simply as the Resistance, are responsible for the numerous attacks over the past few months.”

The crowd became vocal once more, and Link could barely make out any coherent voices. Questions were thrown left and right, silencing McLaughlin momentarily until security got them under control. Stevie and Link both stood still, rooted to the spot in shock. McLaughlin had publicly acknowledged the Resistance...what the hell was he planning? Was he going to pin it all on them? It
seemed feasible and tactical, and Link could feel his skin begin to burn in rage.

“Furthermore, I am pleased to announce that we have not only identified the source of these attacks,” McLaughlin continued once the room had quietened—it had fallen silent in anticipation, the only sound being some stray camera clicks—and made Link's skin crawl, “But we have also identified who is responsible for organizing such a treacherous institution.”

Link’s heart was beating out of his chest, his palms sweating and his arms tingling. No, no, he thought until it was all he could think. No, no, don't do this, he pleaded, he begged. Stevie was incredibly silent, but her face conveyed everything she was feeling. She began shaking her head slowly until it became frantic, in both denial and horror, obviously thinking exactly what Link was.

“This man right here,” McLaughlin gestured behind himself, towards the screen which now displayed a mugshot of the person responsible. Link gasped, but it came out as more of a choked cry in response as he stared at the picture of Rhett on national television. No, no, no, this wasn't happening. It wasn't happening, it couldn't be—

“Regretfully, he was one of ours,” McLaughlin continued over the chattering crowd, a sly smile on his face that made Link want to throw his television off of the balcony, “But he has betrayed the agency, and betrayed our country, by sympathizing with the enemy. We have identified him as the known leader of this Resistance. We have evidence from a reliable source which implicates this man as being responsible for numerous counts of arson and murder.”

The crowd erupted once more and Link wished they wouldn't. Just, they had to be quiet. They had to let McLaughlin speak. He had to hear it. He had to.

“Who is he?” Someone shouted, prompting a short and harsh laugh from McLaughlin.

“He goes by the title “H”,” McLaughlin revealed, and Link felt like he was going to bring up everything he'd eaten over the past six months, “But his real name is Rhett McLaughlin. Before you ask, no relation. We believe he has access to several restricted government files and has kidnapped and murdered numerous Mythical Intelligence agents over the last year alone.”

“He's a monster!” Link heard.

“What are we supposed to do?” Someone asked, a female voice.

“What's your plan, sir?” A man shouted, to which McLaughlin answered.

“Our plan as an agency, and as a country, is to acknowledge to the public that this is man is a threat to national security,” McLaughlin twisted the knife deeper into Link’s gut, endangering Rhett even further, “We have issued a nationwide APB on Rhett McLaughlin. He must be stopped. This man is a monster, and he will stop at nothing until he sees our beloved country bow at his feet. So, please, I urge you to study his photograph,” McLaughlin pointed to the picture of Rhett once more, prompting a lot of people to take pictures, “And report immediately if you see him. Do not approach this man. He is very dangerous, not only that, but he's also extremely intelligent.”

“Why are they—” Stevie blurted, but paused when someone on screen shouted a similar; “Why are you telling us this now? Won't this spark nationwide panic?”

“No,” McLaughlin replied with confidence, “It is my belief that our country is capable enough to know what is truly going on, and I am here today to tell you exactly what you can do to prevent something like this happening again.”

“There'll be—there'll be—” Stevie tried, her voice quiet and shaking, and Link hated it, “There'll be
a price on Rhett's head. McLaughlin has signed the death certificate himself.”

No, no. No. No, it wasn't true. Rhett couldn't—he couldn't die. Not when Link...not when Link needed him. Rhett was in danger. Rhett could handle himself. Couldn't he? “What—what do we do? Stevie, what do we do?”

“I don't know. I don't know,” Stevie managed, evidently as panicked as Link was. Hearing her speaking Rhett's real name aloud hadn't even surprised Link—he had suspected she knew it from the beginning. Her hand shook at her side, shaking Link's too by accident. Link attempted to stop her but only ended up making it worse. He was in no condition to help, not when he couldn't even prevent his legs from shaking.

“This was deliberate. It was deliberate, right?” Link asked, as if Stevie knew all the answers, “McLaughlin knows about us. About Rhett and I. Is this him getting back at me?”

“I don't know, Neal,” Stevie managed, returning her attention to the television. The press conference had ended and McLaughlin refused questions, and within five minutes a quick channel surf confirmed that every news channel in town was running Rhett's photograph, information, full name, everything. Link felt like he was falling, his legs giving out beneath him, his arms tingling until he lost feeling in them. McLaughlin had gone too far and Link was going to kill him. Rhett's life was in jeopardy—no doubt someone out there was patriotic enough to take justice into their own hands and decide to hunt Rhett down themselves. That couldn't happen and Link couldn't let it.

What if...what if something happened? What if Rhett got hurt? What if Rhett died thinking Link hated him?

Why should it matter to him? Rhett didn't deserve to die...did he? Did he have it coming?

Link felt nauseous. The man he loved had a price on his head and he had no idea how to save him.

_tbc_

Chapter End Notes

Oops, Rhett is in a lot of danger now, isn't he? Sorry the upload is a few hours late, I've been preoccupied with some work. Anyway, I hope everyone enjoyed this chapter. Admittedly there wasn't much happening and it was all essentially a set up for the finale (which will be relatively soon, I promise). Sorry for the cliff hanger (if you can call it that).

The line, "Link wasn't sure he could save himself, but maybe that was just fine" is a direct reference to Hannibal (TV) as a similar phrase is spoken by Will Graham.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** From September 7th-11th, I will be travelling to London for a small trip. This means that there will most likely **not** be a chapter that week. I will try my best, but I won't have a laptop with me nor will I have much spare time to write. Sorry for the disruption in uploading. Regular chapter updates will resume September 19th. Thank you! Forgive me!

No beta this week, so like normal I will get to errors momentarily! See you next week! Merci et prends soin de toi!
“It wasn’t me,” Chase blurted in defense, responding to Link who had successfully cornered the smaller man in his own apartment. Stevie stood behind Link with her arms crossed, shaken but eyes hard and focused. “I didn't say anything.”

“You were pretty angry at me for letting him go,” Link spat back angrily, half the mind to punch Chase in the face for the trouble. But the smaller man looked hurt by the accusation, furrowing his brow and pursing his lips. The television was on in the room, the murmurings of reactions from the public to McLaughlin's press conference in Link's ear. He couldn't think about it. He was still in denial.

“That's not—” Chase started, but Stevie interrupted him, speaking up for the first time since she and Link had barged into Chase's apartment. The drive there had been tense, both Stevie and Link's anxiety rolling off them in waves. They both needed answers.

Neal, stop,” Stevie managed, taking a step forward to put her hand on Link's shoulder. He flinched away from it, but it didn't seem to dismay what Stevie was about to say. “The head of Mythical Intelligence is in on it, remember? He threatened you.”

It got Link's attention, and he spun around to look at her. “What?”

“You told me he had a conversation with you. He told you to pick your battles, didn't he?”

“She knows about that?” Chase asked absently, but Link shushed him with a wave of his hand because it didn't matter. It would be easier to assume that Stevie was privy to all the information she needed—perhaps even knowing more than Link and Chase put together.

“He told me to mind my business,” Link recalled, but ended up trailing off mid sentence in realization of what Stevie meant. Of course. Of course McLaughlin was in on it, he'd already thought about that. But if McLaughlin was related to Rhett, then why throw his own nephew under the bus? Was the agency really that important to him that he'd turn his back on family? It didn't make any sense. Link wasn't sure he'd met someone so vile before.

“I'm sure I don't need to tell you that McLaughlin is aware of the situation,” Stevie noted as she motioned for Chase to move closer to them. The smaller man had retreated into the kitchen, hovering between the archway, fearing for his own safety with Link acting as furious as he was. With good reason, Link would add, but he didn't like the way Chase eyed him suspiciously. There was a hint of fear there, too, and Link really didn't like what he was turning into. He wasn't an angry person—not
by a long shot—but something about Rhett being in danger brought out Link's ugly side. “The agency has been under scrutiny for months now, it's only natural for him to seek an out. H—Rhett—becoming his fall guy was probably a tactical response to the press.”

“Rhett McLaughlin,” Chase mused, as if the name was foreign on his tongue. And it kind of was, Link guessed. Hearing it aloud was foreign, too. It caused Link's stomach to flip every time someone said it. “No relation, huh?”

“Yes—” Stevie started, but Link interrupted her.

“He's lying,” He told them firmly, then became slightly self conscious upon realization that he would have to explain how exactly he knew McLaughlin hadn't been telling the truth. It only implicated Link further in all this mess. Why had he bothered to get involved with a handler, again? “They're related. McLaughlin is Rhett's uncle.”

Stevie looked at him in surprise, or perhaps horror. Maybe both. Yeah, it was both. “What?”

“He told me that McLaughlin is his uncle,” Link repeated with a frown at Stevie's expression, “Rhett McLaughlin. It's not that hard to figure out.”

“I'm surprised McLaughlin isn't H's father,” Chase chirped in before correcting himself, “Rhett's father.”

“It's his uncle,” Link repeated dumbly.

“Yeah, because Rhett's father plays baseball with McLaughlin,” Chase noted, recalling their past conversations. It seemed like a simpler time, and it was.

“Basketball,” Link corrected, hating himself a little bit. Chase offered a small smile in understanding.

“Where does Rhett's father fit into all of this?” Chase asked, but Stevie seemed to have something else on her mind. She gnawed at her bottom lip in thought, but Link thought she looked like she was worried about something. Heck, what didn't they have to be worried about? Rhett was in serious danger. Link had to find him, had to help him. It wasn't about capturing Rhett anymore, it was about saving his life.

“His father is irrelevant,” Stevie told them, shaking her head, “Neal, is there anything else you'd like to share with us regarding Rhett McLaughlin, perhaps?”

Link gaped at her tone, “Uh. No.”

“You always surprise me with your intimate knowledge of him,” Stevie continued, seeming irritated, “Which, in a way, is my own fault.”

“This isn't about me, or my knowledge of Rhett,” Link retorted after shaking his head, having had enough of Stevie's offhanded comments, “This is about if McLaughlin has purposefully antagonized Rhett, and if so, why.”

“What is he thinking?” Chase huffed out a breath and rubbed a hand over his face, “This is going to cause nationwide hysteria.”

“Not only that, it's going to make Rhett a target,” Stevie confirmed, “Mythical Intelligence will be all over this. Your co-workers, your friends, they'll all be working against Rhett now. He's nothing but a threat to national security to them now.”
“As if H wasn't feared enough at the office,” Chase commented absently, but there was definitely truth in his words.

“Stevie, what do we do?” Link pleaded with her, drawing the attention of them both but he couldn't find it in himself to care. Dying was probably what Rhett deserved—no, it was definitely what Rhett deserved—but Link was unable to stop himself. He worried, he worried more than he let on. He couldn't stand by and watch some lunatic tear Rhett apart. “How do we save him?”

Stevie was quiet for a long moment, as was Chase. They looked at him in surprise, or perhaps disappointment, and Link understood their displeasure at his words. After all, they weren't emotionally attached to Rhett. Maybe Stevie was, but it was nothing compared to Link's muddled up feelings.

“Here's what we're going to do,” Stevie began, and Link's mood lifted instantly, pleased that she was on his side.

Chase, however, did not share his enthusiasm. “You're kidding me. Stevie, this guy has deserves what he has coming.”

“Maybe so,” Stevie agreed, and Link noticed her wince afterwards, “Rhett is responsible for a lot of things, and he certainly deserves what he has coming. What he doesn't deserve is having everything pinned on him, especially by the agency. It isn't right.”

“Let them do it,” Chase sighed, “If it gets rid of Rhett, so be it. We have bigger problems.”

Abruptly, Link forcibly shoved Chase in the chest. The smaller man fell backwards into the wall behind him, shocked. Stevie took a step between the two men, eyes on fire, pressing both hands against Link's shoulders to hold him back. Link had snapped.

“Agent Neal,” Stevie raised her voice, all but spitting in Link's face. His anger fizzled immediately and he shrunk back, a scowl on his face. “Chase isn't the enemy here.”

The man in question remained silent, mouth hanging open in shock.

“He sure has a lot to say about who is the enemy,” Link replied, voice quiet and unmistakably furious.

“Neal—” Chase started, but Stevie interrupted him.

“Chase, there's a time for talking and a time to shut up,” she said, and Chase fell back into silence, “Look, Neal, I know how you feel. I know how difficult this must be for you to come to terms with. I thought I knew Rhett, too. You're not the only one who—”

“Not the only one who's in love with a murderer?” Link replied and effectively silenced Stevie, whose expression softened considerably. Link shrugged away from her hold and rubbed a hand over his face. “Forgive me, but I don't think either of you can even hazard a guess about how I feel.”

“Neal, I—” Stevie began, brow furrowed, “I wasn't aware you—”

“Yeah, well, let's add that to my list of problems,” Link shot back. To hear it out loud made it real—Link really was in love with Rhett, and Rhett really was a murderer. A serial killer, at the rate things were going. Link's confession hung in mid air, no one daring to approach it until he had let off steam, but he wasn't sure he wanted anyone to acknowledge it. He needed fresh air; time to think, time to regather himself. He made a move to the door, but Stevie's hand on his forearm made him pause.
“Neal,” Stevie addressed him quietly, and Link glanced behind her towards Chase who remained motionless, observing their exchange with a curious eye, “You know where to find me.”

Link pulled his arm free of her grasp and offered a small, curt nod before making his way to the door and getting the hell out of there. He didn't slam the door on his way out, but he was sure he'd made enough of an impression. The sun shone bright, up high in the sky despite it nearing the late hours of the afternoon. Link allowed himself a few seconds of serenity, basking in its warmth and allowing himself time to think, time to breathe.

Figuring Chase could give Stevie a ride home, Link got out of there as soon as he located his car. He rolled the driver's side window down and let the breeze calm him. Whenever he got held up at an intersection, he thought he saw Rhett out of the corner of his eye, thought he caught a glimpse of amber hair and that untamed beard. Wishful thinking, he reminded himself, or perhaps his mind was just drawn to danger. Rhett was like heroine, and Link was addicted to the needle. He couldn't stop going back to Rhett, no matter how unhealthy their relationship was.

But Rhett knew better than to be caught out in public now, right? He knew that. He knew that showing his face somewhere crowded, or somewhere near the agency, would be like walking into a firefight unarmed. Rhett didn't have a death wish, to Link's knowledge. Link shook his head and leaned his elbow on the driver's side window, resting his head on his hand as he drove, emotionally drained.

He stopped at the market on the way home to pick up few things. Junk food, mostly. Link wasn't one for stress eating, but at a time like this he figured he deserved a hell of a lot of ice cream. Peanut butter, too. Maybe he could just eat it out of the jar like he would when he was a kid. Jen used to buy peanut butter for him back when he lived in North Carolina. Every year without fail on his birthday, Jen would buy him the biggest jar of peanut butter she could find. Smooth, not crunchy. Link felt comforted by the thought.

He missed Jen. Hell, he missed her a lot, but he couldn't go back to her now. Not when things were so overly complicated and into dangerous territory. No doubt Jen had seen the news, along with Eddie and the others, and had been assigned the task of locating Rhett. Fire bubbled in Link's gut, making him need that ice cream a hell of a lot sooner than later.

Link bumped into Jessie at the cash register. Well, she was actually the one behind the register serving him, and Link was reminded that the woman actually worked there. Was he always this forgetful?

“Neal?” Jessie's eyebrows show up in surprise when she caught sight of Link, who was hauling an embarrassingly filled basket up and onto the counter, “Haven't seen you in a while.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Link apologized, unloading his groceries to make it easier for Jessie to scan and bag, “I've just...I've been swamped with work.”

“Haven't we all?” Jessie offered, a smile upon her lips which prompted Link to return the gesture. It didn't reach his eyes. “You hosting a kid's party or something?”

“What?” Link asked dumbly, then watched as Jessie scanned two jars of peanut butter with a grin, “Oh. No, I just felt like I needed something sweet.”

It'd make a change from all the bitterness in Link's life, but he didn't say that.

Jessie offered Link a small nod, scanning Link's tub of vanilla ice cream, “Well, you know what they say; life is uncertain—eat dessert first.”
That was precisely what Link thought he was doing. Rhett was the sweetest thing he'd ever tasted, it was the aftertaste that shocked Link. “Tell that to my cavities.”

Jessie glanced up at Link in response, hands pausing as she placed the ice cream container into a brown paper bag. There was something in her eyes that Link didn't understand. Perhaps she understood what he meant, perhaps she’d suffered a similar sense of heartbreak in her life. Link didn’t pity her nor did he pity himself. Heartbreak was just a part of life—Link had simply drawn the short straw. Not all heartbreaks came about with murder and deceit, just his.

Jessie’s fingers grazed Link's once he’d handed her what he owed, and their hands hung delicately in mid air. Link looked at her in question, but Jessie's face seemed distant.

“Come to dinner with me,” She said, and Link almost physically flinched away from the offer, “You look like you need a break.”

“I do,” Link replied, thinking of wriggling his hand away from her, “When?”

“Tomorrow night, my place?”

“Okay, I'll be there,” Link replied, and with that Jessie let go of his hand and went about the task of counting his change. He told her to keep it, since it was the least he could do. Jessie was just being a concerned friend, after all. Right?

“Don’t be a stranger, Neal, ya hear?” Jessie told him on his way out, and he offered her a wave of his hand a fake smile. That was enough socializing for the day, he thought. He was ready to go home and bury himself in his bed sheets, peanut butter in hand. The day couldn't get any worse.

“You worry too much, you know.”

Link's ears rang, a high pitched bell in his ears as he struggled to maintain his composure. Rhett's voice was soft and gentle, calculating, and most of all it was sincere. Rhett had laid his soul bare to Link, and Link had gotten a glimpse behind the veil. He saw Rhett for what he truly was—a murderer, but misunderstood; capable of emotion. He looked at Link with compassion, and it made Link want to surrender to him.

“Whatever is going to happen will happen,” Rhett continued, his voice so soft it enveloped Link and made him light headed, “Whether we worry or not.”

“You are going to be caught,” Link told him, his own voice echoing in his mind. He had already assured Rhett of the fact, and repeating it didn't make him feel any better. Rhett was going to be caught, but now Link wasn't sure if he’d be the one to catch him.

“I know,” Rhett told him.

“But not by me,” Link finished. He wanted—oh, how he wanted it—to be the one who caught Rhett. It would ensure the other man's safety, and it would supply Link with piece of mind. Justice would be served and Link could move on with his life.

Right?

“Perhaps not, but that's not on you,” Rhett replied, a frown on his face. He looked like was ready to
reach out and touch Link, who readied himself for it, but the touch never came and Link was left feeling empty. “This is my doing, it isn’t yours.”

“I’m still responsible for you.”

“No, you aren’t.”

“But you think you’re responsible for me,” Link challenged, even in his dream-like state getting irritated by Rhett. Rhett had this aura about him that encompassed Link’s frail body and consumed him. Link’s heart was warm but his fingers were cold, his breathing harsh but steady. “Don’t you?”

Rhett hesitated, and that was enough of an answer for Link. Rhett thought he could deal with everything on his own, surviving in solitude and only emerging from the shadows when he wanted to. Well, that wasn’t an option anymore, Link decided. It was all in or nothing.

The taller man pursed his lips and sighed, then reached forward and took Link’s hand in his own. If Link’s sharp intake of breath done anything to dismay Rhett, he didn’t acknowledge it. Instead, he pulled Link gently towards him and said, “You’re gonna get hurt if you keep chasing me.”

“No, it’s not,” Rhett told him sincerely, accent thick and voice hushed. His eyes looked like they were glowing. “But I can’t speak for the others.”

“Others?”

“My colleagues,” Rhett grimaced slightly, as if he didn’t want to talk about it. That was when it clicked that he was talking about the Resistance. His fellow criminals, his fellow murderers. Link scoffed and tried to pry his hand away from Rhett, but the taller man just tightened his grip and held Link in place.

Rhett’s heart was beating quickly, unevenly, and Link felt his own speed up in response. He heart thudding in his ears, and the sound of blood rushing through his veins. He started to sweat. Was this Rhett’s doing? How could he have allowed himself to be seduced into this? Rhett was a crushing weight on Link’s shoulders, pressing down on him and shrinking him into nothing. Rhett wasn’t someone to be loved, and Rhett certainly wasn’t someone whose heart raced at the sight of another. Right? Murderers were cold blooded and ruthless, borderline sociopaths—they didn’t feel remorse, or tenderness...right?

“See?” Rhett spoke, asking a question so broad that Link furrowed his brow and felt his hand begin to shake, “You see?”

**JULY 11TH 2007, present day**

Link’s alarm clock woke him, obnoxious beeping ripping him from his sleep with a start. He was sweating—no, he was *drenched*. His legs were freezing and his shoulders were shaking. He sat up quickly and slammed his fist on the darn clock, despising the fact that Rhett had ever fixed it. Fitting
that it would be the thing to tear him from his sleep, from his dream with his ex-handler. Or was it
ex-boyfriend, now? Link didn't want to think about it, feeling sour and like he needed to take a cold
shower.

So he did. Not that he had much choice considering there was no hot water in his apartment. He
shaved and his face bled a couple of times in the absence of the soothing warmth that hot water
provided, but it didn't matter. He wasn't looking to win any beauty contests. Even on his best days,
he wouldn't win one.

He hadn't heard from Stevie or Chase. They were most likely giving him the space he needed, the
time he needed, but Link knew it would take an eternity and then some to fully recover. Maybe he
would never heal and remain broken forever, a weak shell of a man he once was.

No, he couldn't let himself think that way. He had to keep focused. This would not ruin him.

So, Link acted normal and went to work. He didn't bite his nails during the drive there, nervously
nibbling at the skin on his thumb in anticipation, no. He acted calm. He acted normal. He took the
stairs up to the office. Candace was leaning on the reception counter when Link made it through the
door to his floor, pausing in surprise when he saw her.

“Candace, hey,” Link addressed her, prompting the woman to spin around and look at Link, startled,
“What're you doing out here?”

“You didn't hear?” Candace asked, face paler than usual. She had her hair tied up high into a pony
tail, away from her face, and Link could count every freckle decorating her skin.

“About H?” Link asked, but he already knew the answer.

“Rhett McLaughlin,” Candace hissed, and immediately Link knew what kind of day he would be
having. He almost turned back around and went home. “Come on, the group will be happy you're
here.”

“Why?” Link asked, following the smaller woman down the corridor. For someone so little, Candace
could sure walk quickly. Link almost had to jog to keep up with her, despite having long legs. He
watched as the woman's hair bounced in time with her stride.

“We need all the talented people we can get if we're going to have a chance at catching Rhett,”
Candace told him, and Link didn't respond. She held the door to the office open for Link when they
got there, and immediately Link was greeted by a less than cheerful Noah.

“Neal, hey,” Noah grunted, gesturing with his head for Link to follow him to their desks. “I guess
Candace briefed you?”

“Didn't have to,” Link replied quietly, “I saw the news.”

“Right, yeah,” Noah nodded, as if he had forgotten that Rhett's face had spread like wild fire,
destroying everything in it's path, “I had no idea, you know?”

Link offered a small smile in sympathy, having understood what Noah was going through.
Marginally, at least. He recalled the day he'd first met Rhett, first laid eyes on him, and watched as he
and Noah exchanged what could only be identified as a secret handshake. They must have been
reasonably close, right? Handshakes like that didn't manifest overnight. Maybe Noah knew more
than he let on.

“None of us did,” Candace chirped in, a frown on her face as she rubbed at her forearm absently.
Seemed like everybody was shaken up by this recent development. Link no longer felt like he was in on the biggest secret of his life. “We should've known, you know? You don't get a reputation like that without being bad news.”

“Right,” Link replied automatically.

“Candace, could you?” Noah eyed the woman carefully, motioning with his head that she give he and Link privacy. Candace raised a brow but complied—to Link's surprise—and sauntered off to her own desk, the one that Rhett had previously occupied. Link felt himself sag, thinking of better times. Times that weren't so darn complicated.

“What is it, Noah?” Link asked once they had their privacy. Noah took a seat at his desk and motioned for Link to sit next to him in the vacant chair.

“Did you see this coming? I mean, did H ever—I mean, Rhett—did he ever—” Noah paused, struggling to find the right words to say. Link sat down and shrugged out of his jacket with a grunt, shaking his head and sparing Noah the trouble of continuing.

“No,” Link lied, careful to keep his tone level, “No, I'm as surprised as you.”

“Really?” Noah raised both eyebrows in response, “You two seemed close.”

“We did?” Link defended himself, “You two had a secret handshake.”

“Sure we did, but I have handshakes with a lotta people,” Noah retorted, and before Link could point out that they didn't have a secret handshake together, the other man sighed heavily and rested his elbows on the desk before them. “I just can't believe it, you know? We had him right under our noses and we let him get away.”

Link knew the feeling. “We had no way of knowing.”

Noah appeared to accept Link's response, gnawing at his bottom lip in thought. Link observed him quietly, noting the way the other man's hair looked disheveled, as if he'd ran in the wind on the way to work. He probably did—Link had to fight off numerous members of the press to get into the building alone. Noah might have dodged them completely and sneaked through the maintenance entrance. Link should have thought of that, in hindsight.

“So,” Link started, voice cracking, “Do we have any leads?”

“Short answer is no,” Noah admitted, but straightened and leaned his back on the chair, “But we know where the next attack is going to be, and we know how to stop it. What we don't know is if Rhett's gonna be there.”

“Why wouldn't he be?”

“He might send others,” Noah explained, a grimace on his face, “He isn't working alone. We know that.”

“He's brave enough to go, though,” Link spoke without thinking, then proceeded to reel back his claim, “Uh. I mean, he's capable enough.”

Noah looked at him strangely for a moment, and Link could have kicked himself. Thinking his cover was blown, Link made a move to shrug back into his jacket and get the hell out of there, but another voice interrupted them.
“Neal is right,” Morgan spoke, just having entered the room it seemed. He made his way over to Link's desk, shoulders tense and eyes hard. “Rhett is cocky, confident, and can sure as hell handle himself.”

The shock that Morgan had actually spoken to either of them caused Link's heart to race. Something about Morgan unsettled him, but also riled him up in such a way that it reminded him of Rhett. Rhett could do the same to Link; make him sweat and keep him on his toes. What was Morgan's deal?

“Exactly,” Link said slowly, suspiciously, turning his head back to Noah but keeping his eyes focused on Morgan, “Rhett will be there, there's no doubt about it.”

Link conveniently left out the part where he knew Rhett would be there, because the man had told Link himself. Back when the two had shared an intimate moment, Link wrapped in the arms of a murderer. The murderer he was in love with. Link closed his eyes and wished he would disappear.

“So, we set up agents around the perimeter,” Noah said after a long moment of silence, eyes flickering between Link and Morgan, “Involve the police, too. Get SWAT down there.”

“And if we're unsuccessful?” Morgan asked, sounding cocky and far too tired to be talking about this. His tone prompted Link to open his eyes once more to look at the taller man. Morgan's brow was raised and he was looking down at Noah as if he had a better idea, “Say we don't apprehend Rhett, how's that going to look to the press?”

“It'd be a disaster,” Noah admitted.

“Involving the police is a bad idea,” Morgan glanced at Link momentarily, “Keep it within the agency. Don't let the public in on this information. We don't need some wannabe vigilante getting there before we do.”

“But—” Noah began to protest, but Link shushed him.

“He's right, Noah,” Link said, feeling uncomfortable under Morgan's gaze. His skin felt like it was on fire. “We want Rhett captured, not killed.”

“Exactly,” Morgan agreed.

Noah looked between the two of them like they had both grown two heads. Probably shocked that Morgan had actually agreed with Link—it wouldn't have been the first time—but Link understood the surprise. He hadn't actually been counting on Morgan having his back on this, again, but it was certainly welcomed. Morgan always seemed to pleasantly surprise Link, but he wasn't stupid enough to get used to it. Morgan was temperamental; one thing he didn't like and he would snap, tearing into someone like there was no tomorrow. Link had been on the receiving end of it more than once, and he hadn't planned on being there again.

“So, no cops. No backup support,” Noah repeated, “Just the agency.”

Yeah, the agency that was behind everything. Link fought the urge to shake his head, letting Morgan speak for him.

“Just us,” Morgan confirmed, eyes flickering over to Link, brow furrowed. Link looked back at him calmly, wondering if Morgan's avoidance of the word “agency” had been intentional. Just us, not, just the agency.

Link's desire to have someone on the inside who understood was messing with his judgment.
“Fine,” Noah grunted in response, which was seemingly Morgan's cue to go to his own desk and sit down. Link watched him go curiously, lost in thought.

“So, what?” Noah's voice broke through Link's mind, “You and Morgan friends now?”

“No,” Link told him, but he wasn't sure if that was a lie or not, “I don't think so.”

“He's always got your back,” Noah noted, but he sounded a little bitter about it, “Looks like friendship to me.”

Link tore his gaze away from the man in question to glare at Noah, “I said we're not. We might agree on some things, but that doesn't make us friends.”

“Right,” Noah grunted, and Link wanted to punch him in the face. It was childish and foolish to bicker over who was friends with who, and who liked who better. Middle school drama, and Link couldn't be bothered with it. He sighed to himself and rubbed at his stinging eyes, still tired from his restless night. He couldn't get Rhett out of his head no matter how hard he tried (which, admittedly, wasn't that hard).

Link’s phone buzzed around an hour later whilst he was buried in paperwork. He had tried to catch up on it before they got more news on Rhett, but he found himself drowning in it. His fault for not keeping on top of it—his attention had been elsewhere, his mind reliving past moments that comforted him. Moments with Jen and his old colleagues, but mostly moments with Rhett. The buzzing in his jeans shocked him back into reality and he fished the device out of his pocket.

Neal, look. I'm sorry for what I said, and I'm sorry for how I acted. This is all just really hard to take in, but I know that you're taking the brink of the blow. If we could put this behind us, I'd appreciate it. -C

Link looked down at his phone wordlessly, allowing his gaze to soften. He'd almost forgotten about what happened with Chase and Stevie the day before, too wrapped in his own worries for Rhett and the agency. What he had done to Chase was unacceptable, really, and Link knew he was the one who should have been apologizing.

I was in the wrong. I owe you a beer. -N

Sounds like we both could use a beer. -C

Link smirked a bit. Yeah, that sounds about right. -N

Any word from the agency? -C

Link looked around himself cautiously, before deciding the coast was clear enough to type freely.

They're going after Rhett. Still looking into the location of the next attack, but Stevie told me she had a lead. Guess she didn't share it with everybody. -N

Guess not. -C

Noah wanted to involve the police, SWAT, etc. I talked him out of it. -N Link was careful not to mention Morgan, but he wasn't exactly sure why. It didn't feel right to involve him.

Good. There'd be an outcry if we failed. -C

Exactly. -N
There was a brief pause in texts afterwards and Link managed to pour himself a cup of coffee while waiting. Morgan had caught his eye from across the room, but at that point it seemed like a regular thing to catch Morgan staring at him. It begged the question; why? Link touched his face, paranoid there was something on it. He saw the corner of Morgan's lips quirk and then dropped his hand, embarrassed. Morgan shook his head and looked down at his desk, but Link could see the smile on his face. That's when his phone buzzed again.

_Are you free tonight? -C_

Link frowned, remembering his dinner plans with Jessie. _No. Why? What's up? -N_

_Nothing major. Could use your eyes on something._ -C

Link drank some of his coffee in thought, fighting the urge to check if Morgan was staring at him again. _Stevie can't help? -N_

_She said she's busy tonight, too._ -C

Oh, huh. Link wondered what Stevie was doing, but did it really matter? The woman's private life was of no concern to Link. Not really. _I'll swing by later, if you want._ -N

_Great. Let me know._ -C

_Sure thing._ -N

Link returned his phone to his jeans pocket and wondered if he should go to Stevie's office to see her, but thought against it. He needed time, and one night wasn't enough. Link wasn't ready to talk about Rhett anymore than he had to, not yet. Stevie was ready and willing to listen, which was comforting, but Link just couldn't handle it. Rhett had created a hole in Link's life that he was beginning to understand nothing could ever fill. Link was hollow and he would remain that way, not looking for someone to help him or understand his pain. Rhett had taken Link's heart and stored it away somewhere out of reach, somewhere Link wasn't willing to go. He couldn't cross the line into enemy territory.

But, could he? In time? Link knew the answer, of course he did. But he couldn't admit it. Not to himself, and certainly not to anyone else. In a burst of confidence, and perhaps heartache, Link fetched his phone from his jeans and typed onto the screen before he could think himself out of it.

_Be careful._ -Link

He clicked send and exhaled a breath he didn't know he was holding. Then he waited. Nothing. No fatal bounce response. His message had gone through and Rhett had received it. Had the other man forgotten to reprogram his phone? Link shook his head and sighed, tucking his phone back into his pocket. He hadn't expected a response, and he didn't really want one. He just...he couldn't live with himself without warning Rhett. Ultimately Rhett would have already been aware of the dangers he faced, and the precautions he should take, but Link worried. And Rhett knew that.

Link would take Rhett down, sooner or later. Alive, not dead. He was just protecting his assets, that was all. That had to be all.
Early update this week! Some fun things to mention:

First, this work is now officially over 100k! I just want to thank everyone for their kind words and support. It's thanks to you that this story has gotten this far.

Second, the lovely and talented Officialstevenstone (Mamaburnie) has written a companion fic to this story. You can read it here.

And thirdly, to follow through with my plans to surprise my readers from last week... I have begun to include my paintings in this story! Although they are out of order, and a little messy, they will be added to each chapter in a procedural manner. The first piece of art implemented is in chapter 15, towards the end. There is going to be a painting of Link to accompany it but regretfully it isn't completed yet. For quickness, you can view the painting here. Please be gentle with me, I'm not accustomed to sharing my art online.

*sheepish thumbs up*

REMINDER: There will be no chapter next week as I'm travelling to London for a short trip. Regular updates will resume September 19th.

No beta this week, so like normal I will get to errors momentarily! See you in two weeks! Merci et prends soin de toi!
Déclaration

Chapter Notes

**Story Title Translation:** Opération Clandestin - Clandestine Operation (An intelligence operation designed to remain secret)

**Chapter Title Translation:** Déclaration - Declaration (more fitting: Corroboration)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**JULY 11TH 2007, present day**

Neal.

I haven't heard from you in a while. I'm worried. Well, we all are. Is everything okay? Los Angeles isn't stressing you out too much, is it? You know you can talk to me.

Eddie sends his regards. He and Sara are doing fine, I told you about her, right? We went out on a double date last night. Yes, a double date. I had a date. A date, Neal. I wanna tell you all about it, but maybe another time when you're not so busy. Workaholic Lincoln Neal. Some things never change.

I'm guessing you saw the news. Someone at your agency turned against the country, right? This Rhett guy sounds like bad news, Neal. Did you know him? Probably a long shot; Mythical Intelligence is a huge company. I don't imagine you'd have ran into him. At least, I hope not. We've been tasked to locate him and bring him in unharmed, though I don't like it. He deserves a hell of a lot more than that.

Anyway, I don't want to bore you with work talk. Here I am, getting at you for working too much yet all I've talked about is work. Sorry.

Don't be a stranger. We miss you.

Jen

Link looked down at the email miserably, proceeding to read it over multiple times and soak in the feeling of home. His chest restricted and his lungs ached at the thought of not being able to return to North Carolina after all of the drama with Mythical Intelligence ended. Would he even make it out of it unscathed? Would anyone? Nothing was concrete, not even the information he had. Link's life had become a mess of capricious and often brutal people and information; it all blended together into a fatal cocktail which he was doomed to consume sooner or later. And Rhett would watch him crash and burn, not making a move to Link's aid. Just like in his mind, just like in that dream.

Link shook his head and acknowledged the fact that he couldn't go five minutes without his mind wandering off and into dangerous territory. Particularly territory which Rhett occupied. He was in too deep. Sighing, Link read over Jen's email another time and focused on every word and every sentence until he heard the woman's voice when he read it. Her accent soothed him, her words tender and soft and making Link's heart swell in longing. He missed Jen a lot, missed the companionship she offered. They hadn't been apart this long before, having been friends for almost ten years. It was difficult to adjust to.
He had missed a lot, it seemed. Jen had already mentioned that Eddie had gotten himself a girl, but
Link would never have counted on it lasting as long as it had. Maybe things were serious between
the two of them, serious enough that Eddie had actually introduced Sara to the rest of his colleagues.
To Jen and Jason. Link was the last to know, probably. Los Angeles was both a blessing and a
curse, but lately it had been leaning considerably more towards curse and anything remotely positive.

The idea of Eddie dating someone also brought the double date to Link’s attention. Jen was seeing
someone? Really? Link’s stomach churned, similar to if he’d found out a sibling was dating someone.
He felt the urge to become over-protective, to scare away whomever Jen had chosen, but it was
ridiculous. Link shook his head. Did he even have the right to act that way any more? Were he and
Jen even close enough to consider one another family any more? He’d barely had a few
conversations with her since he’d moved to Los Angeles, after all. He must have seemed like a jerk,
and maybe he was.

Prioritizing his own life was never something Link intended to do, and Jen’s email had highlighted
the fact that he had been selfish and disregarded his friends. Not only Jen, but also Jessie whom he
had spoken to the day before for the first time in weeks. Link couldn’t remember the last time he’d
spoken to let alone seen Benjamin, either.

His life was beginning to blur, and he didn't like it. He didn't like it at all.

He did his best to ignore the fact that Jen had mentioned Rhett, but he couldn't fight the sharp pang
of dread in his stomach at the thought of Jen finding out about them. Finding out that Link and Rhett
had been romantically intimate before crap hit the fan. Link wasn’t ashamed, not really, but he would
rather bury his head in the sand than have Jen—who was basically his sister—scold him on his
romantic endeavors. But she also reminded him that Rhett's life was at stake, considering how she
was opposed to the idea of bringing Rhett in alive. Someone was going to kill Rhett if he wasn’t
careful. Link had half the mind to send him another text, but he couldn't allow himself to do that.

His ex-handler had murdered his family and tore Link's life away from him. He couldn't remain hung
up on Rhett, he couldn't. It wasn't right. It wasn't healthy. And it certainly wouldn't go down well
with Jen.

And if Link's heart had a different opinion, well, then he'd just have to deal with it.

A quick glance at his watch indicated that he should probably begin getting ready to head to Jessie's
place for dinner. She had invited him out of the blue, presumably to catch up, even if it was the least
of Link's priorities. But he would attend because it was polite and it would save him feeling guilty if
he didn't. Jessie was kind and sweet, and Link might have looked at her with a romantic eye had he
not been so infatuated with his handler when he met her. But the time had come and gone to initiate a
romance with Jessie, even if she had certainly hinted at it. With her lingering touches and blushing
cheeks. Link smiled a little to himself and hastily typed a response to Jen's email before he had to get
dressed.

Jen,

Sorry, I've been buried with paperwork. I've been working non-stop, you're right. I miss
you guys too. It feels like forever since I've heard your voices. I hope you're all keeping
well and staying out of trouble. Especially you, Jen. What's this about a date? You?
Dating? Has Hell frozen over?

Tell me about them. Are they good to you? Where did you meet? What's their name?
You know I'll worry.
I hope you're keeping my plants alive, Jen. Or else there will be hell when I get back.

I miss you too. Talk to you sooner rather than later this time.

Neal

Link sent the email and closed his laptop, then covered his face with his hands and sighed. *When I get back.* He'd typed it without thinking, then proceeded to wonder if he'd ever really be back in North Carolina. It was starting to feel like a one way trip. But Jen didn't need to know that. No one did.

Link wasn't sure he'd survive this time. Not just physically, but mentally. He'd been through enough in the past to know that he was strong and resilient, but was it enough this time? He didn't think so. Link had let Rhett burrow his way into Link's life and make a bed there, eating away at his insides like an insect. Link's heart was a shriveled mess inside his chest, waiting for the day where he would finally give up and accept that Rhett had ruined him. He had let himself get too close, too soon, and had it blown up—pun definitely not intended—in his face.

Growling in frustration, Link pushed himself up from the couch and sauntered into the bathroom to shower. He had managed to escape from work without many incidents, only having suffered through a couple of photographs from the press before he made it to his car relatively unscathed. He was still to spot himself on a newspaper or TV channel. He could only view it as a good thing.

The steam from the shower did nothing to rid of the built up tension in Link's shoulders, nor did it ease the rigidity of his muscles. He couldn't make his mind quit. It ran circles around the thought of Rhett being harmed—or worse, killed. His ex-handler was always somewhere in his mind, taunting him and messing with him. Even if Rhett wasn't physically there, Link would still feel his presence. Could still feel Rhett's lips ghost his earlobe, feel Rhett's hand descend his body, sliding down Link's wet skin and settling at his hip. Link inhaled sharply at the thought, letting his imagination get the better of him.

Thinking of Rhett in the shower was definitely, *definitely* a bad idea. Unfortunately for Link, the shower was where he did most of his thinking, most of his daydreaming. And most, if not all, of those eventually led him to Rhett.

Link managed to get dressed in something of a drunken stupor. He fumbled with his shirt, struggling with the buttons. He tripped over his own laces, forgetting to tie them. His skin was on fire. Had he really thought of Rhett in such an inappropriate way? In the shower, of all places. After everything? Was there something wrong with him? *Yes,* part of his mind screamed, because of course it was wrong. It went against everything Link stood for, and against everything he, Stevie and Chase were working for. Rhett had to be captured, saved and punished for what he'd done not only to Link but to the rest of the population. And despite it all, Link was still in love with Rhett. No, he wasn't just in love with him.

Rhett felt like an ocean—a wild mess of capricious waves—and Link was falling in, drowning in the depths. Rhett was unpredictable and menacing, but also soft, caring and generous; everything Link wanted him to be. Rhett was a breath of fresh air in the shit storm of Link's life, at least for a short period of time. But nothing lasted, and Link knew it all too well. He had to stop thinking of his ex-handler in such a way; like the world revolved around him. It had to *stop.*
“Neal, hey,” Jessie greeted Link cheerfully, holding her apartment door open wide and welcoming him inside, “Come on in. Dinner's almost ready.”

“Thanks,” Link replied automatically, sliding past Jessie and shielding the small bottle of wine he'd brought with him in his jacket. He surprised Jessie with it once they'd moved into the kitchen so they could speak properly. “Nothing fancy,” he admitted, handing her the bottle.

“Dry white wine,” Jessie mused, raising both eyebrows as she observed the bottle in her small hands. She was dressed in a small evening gown—white with pale orange petals decorating it—with jeans and boots underneath. Link smiled a little at the casualness of her outfit, making himself feel a little better about his simple choice of faded gray shirt and sneakers. He thought about removing his tie, though. “Care for an apéritif?”

“Sure,” Link nodded, then added, “But I have to drive home.”

“Half measures, of course.” Jessie smiled and opened the wine bottle with ease, fetching two small glasses from a cupboard above her head. The kitchen smelled sweet, but also a little spicy, prompting Link's stomach to announce itself to the room. Admittedly, he was a little hungry.

“What's on the menu?” Link asked after Jessie had handed him his wine.

“It's a surprise,” Jessie told him, smiling. Her lips left red lipstick stains around the rim of her glass.

“Should I be worried?”

“Only if you're allergic to vegetables.”

Link made a face at her. “I'm not. I'm just...I don't cook very often, and when I do it's usually something simple. Like an omelet.”

“No wonder you're so thin.”

“Hey, I can handle—” Link began, but Jessie interrupted him.

“Handle yourself?” She finished, a grin on her face that reminded Link of Rhett somehow. Rhett usually called him out for saying he could handle himself, as did Stevie. Was Link really that predictable? “You've told me before.”

“Huh.” Link grunted around his wine glass, fighting the urge to down it. He probably would have if he didn't need to drive to Chase's afterwards. But that was another story, another nightmare. Another thing Link had to worry about. Jessie didn't need to know about it. For all she was concerned, Link was heading straight home.

“So,” Jessie cleared her throat, and Link felt his stomach drop with nerves, “How've you been? Haven't seen you in a while.”

Link cleared his throat, too, because how had he been? “I've been better.”

“Oh?” Jessie frowned a little, but Link was quick to wave her off.

“Work is stressful right now, that's all,” He explained and it seemed to reassure Jessie a bit. It wasn't a lie, at least. “I'm buried with paperwork.”

Jessie went quiet for a moment, swirling around the liquid in her glass in thought. “I don't think you've ever told me what you do. I know you work from home, but what exactly do you do?”
Link hesitated, racking his brain to find something eligible enough to use as an excuse. Weakly, he managed, “Support, uh. Customer support.”

“From home?” Jessie didn't sound convinced.

“Yeah,” Link lied, knowing he'd feel guilty about it later, but he wasn't about to tell the truth. Especially not to Jessie. She didn't deserve to be wrapped up in all of Link's mess. “Sometimes I go into the office, but not often.”

“Sounds more exciting than working at the market, I'll tell ya,” Jessie laughed it off, obviously having accepted Link's deflection. He felt bad about it, sure, but it was better that way. He was protecting her as much as he could. She wasn't involved and Link intended to keep it that way.

They sipped their wine and exchanged a few pleasantries. A few times Jessie would peer into the oven to check on their meal, and a sweet aroma would fill the room and make Link feel even hungrier than before. It had been a long time since he'd had a home cooked meal. Years, perhaps. It would be a welcome change from the take-outs and cereal over the past few months, that was for sure. Briefly, Link wondered what kind of food Rhett ate. Did he eat out a lot? What was his favorite food?

Link had to remind himself that none of that mattered anymore. It wasn't his business nor his job to learn about Rhett's palate. It was likely they were complete opposites when it came to meals, anyway. At least, Link hoped that was the case. He didn't need another reason to feel attached to the other man.

Jessie ushered Link into the dining room—an extension of the kitchen, separated by a breakfast bar—whilst she tended to their meal. It smelled good, damn good. Link sat down easily at the dining table, a small, square piece of furniture which could only really accommodate four people. At a push. The places were set across from one another, which Link was thankful for. He preferred to observe Jessie whilst they ate instead of having to steal sideways glances at her.

“Here we go,” Jessie said, emerging from the kitchen with a large bowl in her hands, occupied by two large spoons. She placed the bowl in the middle of the table, positioned between both of their plates, before taking a seat across from Link with a smile. “Bon appétit.”

Link peered at the bowl hesitantly. Some kind of salad. Since when did salad go in the oven? “Uh. What, uh, what is it?”

Jessie laughed and shook her head. She picked up the spoons as she spoke, moving to place some food onto Link's plate, “Puy lentil, parsnip and walnut salad. I figured you might need the protein.”

Link observed her quietly, watching as steam rose from his plate once Jessie had dished him a portion. Hesitantly, he poked at it with his fork and prompted Jessie to roll her eyes. Okay, so he wasn't exactly used to having someone cook for him. And he earned the right to be hesitant. “Looks interesting.”

“Try it.”

Link furrowed his brow, but did as he was told. “Whoa, it's—it's actually pretty good.”

“You expected it to be bad?” Jessie asked.

“No, I—” Link stammered, having difficulty with the entire evening. He made a futile attempt to act natural, normal, like nothing was wrong. “Sorry, I didn't mean to offend you.”
“You didn't,” Jessie assured him, forking some of her salad and taking a bite. Link had to admit, the girl could cook. Or maybe he was so used to cereal that anything could taste good. The woman before him finished chewing and looked over at him curiously, “Everything okay, Neal?”

Link opened his mouth to respond, but ended up grunting in surprise when he felt something brush against his leg. He leaned to the side to look under the table, finding Jessie's cat looking back up at him. He smiled a little. “Whoa, hey buddy.”

“Sorry, he shouldn't be in the dining room,” Jessie apologized, making a move to stand up but Link raised a hand to stop her, assuring that it was fine, “He likes you.”

“Yeah,” Link leaned down and pet the cat's head gently before straightening and returning to his meal. “I had some fish back home.”

“In the south?” Jessie asked around a mouthful of green salad leaves. Link chuckled.

“Yep,” He told her, “North Carolina.”

 Abruptly, Jessie dropped her fork onto the table and startled Link mid-bite. A metallic clang echoed throughout the room and frightened the cat before Jessie picked the utensil back up again, a sheepish smile on her face. Link furrowed his brow.

“Sorry,” she cleared her throat, “I'm clumsier than I thought today.”

Link eyed her carefully, finding her reaction a little off putting. Did she know someone from North Carolina, or something? Or was it just a coincidence? Link was probably over-thinking things, like always. He could be clumsy sometimes too, as Rhett pointed out. It had to be a coincidence.

“It's fine. I've usually dropped food on myself by now.”

“Actually, um,” Jessie huffed a laugh, as if she was trying to hold it in. She gestured to Link with her fork, prompting him to look down at himself, “You already did.”

Link spotted the small stain on his shirt and heaved a sigh. Of course. “I told you so.”

Jessie's smile was worth it, whatever had irked her before now gone and replaced with a familiar warmth that Link was accustomed to whenever he was around the woman. She was calming, and Link clung to it. He desired the semblance of normality that Jessie offered. He could forget—at least marginally—about Rhett and the agency for a while and just...be. It was pleasant.

Their conversation dwindled slightly afterwards, but it wasn't uncomfortable. They chatted briefly about the weather, about the upcoming volleyball tournament that was bound to cause a lot of traffic delays. Link recalled Stevie mentioning it to him, too, but he hadn't paid it any mind. He would need to leave for work over an hour early, according to Jessie. Delays were really, really not what Link needed.

The world was unquestionably against him. And, of course, Rhett soon became the topic of conversation between he and Jessie. Of course he did.

“I heard about it,” Link said quietly, looking down at his near empty plate with a frown. Jessie's posture matched his.

“A terrible thing,” She said, but something about her tone made Link look up at her. She didn't seem too distraught by it despite her words. Maybe being held hostage by a drug traffickers hardened her resolve, or something. That felt like a lifetime ago. “Someone will kill him, no doubt. Not the police,
but a member of the public.”

Link winced. “Yeah.”

“It was a mistake to announce his name on live television,” Jessie continued, surprising the hell out of Link who managed to spill water on himself in response. “Rhett McLaughlin is a terrible man, but the head of Mythical Intelligence pretty much sentenced him to death.”

“Yes,” Link croaked, dabbing at the wet patch of his jeans with a napkin. He didn't need to hear about Rhett's impending demise, no. He couldn't hear about it. He couldn't deal with it. Not here, not anywhere. Did Rhett receive his text message from before? Was he being careful? Somehow, Link doubted that.

“What do you think about it?” Jessie asked, observing Link with a frown. She obviously sensed his discomfort.

“I agree with you. The head of Mythical Intelligence shouldn't have did what he did.”

“Why do I get the feeling there's a ‘but’ coming?” Jessie prodded, and Link sighed to himself.

“But, there's nothing we can do about it now,” Link admitted, sounding deflated and looking away from Jessie, “If Rhett gets hurt, I mean. Nothing we can do.”

“Oh,” Jessie replied quietly, and Link glanced at her questionably, “You sound dispirited by the idea.”

Link looked away quickly, down at his empty plate, anywhere but Jessie. He couldn't afford to have her see straight through him. Not now, not ever. Not in the fragile state of mind he'd found himself in, worrying over Rhett's every move and every breath. If his ex-handler so much as showed his face in public, there would be mayhem. Perhaps bloodshed, but he couldn't think about that. They had to find Rhett and quick.

“I'm not,” Link lied through his teeth, avoiding eye contact, “From what I've heard, he deserves what's coming to him.”

Jessie didn't respond to that, and the two of them fell into a mildly uncomfortable silence. Nothing but the sound of the cat purring broke the silence of the room as it rubbed up against Link's leg and got his jeans covered in fur. Link didn't mind. He wasn't thinking about it. He wasn't thinking about anything, really. He just wanted to go home and go to bed, maybe sleep for a good few years. Or maybe indefinitely. Yeah, that sounded better.

“Whether he deserves it or not,” Jessie broke the silence first, interrupting Link's internal monologue, “He shouldn't be punished so. The authorities should be handling it, not civilians.”

“Nothing we can do,” Link echoed, sounding a little like a broken record. He was broken, alright.

Jessie sighed heavily, evidently finished with the conversation. She gathered up their empty plates, politely refusing Link's assistance, before disappearing into the kitchen to wash up. Link hovered awkwardly at the breakfast bar, unsure what to do next. He figured he should apologize for his behavior, but what would he say? That he knew Rhett? That he was in love with Rhett? That yeah, Rhett might have done some bad things and he might have ruined Link's life, but Link still loved him?

He wasn't sure how that would go down, but he wasn't about to find out. Instead, he uttered a
pathetic, “Sorry. I guess I'm more tired than I thought.”

“Don't apologize, Neal,” Jessie replied politely, and Link couldn't tell if she was being genuine or not. The smile on her face didn't waver. “It's a sensitive topic, evidently. I'm sorry for mentioning it.”

“No, I—it's,” Link sighed, “It's not that. I feel like all I've done tonight is be rude to you.”

“Nonsense,” Jessie's response was instantaneous, as was her gentle touch on his forearm. Link smiled sheepishly in return. “It's getting late, and I'd hate for your car to break down and you be stranded again.”

“Yeah,” Link nodded slowly, feeling his jeans pockets for his phone to check the time. That's when it donned on him. “Wait, how did you know about that?”

“Know about what?” Jessie asked, beginning the task of putting away leftovers for the next day. She spooned small portions of salad into multiple containers in front of Link, presumably for her lunch the next day. Link was too in his own head to pay much attention to it. How did Jessie know about his break down? He hadn't told her about it...had he? He couldn't remember, but he didn't think so. Only Chase and Benjamin knew, didn't they? And Rhett, of course, but that wasn't important.

“My car breaking down,” Link prompted, brow furrowed in confusion. “I told you about that?”

“Yes,” Jessie spared him a glance, but otherwise didn't seem too dismayed by his negative reaction, “At lunch the other week. Remember?”

Oh. Oh, really? It must have slipped Link's mind. “Sorry, I'm a little out of it.”

“I noticed.”

“Yeah,” Link shook his head and sighed, “Thank you for dinner. It was...really nice.”

“Anytime, Neal,” Jessie replied, a polite smile on her face as she offered him a tub of leftovers, “Here, don't forget to bring the tub back.”

“Thanks,” Link took the plastic tub from her hands and ignored the way their fingers brushed accidentally. There was no spark, nothing like touching Rhett. It wasn't electrifying or intense, and it made Link realize just how bad he had it for his ex-handler. And Morgan, too, if his bodily reactions were anything to go by. Though, his reaction to Morgan's staring and passing touches could just be his body seething at the idea. Both plausible theories.

Jessie hugged Link goodnight and thanked him for coming, but this time she didn't kiss him on the cheek. Not that Link was disappointed about it, no, but it did beg the question of why she'd done it before in the first place. Had she changed her mind about him now? Perhaps she'd never really been interested in Link to being with and he was just over thinking it. That was entirely likely. Not that it mattered. It wasn't as if Link was on the market anyway.

His heart was elsewhere.

“Hey, Neal,” Chase greeted Link, opening his apartment door wider to let him inside. Behind Chase, Alex was perched on the sofa in the living room, feet up on the coffee table. He offered Link a wave in greeting before returning his attention to the book in his hands.
“Hey, here,” Link handed Chase a six pack of beer that he’d picked up from the convenience store down the street before knocking Chase’s door. Link owed Chase a beer, probably more than that, but it was a start. Chase smirked a little and tossed one of the cans in Alex's direction, who caught it one handed.

“No one told me there’d be alcohol,” Alex mused, the sound of his can opening echoing through the room, “Not that I'm complaining.”

“Spur of the moment decision,” Link explained, but it wasn't entirely true.

“You didn't have to,” Chase told him sincerely, motioning with his head for Link to follow him into the small kitchen area. Once Alex was out of ear shot, Chase spoke again, “Neal, I'm sorry, man. I just—”

“It's fine,” Link interrupted, shrugging out of his jacket and placing it on the kitchen counter, “If I was in your position, I would have reacted the same.”

“But, if I was in your position,” Chase began then furrowed his brow and put the six pack—now five pack—down onto the counter, “I can't even imagine how you must feel. The entire situation is a mess.”

“Yeah.”

“I feel like Rhett left you alone in the middle of this chaos,” Chase continued, voice quiet as he pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger, “Now you're just caught in the debris.”

Link raised an eyebrow at the metaphor, but it wasn't entirely untrue. Rhett was a crushing force, destroying everything in his path and heading straight for Link. Now they had to pick up the pieces that Rhett had left behind, and it wasn't pretty. “It's my own fault.”

“Not entirely,” Chase was fast to defend Link from, well, himself, “Stevie told me about how Rhett talked about you.”

“Oh?” Link blinked. Stevie had mentioned the way Rhett looked at him fleetingly before, but why had she mentioned it to Chase? “What did she say?”

Chase looked uncomfortable, and Link didn't blame him. “That she knew about the two of you for a lot longer than you think thanks to Rhett. And that Rhett talked about you like you were the sun, or something. I don't remember what she said exactly.”

Link fell silent upon hearing that, caught somewhere between distress and flattery. So, that totally diminished the possibility of Rhett faking his feelings for Link, right? If he was acting like he loved Link in front of Stevie, as well as when he spent time with Link, then he had to be telling the truth, right?

“But I don't know if I buy it,” Chase interrupted Link's thoughts, “The relationship might have been a set up from the beginning, and Rhett might have gotten too close.”

Just like that, Link felt a crushing weight against his chest once more. He’d buried the possibility of Rhett only being with Link to get information out of him, locked it away behind his feelings for his ex-handler. Link was a goner, that much was clear, but if he could save a few lives before he burned out, then it was worth it. He couldn't let Rhett—or the Resistance—hurt anyone else.

“You okay, Neal?” Chase asked suddenly, surprising Link who fought the urge to jump, “You look like you're about to be sick.”
“Not far from it.” Link croaked.

“Let's go into my office,” Chase ushered Link out of the kitchen by his elbow, gently maneuvering them into another room. He paused to offer a short explanation to Alex on his way, letting Link go ahead. “Alex, I've got something to go over with Neal.”

“You and your secrets,” Alex grunted in response, but Link couldn't tell if he was really bothered by it or not. Alex looked up from the book in his hands and immediately his brow furrowed when he caught sight of Link. “Whoa, Neal. You okay, man?”

Link opened his mouth to speak, but then hesitated. How much did Alex know? Had Chase told him everything, or nothing? And why was he even there to begin with? Link felt his head swim and he had to discreetly lean against the doorway to Chase's office for support.

“He's fine,” Chase answered for Link, shooting a worried glance in his direction before turning his attention back to Alex, “We'll just be a few minutes. Don't break anything.”

Alex made a face in response and watched as the two men disappeared into Chase's office. Once inside, Link took a deep breath and all but collapsed against the wall, leaning his back on it. He couldn't think straight. Chase made his way into the room but didn't go straight for his computer like Link assumed he would. Too many times had Link came here for Chase to be the bearer of bad news, all but strapping Link to a chair and thrusting case files in his direction. But not this time.

This time, Chase rummaged around in his computer desk drawer for a small piece of paper. Link recognized it instantly, easily, because it wasn't like he hadn't spend any spare time he had trying to figure out Rhett's damn note. Not at all.

“You figured it out?” Link blurted, half panicked, half excited. No doubt Rhett's note would lead to more trouble, if not more bad news for Link, but it was something.

“Not quite,” Chase replied, watching Link deflate with sad eyes, “But I circled some things. Here, take a look.”

Link took the small piece of paper from Chase's hands and held it up to his face, brows furrowing. This stupid piece of paper...it had caused so many problems, but now it seemed like the least of Link's worries. Whatever Rhett had wanted from him, it was too late now. Rhett was already the enemy—both an enemy of Link and the entire country—and there was no point going back over the note he'd left Link weeks ago. It probably didn't mean anything. A momentary distraction so Rhett could get one step ahead, or something.

Even if the note did once have some significance, it wouldn't now. Whatever it meant was probably redundant now, since so much time had passed. Right?

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Yeah, the note was still as confusing to look at. It was just a mess of characters and numbers; it didn't make any sense. Obviously it was a code of some sort, as Chase had pointed out one of the first times he'd tried to make sense of it, but that knowledge hadn't exactly gotten them any closer to solving it.

“I don't see anything circled,” Link said.

“Turn it over, Neal,” Chase snorted, taking the paper from Link's hand only to flip it over and reveal the other side. The side which actually made sense.
I am not who you think I am. I'm sorry, Neal. But in time I hope you understand.

Wait for me. -R

Link sighed heavily, eyes drooping, remembering what it felt like to have Rhett wrapped around him the night before it all went to hell. Rhett had put an arm over Link’s small waist and pulled him against his chest, breathing hot air onto Link's neck. It was...something. Something Link would kill to have again, but it couldn't be. They couldn't be, and he was just going to have to accept it.

“Neal,” Chase waved a hand in front of Link's face, prompting him to look up, startled, “Look, I circled the letters that Rhett underlined. You knew it spelled out “Link”, right?”

Link cringed. “Yeah, I knew.”

“What is that?” Chase asked, but Link got the impression he already knew the answer, “His pet name for you?”

“It's not a pet name,” Link all but spat back, prompting Chase to raise a hand in defense, “It's a nickname. People in high school used to call me it, and then Rhett called me it out of the blue. I don't know where he got it from.”

“Huh,” Chase pursed his lips, “I think I'll stick to Neal, if that's okay with you.”

“It's fine,” Link told him. The less he had to remind him of Rhett, the better. “What's the nickname got to do with anything?”

Suddenly, Chase got this weird smile on his face as if he had an incredible idea. “Well, he didn’t underline them for nothing, right? So I'm thinking it's a key word of some kind. Something to help us—or rather, help you—solve whatever the code on the back of the note means.”

Link blinked slowly in response, then looked down at the note again. If his name was really a key word, what did it do? Was it going to help him rearrange the letters into some kind of message? Why couldn't Rhett have just been straightforward? Nothing was ever easy.

“I'm not sure how, but I think he was trying to help you figure it out,” Chase continued once Link didn't reply, “Maybe it was something too risky to write down plainly, maybe—”

“What does it matter, anyway?” Link replied flatly, handing the note back to Chase who didn't accept it. The other man looked surprised that Link had interrupted him, but Link didn't feel much like talking about it. He didn't feel much like anything. The note wasn't important to him anymore. “He gave me that note a month ago now. What's the point? Whatever he was trying to tell me is probably irrelevant now.”

Chase was quiet for a long moment, simply observing Link. When he still hadn't raised his hand to accept the note, Link placed it down onto the computer desk to his right in favor of removing his glasses and rubbing at his eyes. When he opened them again, the room was blurry and for a second, just a second, Link thought he saw Rhett standing there before him. That was until he put his glasses back on and reality hit him square in the jaw.

Rhett wasn't there. He was never going to be.

“I get that you're discouraged, but hear me out,” Chase spoke up finally, voice quiet as if he was afraid of hurting Link's feelings. Not that it would happen; Link's feelings were already beyond repair. “I want to believe that Rhett cares about you, Neal. I want to believe that his compassion for you might be enough to get him to stop what he's doing.”
“And do you?”

“I don’t know,” Chase admitted, “But he intended this note for your eyes only, right? Maybe he was going to let you in on everything, or maybe he wanted invite you to join the Resistance. I don't know. But whatever it means, it's important. We can't just shrug it off.”

“Why would Rhett want me to join the Resistance?” Link asked, eyes wide and hands shaking. He didn't need this; he didn't need Chase planting these thoughts in Link's head. He didn't need to think of Rhett being in love with him. Rhett was a bad person, he had to remember that. Rhett murdered his family.

But did he mean to? Had he murdered Link's wife and the others on purpose, or was it something else?

Link shook his head. He didn't know. He didn't know anything.

“If he loved you, he would want you by his side,” Chase spoke tenderly, and Link blinked at him, fighting the sting in his eyes. Chase's gaze wandered off towards the door behind Link as he spoke, as if he was thinking of someone, “At least, that's what I would want if I were him.”

“If you were him,” Link echoed, finding humor in Chase's words considering the guy hated Rhett's guts, “I'm surprised you even made the comparison.”

“It's not the point,” Chase said, looking away from the door towards Link, “You love someone, you want to be with them. It's not rocket science, Neal.”

“What happened to him only being with me to distract me?” Link asked, surprised at Chase's sudden change of heart. Not that it was unwelcome, no, but it was certainly a short time to do a one-eighty.

Chase made a face. “It's still a possibility. If he was really assigned to keep an eye on you, then he didn't intend to fall for you. But he did.”

“And he tried to use the note to reach out to me,” Link finished, things clicking into place. He had seen Rhett after he'd left Link the note; back in the Nevada where Rhett had appeared at his hotel room out of the blue to scold Link for running head first into danger. It was ridiculous to think about now. Link was probably in more danger being alone with Rhett in a room than he was on the field. How times had changed.

“Right,” Chase nodded to himself, picking up the note from the computer desk and looking at it. He gnawed at his bottom lip in thought. “Have you had Stevie look at it?”

“No, I—” Link shook his head, “I hadn't thought about showing her.”

“Maybe you should,” Chase said, then smiled sheepishly as if he'd done something wrong, “I actually invited her here.”

Link raised an eyebrow in surprise, remembering that Alex was in the living room. Maybe Chase had told him after all. “Why?”

“To talk about what's happening in Washington,” Chase explained, and Link's face paled, “You're going, right?”

“No,” Link shook his head, scowling a little, “Stevie wants me to stay here and hold down the fort.”

“And by that you mean babysit Ben, right?”
“Right.”

Chase cursed to himself. “What’s Stevie thinking? You should be going. We need people there who are actually aware of the situation with the agency. Our agents are going to go in blind and get taken hostage.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Link said, but the doorbell ringing interrupted him. He could hear Alex calling to Chase, which prompted the shorter man to open his office door and move into the living room. Chase passed the note to Link on his way out, who tucked it into his jeans pocket before emerging into the living room, too.

“Don’t rush to get the door, now,” Chase commented at Alex, who hadn’t moved from the couch despite obviously hearing the door go. Link shook his head, smiling at how domestic both Chase and Alex seemed.

“Agent Hilt,” Stevie greeted Chase at the door, all business and making Link’s smile falter.

“What’s wrong?” Link asked instantly, watching as Stevie moved past Chase and into the room. She didn’t stop until she was standing in front of Link, eyes wide. She was carrying her laptop under her arm. Link recognized the look on her face; it was the same as when they’d watched McLaughlin’s press conference. “Stevie, what happened?”

“You’re not going to like this,” Stevie replied. Her long hair was disheveled and falling over her face as if she’d hurried to the apartment. It wasn’t promising.

“What’s going on?” Alex asked, placing the book he was reading down onto the table. Link had a moment of raw panic, looking at Chase in alarm. But Chase didn’t seem too bothered by Alex’s presence, and neither did Stevie. Was Link missing something?

It didn’t matter. What mattered was what was causing that look of distress on Stevie’s face.

The woman shifted the laptop she was carrying and handed it to Alex who was still sitting on the couch. “Boot that up.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Alex said sarcastically, but did as he was told after Chase shot a glare in his direction. Link had the urge to reach out and take Stevie’s hands, so he did, and she seemed pretty comforted by his touch.

“Stevie, what is it?”

“It’s Rhett.”

Link’s face paled, and he felt his heart collapse inside his chest. No, no. Rhett couldn’t be—he couldn’t be—“Is he alive?”

“Yes,” Stevie replied instantly, and Link felt his heart restart, “But I don’t know for how long.”

“Is he hurt?” Chase asked from somewhere behind Stevie, but Link wasn’t paying attention, “Did someone catch him?”

“No,” Stevie shook her head wildly, then guided Link around the couch so they could sit down together on it. Alex was perched on the other side of Stevie, then placed the laptop onto the coffee table in front of them. “Chase, come here.”

Chase furrowed his brow and moved around the couch so he could perch on Alex’s armrest, peering
at the laptop with apprehension. Stevie let go of Link's hands to use the laptop and show them...her emails?

“I'm part of a mailing list which includes a lot of the managers in our department, as well as some other people a lot higher ranking than we are,” She explained, clicking around so quickly that Link had trouble keeping track of what she was doing, “Before he went on the run, Rhett got me access to the head of Mythical Intelligence's mailing list.”

“Of course he did,” Chase commented absently, but Alex hushed him with a nudge to his side. Link kept his attention on the laptop. If Rhett was hurt, or worse, he didn't know what he'd do. He didn't know what he'd have to do. Rhett couldn't be hurt. Link told him to be careful, had Rhett not listened?

“This has been circulating some mailing lists for the past hour,” Stevie continued as if Chase hadn't spoken, opening up an email with some sort of attachment. “To my knowledge, McLaughlin intends to send it to every local news station in the state.”

“What is it?” Link asked, voice higher pitched than normal. He was worried. Beyond that, he was terrified. Last time the news got wind of agency news, it hadn't ended well for anyone involved, and now Rhett's life was on the line. Was there ever an end to this nightmare? Link didn't count on it.

“It's a video,” Stevie said grimly, opening up the file and waiting for it to load, “It's the Resistance's response to McLaughlin's allegations.”

“It's not—” Link started, but Chase interrupted him, having clearly been thinking the same thing.

“Rhett is in it?”

Stevie glanced at Chase, whose face paled significantly in response. There was a silent exchange between the two of them, but Link was too far gone to bother figuring out what it meant. Was Rhett really dumb enough to appear on video on national television? His picture was already plastered all over the news stations, magazines and the internet, you name it. Did he have a death wish?

Of course he did. Of course Rhett would appear in the Resistance's video. He was their leader, after all. Link closed his eyes and willed his brain to slow down, to turn it down a notch long enough for him to focus on the video he was about to see. He felt his heart in his throat, his chest heaving in shaking breaths. His hands were shaking on his lap.

The laptop made an unpleasant crackling noise before the video began playing, static images flashing over the screen before a man appeared on the screen. To Link's relief, it wasn't Rhett.

“United States of America, this is a message from the Resistance,” The man announced, looking straight at the camera. He had a deep voice and it did nothing but make Link's stomach churn. His hair was dark and trimmed short, and he was wearing a maroon dress shirt and black tie. Overdressed, maybe. Maybe he just liked suits. It wasn't important. “This is a movement against the Mythical Intelligence Agency. We heard your accusations, McLaughlin, and we're here to address them.”

Abruptly, the camera flickered and a familiar static flickered across the screen. Were they using an old camera? Video tape? Link couldn't be sure.

When the image became clear again, Link's face fell. Standing in front of the camera was Rhett, looking like he hadn't slept in about three weeks. Link's heart ached. He heard Stevie exhale beside him.
“I'm Rhett McLaughlin,” Rhett introduced himself, sounding rough and more southern than Link had ever heard him. His beard covered his lips and Link guessed he hadn't bothered trimming it in a long time. Link heard a small noise of distress, before he realized that it came from his own throat. Stevie gripped at his hand. “I'm the leader of the Resistance, but you already know that.”

There he was; the cocky, arrogant asshole that Link had come to know and love. Rhett was unbelievable. He had a death wish, that had to be it.

“I'll admit, it was a smart thing you did, McLaughlin,” Rhett sneered, and Link felt like he was about to be sick. “Pinning everything on us. I guess that's what you do best, isn't it?”

“What's he talking about?” Chase asked suddenly, but Stevie shushed him with a short, “Not now.”

“United States of America, we are the Resistance and we aim to make this country a better place,” Rhett claimed, eyes hard and voice unwavering, looking straight at the camera. There was a movement behind him but Link couldn't make out what it was. It looked like Rhett was standing in a large room, or hall, or something. “We do what we have to do, and we will not stop until we see justice. We aren't the enemy. We never have been. The enemy has been Mythical Intelligence all along.”

“Is he crazy?” Alex blurted in surprise.

“The Resistance will not stop, and we will continue to do what we set out to do,” Rhett continued, and Link felt himself wishing that Rhett would just come clean and tell the public what was really going on. Tell them about McLaughlin being related to Rhett, and about the surveillance cameras. If it would save Rhett's life, Link could risk the potential nationwide hysteria. Rhett mattered to him more than anything. It only took a death scare for Link to realize it. “Try to stop us and you won't succeed. We'll keep taking hostages, and we'll keep sending you those canisters we know you like.”

Rhett's smirk caused Link to dry heave, startling Stevie who leaned out of the way in case Link began to vomit. Rhett was threatening to kill agents if people came after him. This wasn't happening, was it? Rhett was really...Rhett was really responsible for all of this, and he was really killing people and using their blood as a gimmick. It wasn't right. Link couldn't have fallen for such a monster. Link was in love with a monster.

“Mythical Intelligence, stay away from Washington,” Rhett threatened, his voice taking on a much darker, sinister tone. His eyes were glowing. “Or you're going to lose people. You should be concerned about time. You're running out of it.”

Link froze, eyes wide and unblinking at the screen which had cut to black, the video over. You should be concerned about time. Had Rhett been aiming that part at Link?

I'm not concerned about time. Link's own words from weeks ago echoed in his mind, circling his skull until he could read them behind his eyelids. Rhett was obsessed with time, or something, or maybe Link's mind was just all over the place. Had Rhett been trying to reach out to him through that video? Rhett, the guy who threatened to murder innocent agents if he didn't get is way, was trying to communicate with Link. Rhett, the guy who murdered Link's family and numerous others, the guy who was undoubtedly in love with him, was trying to talk to Link.

This time when Link dry heaved, he actually vomited in his mouth and had to make a break for the kitchen to empty the contents of his stomach into Chase's sink. Stevie followed behind him, leaving Alex and Chase dumbfounded on the couch, too shocked to speak.

Was Link running out of time? How? What was he going to lose? What did Rhett know that Link
didn’t? A hell of a lot, probably. Link's eyes watered, his chest aching as he heaved the remainder of
the dinner he and Jessie shared together into the drain. Stevie was behind him, a hand on his back,
but it did little to soothe him.

“I'm sorry,” Stevie said, but she clearly knew it was the last thing Link wanted to hear, “I thought I
should show you it first before you see it on the big screen tomorrow morning.”

Link just shook his head in response and groaned into the sink, wanting nothing more than to keel
over and curl up on the kitchen floor. The tiles would be cold and soothing, he was willing to bet.

“He—He wants my attention,” Link managed, voice a little groggy. He swirled saliva around in his
mouth before spitting it into the sink, grimacing at the taste in his mouth. It probably smelled, too, but
Stevie was evidently ignoring it.

“Wants your attention how?”

“He talked about time,” Link told her, “It's just—it's something we talked about. Me and him. He's
trying to get to me.”

“Does the concept of time upset you?” Stevie asked, and when Link shook his head she prompted,
“Then why would Rhett mentioning time get to you?”

“I think he's trying to get my attention,” Link explained, wiping his mouth with his sleeve and lifting
his head away from the sink. Chase was standing in the kitchen archway, Alex close behind him.
Link could have sworn Alex's arm was around Chase's waist, but he couldn't see clearly. His eyes
were blurring.

“Well, it certainly worked,” Chase commented, a frown on his face. Stevie made a move to get Link
a glass of water, seemingly locating the glasses faster than she did in her own apartment. Weird.

“It's going to be on the news tomorrow and it'll spread like wildfire,” Stevie spoke quietly.

“Just like Rhett's photograph,” Alex commented.

“How much does he know, Chase?” Link asked abruptly, breathing heavily. Chase looked around at
Alex before pursing his lips.

“Enough.”

“Perfect.”

“Neal,” Stevie scolded Link's tone, handing him the glass of water she had poured, “If Rhett is trying
to get your attention, we shouldn't ignore it. He must want something.”

“But what?” Chase asked.

“What else does he want?” Link asked grimly, eyes on the water in his hands and earning the
concerned gazes of everyone in the room, “What more can he take from me?”

“Neal...” Stevie began, but she clearly didn't know what else to say.

“The note,” Chase said suddenly, eyes brightening as if the note Rhett had left for Link was the
answer to everything. If only. “Neal, show Stevie the note.”

“What note?” Stevie asked curiously, then watched as Link fished the crumpled paper out of his
jeans pocket and handed it to her. She took it delicately and unfolded it, reading the legible side first
before flipping it over to check the back. Clearly Link was the only one who hadn't thought to check both sides of the paper the first time he'd read it. Stupid.

“We think it's a code of some sort, with “Link” being the key word,” Chase said.

“Link?”

“My nickname,” Link explained sheepishly, “His nickname for me.”

“Oh,” Stevie swallowed audibly, looking down at the paper with a furrowed brow, “It's a cipher of some sort. No doubt the underlined letters are the key to solving what he's written here. I guess you two haven't been able to crack it?”

“No, we...admittedly, there's been other things going on,” Chase said. Link had trouble keeping up with the conversation, feeling like he was lagging behind while everyone else raced ahead.

“I understand. You have copies?” Stevie asked and watched as Chase and Link both nodded, “Okay, let me hang onto this. I'll see what I can do.”

“Stevie,” Link croaked, voice weak and shoulders slumped, “What are we going to do?”

“We can't do anything. I can't stop that video from being released, and I certainly can't take back anything Rhett said.”

“There must be something we can do,” Alex offered, clearing his throat. Link felt weird having him involved, but the more the merrier, in a way. If Alex was willing to get involved in the mess Link was in, then he was welcome to it.

“We'll do what we were going to do,” Stevie told them, “We're going to go to Washington and stop the terrorism threat before it escalates. That's all we can do.”

And maybe, Link thought, maybe they'd find a way to save some lives. Rhett's included.

His own life didn't matter as much as Rhett's did.

Chapter End Notes

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Bon soir! Sorry again for the wait for this chapter, but I'm back home now and updates are back to their regular schedule (every Sunday evening). This chapter is almost 10k in words, hopefully that makes up for it.

There's only a few chapters left for this story. I'm estimating there might me a maximum of 23 chapters? At a push. But I haven't really decided yet since there's a lot of plot holes I have to cover. Regardless, I hope everyone is doing well and enjoyed this week's chapter. I focused on some character building (+mystery) to add to the speculation about who is good and who is bad. I'm enjoying the theories so far. If anyone would like to share what they think is going to happen/who they think is involved, please do! I'm all ears. Bonus points if anyone could identify who the first man on the Resistance's video was. (It's a GMM crew member, or was, since I'm unsure if they work there now.)

No beta this week, so like normal I will get to errors momentarily! See you next week! Merci et prends soin de toi!
JULY 13TH 2007, present day

Over the next two days every newspaper, magazine and television station in town aired the Resistance's retaliation tape. Link read every article and watched the video each time it was broadcast, never giving up on the hope that maybe one of the channels wouldn't air it. He sat in anticipation each time the camera stuttered to life, before feeling his heart deflate each time the video played and Rhett dug himself an even deeper hole. Link ached to reach out for him and beg the other man to take his hand, but would Rhett just pull him down too? It seemed likely, but it didn't stop Link from wanting to try.

Maybe one of the news stations would consider Rhett old news or something, or maybe the world would give Link a break for a damn second. Neither happened, and Link was left in a dizzy haze of his own twisted morals. An air of melancholy surrounded him and he fought with himself and his feelings towards the Resistance, his feelings towards the agency and most of all, his feelings for Rhett. Link's affection for his ex-handler had made him soft in the gut and weak at the knees. It had sneak ed up on him and swallowed him whole, and now there was no turning back. It was all in or nothing. It was kill or be killed, quite literally, and Link sure as hell wasn't going to go down without a fight.

He wasn't going to let Rhett get hurt, but most importantly he wasn't going to let Rhett hurt anyone else.

Link couldn't blame anything but his own two feet for taking him to the Santa Monica Pier. He told himself he didn't know why he was heading there, but deep down he did. It was late and there weren't many people on the beach. A few campfires illuminated the sand but most were canceled out by the flashing lights of the Ferris wheel on the boardwalk. Link wondered what it was like up there, high in the clouds on top of the wheel. He'd try it one day, but not now. This wasn't a vacation and he definitely wasn't in the mood to relax. Not that he could even if he tried. He had Rhett to thank for that, and himself, really.

Grains of sand invaded his trainers and stuck to his toes. It wasn't pleasant, but was anything pleasant anymore? Shaking his head, Link advanced across the sand and ignored a group of younger people gathered around a nearby campfire. He was there for a reason, not to simply admire the view. The tide was in, waves swooshing onto the sand and echoing through Link's mind. The stars were out, but barely. Los Angeles lighting did a good job of restricting Link's view of any constellations in the sky. Light pollution at its finest.

Link looked around himself, making sure the coast was clear, before he sneak ed behind a pillar
which helped support the pier. This was where Rhett had taken him last month—had it really been that long?—and Link had no idea what he was going to do once he arrived at the door to Rhett's hidden room. A bunker, really. Like something out of a war zone. It suited Rhett, now that Link thought about it.

Link stopped a few meters short of the metal door and furrowed his brow. Now what? The door was locked—Link tried it multiple times, just to be sure—and there was no other obvious way to get inside. The room must have been buried in the concrete under the pier, or something. Extremely secretive, which begged the question; what was Rhett hiding here? And would it help Link save him? He could remember standing inside, watching Rhett fish around in one of the many cardboard boxes scattered across the room. A little like Stevie's apartment, really, but Link didn't want to make that comparison. He had enough to worry about.

Rhett had seemed so...carefree that night, acting younger than what he was. Don't look at me like that. Rhett's words made Link smile to himself, not bothering to fight it. Like I'm fourteen or something. Yeah, Rhett, because a thirty-something year old would want to play around with BB's. Although Link would admit that it was pretty darn fun, just to forget the world for a little while. To spend time with the man he loved—even if he didn't know it at the time—and just enjoy one another.

Ghostly echoes of Rhett's laughter sounded in Link's ears, taking him back to the night on the beach. He shook his head to rid himself of the memory, because reliving it would get him nowhere. Link had pleasant memories of Rhett, but they were hidden behind the harsh reality they lived in. His ex-handler was a bad person and he always had been.

Right?

Link gnawed away at the broken skin of his bottom lip, scowling at the key card scanner on the door. He'd taken the key card from Rhett's belt that night, using it as his getaway before the other man managed to open fire on him, but he hadn't kept it. If only he had, then he could get back inside the bunker. But Rhett wouldn't have been that stupid and he sure as hell wouldn't have let Link keep the only thing he had to enter the room.

Link grazed his fingers over the metal of the door, frowning and thinking of a better time. A complicated time, but a better one. The sound of shuffling behind him prompted Link to turn his head towards the offending noise and, for the briefest moment, he thought he saw Rhett leaning up against one of the support pillars. His ex-handler appeared to have a frown on his face, watching Link intensely. When Link blinked, Rhett was gone and left nothing but an ache in his chest, an irregular rhythm in his beating heart.

He wasn't hallucinating, no, but his mind certainly ached for Rhett. Link just had to come to terms with that. The first step of overcoming a problem was admitting you had one, and Link's problem was that he was irrevocably in love with a criminal. It was less of a problem, more of a catastrophe with Link in the center of the chaos. Shaking his head, Link allowed himself one last look around before he re-emerged onto the beach, moving away from Rhett's hidden bunker.

He thought Rhett might have been there and Link might have confronted him. Maybe he would have taken the other man in, or maybe they would have run away together, away from McLaughlin and Mythical Intelligence. Away from everyone. But that wasn't right, it wasn't ethical, and Link sure as hell wasn't a quitter. His compassion for his ex-handler was inconvenient and it clouded his judgment. Rhett wasn't coming back here again, obviously; it was too dangerous for him. He couldn't be caught outside or in public at the risk of being apprehended or worse, killed.

Link's stomach flipped and he begged his mind to think of something else. The sky already seemed
darker with the prospect of Rhett at death's door, the stars nothing but a dark reminder of what could have been.

Link followed in his own footsteps, walking the same way he had the night he'd run from his handler. He had spontaneously shot Rhett with a pellet gun which elevated the situation into a high speed chase down the coast. It was entertaining watching Rhett's face contort in response, realization hitting him square in the jaw. They acted like children. Link was surprised at that; he wasn't exactly immature, but Rhett brought something out of him that made him feel like a teenager again. Rhett was charming, witty and most of all fun. Link didn't think there could be a dull moment with Rhett. At the time Link didn't have a care in the world, but now...now things were so much more complicated. Link had been such a fool.

The flashing lights from the Ferris wheel behind Link cast a plethora of colors on the sand beneath his feet. His body cast a shadow on the ground and made him look much taller and intimidating than he really was. He wasn't intimidating at all, not really. At least, he didn't think so. Chase had certainly looked intimidated when Link had pushed him in the middle of his own hysteria, but...Link wasn't an intimidating person. He could get angry, sure, but he wasn't the type to go off on one. Nothing like Rhett. Link was nothing like Rhett.

Or so he kept telling himself.

Link walked for what felt like an eternity, making his way along the beach and dodging a few stragglers along the way. The sand gathering in his shoes did nothing to ease his evening stroll. He fought the urge to simply remove his sneakers and go barefoot, but he didn't. Coming to a stop once he had just passed one of the lifeguard huts near the shore, he regarded the sand beneath his feet with a pensive gaze. If he was correct—he knew he was—then this was the spot where Rhett had tackled Link to the ground, pinning him to the sand with his thighs. Rhett was stronger than he looked, and tougher than he came across. He could have easily killed Link that night, but he didn't. Why?

Because Link wasn't Rhett's target, his family was. Link shook his head because no, he wouldn't get anywhere thinking like that.

His handler—at the time, at least—and him had lay there and talked late into the night, side by side, staring up at the night sky. Their hands found each other in the darkness, but Link couldn't remember who had initiated it. Probably Rhett. Rhett started everything. Link got the impression the taller man didn't appreciate physical contact unless he was the one initiating it. Then again, he certainly hadn't protested the few times Link had kissed him without thinking. Maybe Link was wrong about him.

Maybe Link was wrong about a lot of things. But he wasn't wrong about how he felt about Rhett, and vice versa. Rhett loved Link—Rhett was in love with Link, and Link loved him right back. That night only strengthened their relationship, or whatever it was. Link remembered it all too well.

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**JUNE 20TH 2007, 3 weeks ago**

Rhett squeezed Link's hand, a soft smile on his face as he returned his gaze to the sky. Link felt like he was falling despite being perfectly planted on the ground.

““My father and I moved around a lot,” Rhett continued answering Link's question of where he lived before Los Angeles, “Nowhere specifically. The only place I consider my home is here.”
Link mulled that over, wondering what it must have been like for his handler to feel like he didn’t have a concrete home for most of his younger life. Link was born and raised in North Carolina, and Los Angeles could never compare to growing up in a small town like Buies Creek. Link had memories there that he couldn’t have experienced had he been born in a busy city; solo hikes along the Cape Fear river or late night walks through the quiet neighborhood. Rhett didn’t have that. Los Angeles was—and probably always would be—his handler’s home.

“Why Los Angeles?” Link asked, but he wasn't sure if Rhett would even tell him. His father must have picked L.A. for a reason, right? To move closer to Mythical Intelligence headquarters? Rhett's father was close with the head of the agency, after all.

His handler was quiet for a long moment, and Link accepted that he'd probably never hear the answer. But then Rhett turned his head towards Link and their eyes met. The taller man’s hair was covered in sand on one side, prompting Link to smile at him. Rhett smiled back after a moment and spoke quietly, “You have sand in your hair.”

“So do you.”

Rhett ran his free hand through his hair and made a face when it came away covered in grains of sand. Link exhaled audibly, doing everything in his power to ignore the way Rhett's pulse felt against his palm, heating him from head to toe. He swallowed the lump in his throat, watching Rhett intensely. The other man's thumb caressed the top of Link's palm, startling him and causing Rhett to smile wider.

“All out of questions?” His handler asked, a spark of mischief in his eye. Oh, so that's how it was.

“For now,” Link replied, exhaling the breath he didn't know he was holding, “I'm sure there'll be more.”

“Yeah,” Rhett looked away after that, as if Link's words had bothered him. Why, Link couldn't hazard a guess, but his handler was pretty good at hiding things. Link was sure he'd discover something in the future that would warrant some questioning. Rhett seemed to think so, too. The idea was a little frightening, but if his handler was still by his side, maybe Link would manage.

They fell into a comfortable silence, neither of them feeling the need to fill the quiet with chatter. Rhett's skin felt hot against Link's palm, like the other man was on fire and Link was a melting piece of ice. He felt like water, alright, his mind ebbing and flowing. Link turned into mush when he was with his handler, and it was nothing short of frustrating, if not a little embarrassing.

“It's getting late,” Rhett broke the silence first, shifting his position and sitting up cross legged. His hand twisted around Link's but he kept their fingers loosely intertwined, making Link's heart stutter. “I've kept you out later than I planned.”

Link deflated slightly, furrowing his brow and remaining laying down. His handler loomed over him, but for once Link didn't feel intimidated by it. Rhett's eyes were soft, something in them that Link couldn't figure out. “You planned?”

“After I picked you up,” Rhett replied instantly. Link noticed the way he hesitated, as if trying to find another way to word the fact that he'd basically rescued Link. But that made Link sound like a damsel in distress which he was not. Definitely not.

One thing was for sure; Link wasn't ready for the night to end. He wasn't ready for Rhett to leave him, not yet. Not when things were going so well. But he couldn't think of an excuse to prolong their evening without the risk of sounding clingy or desperate. Which he also was not.
He sighed and confirmed, “It is getting late.”

“Yeah,” Rhett replied quietly, breaking eye contact with Link to watch the incoming waves collide with the shore a few meters away. Link grunted as he pulled himself into a sitting position and shook his head in attempt to rid his hair of some of the sand there. Rhett flinched in response, leaning away from Link who had successfully covered him in sand.

“Sorry,” Link huffed, trying not to laugh. Rhett shot him a look, but Link could tell he wasn't really that bothered by it. Link laughed slightly when Rhett attempted to shake his own hair at him, but Link dodged it. “Nice try.”

“There's gonna be sand all over my ride,” Rhett complained like he'd just remembered they'd both have to sit in his Camaro, drowning in remnants of the beach.

“I didn't ask to be tackled to the ground.” Link reminded him.

Rhett glanced at Link momentarily, a small smirk on his face, before shaking his head and making a move to rise to his feet. The motion also prompted Link to stand since their hands were still interlinked. The taller man helped pull Link to his feet, who stumbled slightly before gaining his balance. To Link's surprise (and disappointment), Rhett let go of his hand as soon as they were both on their feet. There was a moment of intimacy that left Link feeling breathless, both of their eyes meeting in the darkness, nothing but the flashing lights of the Ferris wheel in the distance illuminating their faces. Link had the irrational thought that he wanted to kiss Rhett, or maybe Rhett wanted to kiss him. He couldn't tell. He couldn't make up his mind.

He didn't get the chance to, anyways, as the taller man looked away and took a step forward, back towards the direction of the parking lot.

“Need a ride home?”

And all Link could do was follow Rhett back to his car.

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**JULY 13TH 2007, present day**

Link sighed to himself, then shook his head and started walking back to his apartment. There was no use in thinking of past events, especially those he shared with Rhett, because it only caused his heart to clench. His breathing was heavy as he dragged his feet forward, shoulders hunched and hands tucked into his pockets. He fingered his phone inside his jacket, fighting the urge to text Rhett. But what would he say? Was there anything to say? Not really. Link was just a little overwhelmed and seeking comfort, or something. He hoped to find some sort of closure, if anything. Something to help him get over his ex-handler. Anything.

Maybe he was lying to himself. Could he ever really get over Rhett? Or was the guy going to be a part of Link's life forever?

Only time would tell.
It was an excruciatingly long day for Link once Stevie and the others left him. They caught a flight to Washington early in the morning whilst Link stayed behind with nothing but his laptop and a communication channel that didn't look too promising. Stevie hadn't seemed to confident in its abilities, either.

“In the event that the channel malfunctions,” She had said, shrugging into a denim jacket whilst Chase shoved some things into a carry-on bag, “You can contact my cell phone. For emergencies only.”

“Yeah,” Link grunted back, standing awkwardly in Chase's front doorway with his arms crossed. Truthfully, he was bitter about not being able to accompany them to Washington. But it was his own fault—he was too emotionally involved, like Stevie had said. The second he caught sight of Rhett, Link would charge forward and attempt to apprehend the taller man without so much as a second thought. He would compromise the entire mission, jeopardizing not only his own life but Rhett's, too. So Stevie had told him to stay put and babysit Benjamin for the time being; not something Link was happy about.

“We'll be back before you know it,” Alex told him, jostling Link's shoulders affectionately. Link offered him a small, sad smile in response.

“Come on, man.” Chase offered, a smirk on his face, “You really think I wanna be stuck sitting next to Morgan for five hours?”

Link blinked. “Morgan's going with you?”

“Yes.” Stevie replied.

“Why?”

“Without you accompanying us, Morgan was the best compromise,” Stevie explained, pointedly avoiding eye contact with Link as she tied her hair up into a ponytail. Her bangs hung loosely around her face, getting into her eyes and making her look younger than before. “His abilities match yours in almost every field.”

Link raised an eyebrow at that. Huh. Maybe he and Morgan had a lot more in common than Link thought, but friendship was definitely off the table. Morgan had made that impeccably clear on the multiple occasions he let off steam in Link’s direction. Some people just weren't meant for friendship, Link and Morgan being perfect examples for that. Although, regarding Morgan's recent behavior—if the subtle touche at the office was anything to go by—maybe there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Maybe they'd be friends somewhere down the line, just not now.

“Who else is going?” Link asked, his cracking voice doing nothing to help his case. He was worried; no, he was frightened for his friends. They were going into unknown territory—territory that had been hit by the agency before—without knowing what they were heading into. Link didn't like it. He didn't like it one bit.

Then there was Rhett's threat on the video. *Stay away from Washington.* It sounded menacing enough, causing alarm bells to sound in Link's mind. Was Rhett going to hurt anyone? He'd threatened to kidnap agents, hadn't he? Or was that just for show? Link wasn't sure, and he didn't feel like taking any chances. His ex-handler had surprised him before and he wasn't about to fall for that again.
“Not many,” Stevie dismissed, but Chase rolled his eyes.

“Well, I had to bring us three,” Chase answered for her, gesturing to himself, Stevie and Alex, “And Morgan, Noah and Candace from the office.”

“Candace?” Alex inquired, letting go of Link's shoulders after what felt like an eternity, “Why her?”

“Or something about her knowledge of surveillance cameras,” Stevie replied, but her eyes fell on Link. “It seemed like the smart thing to do to bring her along. The more agents we have, the less likely we are to lose people. Everyone needs to stick together on this one. There can be no casualties.”

“I'll be tuned into your communication channel,” Link added, already dreading it, “If anyone needs me.”

“Yes. We're using a different wavelength this time so Neal can converse with us.” Stevie nodded, then picked up her bag from the coffee table and sighed, “Come on. Noah said he'd get us at the airport.”

A few hours later and Link had wound up in Benjamin's apartment, perched on a small couch with a cup of coffee in his hand. Ben had shed his office uniform and settled into something more casual; a gray shirt and jeans. Link felt overdressed, but he didn't mention it. Ben looked stressed, eyes sunken in and face pale like he hadn't been sleeping well. Neither had Link—no one had. This whole situation was taking its toll on everybody.

“You know why they wouldn't let me go, right?” Ben asked after a long and tense silence, Link spending it trying to launch the communication channel before Stevie's flight landed. Ben's voice startled him, sounding from somewhere in the kitchen. The other man emerged with two small packets of peanuts in his hands.

“Yeah,” Link told him, feeling better that he'd chosen the truth over a lie. Ben handed him one of the packets, prompting Link to smile a bit despite the topic of conversation. “Because of Lizzie.”

“Because they think I'll cause a scene since that's where she...” Ben trailed off, then shook his head and scowled at his peanuts, slouching into an armchair adjacent to Link.

“I know,” Link offered, knowing how Ben felt all too well, “I figured you'd know.”

“It didn't take a genius to figure out why I'm being excluded from the assignment.”

“I guess not,” Link sighed to himself, then straightened his back when his phone buzzed in his pocket. He put his cup of coffee down onto the coffee table at his feet and fished the device out of his jeans.

*Just landed. Things look good so far. I'll message you once we get to the hotel. -C*

Link inhaled sharply, relief flowing through him like a calming wave. Benjamin raised an eyebrow and asked, “That Chase?”

“Yeah, they just landed.”

“We should get set up,” Ben grunted.

In the next few hours, both men had assembled a rather extravagant set up in the middle of Ben's living room. They had pushed the coffee table out of the way, along with two small armchairs so they could set up their equipment on the rug. They laughed occasionally when one of them dropped
something, or when Link managed to twist himself into some wires attached to a microphone and Ben had to untangle him. Link was able to forget about Rhett for a while and focus on something else, something more important—at least, that's what he told himself. Ben didn't appear to notice Link being distracted, which was a blessing, but Ben was probably reasonably distracted himself. Lizzie had been Ben's partner for a few years when she'd disappeared, and it didn't look good for her. Ben probably knew that, too, but admitting it would take time.

Link wasn't about to get in the middle of it, so he didn't bring it up and he wouldn't unless Ben did. They focused on the task at hand, setting up their laptops to have the communication channel open on both devices in the event that one of them went down. A third laptop—provided by Stevie—was also set up next to them for emergencies, as well as monitoring surveillance feeds of the target location. Link had almost sucked his teeth when Stevie had informed him of the place Mythical Intelligence intended to hit. It was either a terrible joke, or one hell of a coincidence. Link was betting on a terrible joke and it was definitely the kind McLaughlin would make.

The International Spy Museum was located in the middle of a busy area, stuck in between noise and traffic and the bustle of tourists walking the streets. It was only a couple of blocks away from—the White House. Rhett sure was ambitious, no, Rhett was stupid. His ex-handler wouldn't stand a chance if things went wrong and the president called in national security. Link shook his head, then removed his glasses to rub at his tired eyes. They were stinging, tinted red around the rims and daring to water, but Link wouldn't let himself get upset over this. There was bigger things at stake than Rhett's life.

Wasn't there? Link couldn't think straight.

“International Spy Museum,” Ben's voice echoed through Link's thoughts, tearing him away from a mental breakdown, “You've gotta be kidding me.”

Link grunted in response, because that was close to what he said when Stevie had informed him of the atrocious coincidence. “Tell me about it. The Resistance are either stupid and have a death wish, or they have something else planned.”

“I'm betting on the latter,” Ben replied grimly, clicking around on his laptop and opening up the location of the museum so they could both take a look. It was surrounded by busy areas; shopping malls and convention centers surrounded the block, making it seem less and less likely that the Resistance would come out victorious in this one. But Link had to be careful with what he said. He wasn't sure how much Ben knew about the agency being involved, and ultimately if he knew that the Resistance was responsible for the disappearance and murder of Lizzie.

Link wasn't about to make assumptions, but it definitely seemed like Ben was still in the dark. But why? Why hadn't Stevie involved him? Chase had involved Alex, after all, so why not Ben? Link wasn't stupid and he knew there was something else going on between Alex and Chase, but what, he couldn't hazard a guess. They were closer than he'd once assumed, but that didn't mean much. Relationships between friends tended to fluctuate in levels of intimacy all the time. Link was well aware of that fact. Regardless, it wasn't exact fair that Ben had been left uninformed.

“Alex just text me,” Ben announced, phone in his hand and a crease in his brow. Link peered over to see the device, leaning partially into the other man's space. “They're at the hotel.”

“What time is it?” Link asked, because of course he didn't know. He had no concept of time.

“Three thirty-two.”

“Why did Stevie book a flight so late?” Link shook his head. They would run out of time at this rate.
“What if the age—I mean, what if the Resistance get there first?”

Ben looked at Link strangely, and Link felt like disappearing into his jacket. He'd almost said the agency, not catching himself on time. He'd been too wrapped up in his own thoughts to remember to censor his speech. Ben had to find out sooner or later, right? Maybe Link should just tell him?

“She said they'd planned an evening attack,” Ben told him, raising an eyebrow, “You feeling okay?”

“Yeah, I just—” Link fell over himself, turning his attention back to his own phone, “I'm nervous, that's all.”

“Me too,” Ben admitted, “But they'll be fine. Stevie took double the agents she did last time, on top of that we have back up from the department in Seattle. We won't lose.”

Link didn't share Ben's enthusiasm, but settled for nodding shortly in response. He text Chase for a status report, feeling a lot like Rhett when he did so. To Link's surprise, Chase didn't respond and instead he got a phone call moments after. The caller ID indicated that it was Stevie.

“Hey,” Link answered, a little anxious about the spontaneity of the phone call. There was some shuffling on the other side of the line before someone replied, but it wasn't the woman he'd expected.

“Neal, it's Morgan,” the voice said, and Link felt his heart stutter.

“Where's Stevie?”

“Relax, she's here. Don't burst a blood vessel.” Morgan replied and instantly Link's anxiety was replaced with irritation. Why did he bother with Morgan? “We're just getting set up. Have you tried getting into the surveillance cameras yet?”

Link glanced at Ben who swapped his own laptop with the spare that Stevie had given them, opening up the feed to the surveillance cameras and offering Link an affirmative nod. “Yeah,” Link said, “It's working fine. It looks busy in there, man.”

“Imagine that,” Morgan replied, and Link could hear the smirk in his voice, “It's a museum, Neal. You know, where people go to—”

There was another voice that interrupted Morgan, Link having heard it in the background, “Morgan, if you can't act professional then give me the damn phone.”

Link smirked in response, recognizing Stevie's irritated voice in an instant. At least she had his back. She always seemed to come through for Link, one way or another. Maybe he could really trust her after all. There was a shuffling on the other side of the line, the phone obviously changing hands, before Stevie's voice greeted Link, “Neal.”

“Hey, everything okay?” Link asked instantly, glancing over at Ben who was listening in intently, probably for any news about the missing agents. Link knew the other man was clutching at straws, but he wasn't about to tell him so.

“Everything has gone to plan so far,” Stevie told him, and Link overheard some more rustling followed by quiet chatter in the background, “Morgan, Candace and I are positioned a couple of blocks north of the museum. Chase, Alex and Noah are to the south.”

“Don't forget about the Seattle jerks.” Link heard Morgan say. It sounded like Stevie threw something at him in response.
“Yes, the agents from Seattle are also positioned around the perimeter,” The woman continued, and Link hated how much he felt like an outsider. “It's already six thirty, we'll be heading out soon. I got word the attackers begin at seven.”

Link glanced at Ben, confused, because he was sure the other man had mentioned that it was only three in the afternoon.

“Time difference,” Ben told him. Oh, right. The three hour time difference from L.A. To D.C..

“How have you heard anything from Rhett?” Link asked. Ben shot him a look.

“No, Neal,” Stevie answered, though she sounded distraught about the fact. Maybe she was worried for Rhett's well-being too, “This is a risky location. I'm not sure what the Resistance are thinking.”

“I know.”

“Keep an eye on our channel.” Stevie ordered, prompting Link to put on his earpiece. “Noah is going to intercept the Resistance's communications. We'll see if the message is similar to the last two.”

“It should be,” Link told her, recalling both messages. Noah had mentioned the possibility of RMC and CMC being the code words for people, instead of a location or bomb. It sounded plausible. Especially since—

Link furrowed his brow. Wait...no, could it really be that simple?

“Stevie,” he spoke into the phone frantically, prompting Ben to look at him in alarm, “They said ‘RMC’, right? The past messages.”

“They did,” Stevie confirmed after a moment, as if she was hesitant to respond to Link's panic.

“Rhett McLaughlin,” Link said, “It's his initials. RMC, Rhett McLaughlin. Had Rhett been there for every single terrorism hit?”

Stevie was quiet for a long moment, and Link busied himself with his laptop, bringing up the past encrypted messages from the Resistance. *RMC and CMC in position.* Had Rhett been RMC this entire time? Or was it just a coincidence? Link wasn't sure what to believe, he wasn't sure what he wanted to believe.

Rhett had been present in Salt Lake City, Link knew that much. But he had been on their side at the time, hadn't he? He had been working alongside Stevie, attempting to stop the terrorists from...well, himself. Now that Link thought about it, Rhett was never really on their side, was he? Rhett was always a terrorist. Salt Lake City must have been a cover up, or something. Rhett was present in Nevada too, under the pretense of a transfer, but why? What was he doing?

Link sighed angrily to himself and rubbed a hand over his face, prompting Ben to take the phone from him in order to talk to Stevie. He was less emotionally involved, after all, even if he wasn't aware of it.

Rhett had almost been killed—or so Link thought—in Salt Lake, having been tackled by one of the terrorists. Link had watched it on the surveillance feed, watched Rhett be thrown onto the floor moments before the surveillance camera was shot out. He recalled the raw panic flowing through him as he ordered agents to go to Rhett's aid, all the while trying to save Stevie's life and instructing her on how to disarm the bomb. What if Rhett's life had never really been in danger? What if the man who tackled him to the ground was actually involved with Rhett?
It seemed conceivable, and it would also explain the terrorist's miraculous ability to outrun both Rhett and a few other agents and escape. Rhett must have covered for him, only benefiting from the surveillance camera taking a bullet. A tactical decision? In the absence of surveillance, Rhett and his “attacker” could have done whatever they liked. Rhett was highly intelligent, that much was clear. If he had planned to be tackled to the ground for show, then it sure as hell had looked convincing. But that didn't explain why Rhett had been beaten and bruised when Link had seen him afterwards. Was it for show? Would they really go that far for a lie?

Probably, Link thought, but a small part of him wondered if there might have been something else to it. Something he'd missed, something he was afraid to find out. He was clinging to the idea that Rhett could redeem himself, could bounce back from all of this and Link would feel less terrible for loving him.

Link shook his head. It wasn't going to happen, and he wasn't going to hold his breath. Rhett had let him down before and he wasn't going to do it again.

“Link.”

Link looked up from his hands, eyes scanning the room upon hearing someone say his nickname. No, he heard Rhett. But the room looked the same as before, Benjamin sitting next to him on the phone, the world still in a sorry state. Link rubbed his eyes and flexed his jaw, forgetting about it. He didn't have time for his mind to play tricks on him.

“Neal,” Ben's voice was a welcome change, sounding in Link's left ear, “They're heading to the museum now. Keep your eyes open.”

“Yeah, okay,” Link confirmed, taking Stevie's laptop from Ben's thighs and placing it onto his own. He could do it, he could scan the area. He would be their eye in the sky. No one was getting hurt this time, especially not one of his friends. Morgan was part of that category whether Link liked it or not.

It took Link a further fifteen minutes to locate Stevie and the others on the surveillance cameras. They were dressed in the standard tactical wear; all black with combat boots on their feet. Candace's long hair was twisted into a bun which was perched on the top of her head, bouncing when she walked. Stevie's was in a similar bun, although some stray hairs were decorating her face.

“Neal, Eck, come in,” Stevie's voice sounded in both Ben and Link's ears, “We're going to split up. Ben, you take Chase and Alex. Link, you keep an eye on Morgan, Candace and I.”

“Where's Noah?” Link asked suddenly, noting that the younger man wasn't present. To his surprise, Noah's voice sounded in Link's earpiece in response.

“I'm at the hotel. Someone had to hack into the communication system.” Noah told him, and Link grunted in response. That was supposed to be his job, not Noah's, but he couldn't really spite the younger guy for it. It was Link's own fault, after all. Too emotionally involved.

“What about the others?” Ben asked, holding his earpiece to his ear like it was the answer to all of his problems. If only. “The agents from Seattle.”

“They're not our concern,” Stevie said simply, making Link furrow his brow at her brevity, “They have their own surveillance team.”

“What Stevie means to say,” Chase interrupted, sounding like he was too tired to be part of the operation. He looked it, too, but Link wasn't about to point that out. “Is that they'll be safer on their own.”
“Less work for us,” Morgan glanced up the camera as he spoke, and Link felt like he was staring right into his soul. Chase shot Morgan a glare, to which the larger made a face at in response. Suddenly, Link was a little grateful that he had been excluded from the assignment.

“He’s right, though,” Ben said into the earpiece, eyes scanning the cameras on his own laptop, “The less people we have to monitor, the less likely we’ll lose someone.”

“We aren’t going to lose people,” Stevie told him, as if sensing where the conversation was leading. She clearly didn’t have the time, nor the patience, to discuss Lizzie’s well-being right now. No one wanted to approach the subject with Ben, and Link figured he’d be the one who’d have to do it. Did Ben even know that Lizzie’s blood had been used in one of the hoax bombs? Link couldn’t remember.

“Heard that before.” Ben retorted, and a short silence stretched out between the eight of them before Stevie sighed and shook her head. Link watched as she directed the others to their positions, pointing and speaking quietly. The museum was dimly lit, a few orange lights decorating the hallways and reflecting on the marble floor. There were multiple small rooms and corridors throughout the building, far too many to monitor at one time. It wasn’t exactly a confidence booster for Link, who had trouble overseeing more than three screens at a time, but he would do his damnedest to ensure his team’s safety. He wasn’t about to lose anybody. And more importantly, he wasn’t about to let Rhett get hurt.

The International Spy Museum wasn’t exactly crowded by then considering it was after seven pm. A peculiar time for a terrorist hit, Link thought. Wasn’t the idea of the terrorist threat to scare the city into evacuating the civilians so the agency could worm its agents inside and install surveillance cameras? Rhett had been the one to announce Washington in the video...but why? Was he testing the agency, seeing how far they would go to install their precious surveillance technology? Was that it?

Link fished out his phone from his pocket, lying to Ben that he had to check on something with someone from the office, but really he wanted to contact Stevie. He couldn’t do that verbally in front of Ben, which was becoming a real hindrance.

*Can we trust the agents from Seattle? -N*

The response came back moments later, to Link’s surprise.

*It's unlikely. -Stevie*

Link furrowed his brow. It was as he’d suspected. The agents from Seattle were working for McLaughlin, then, or that’s what they had to assume. They couldn’t take any chances. *Then shouldn't we be keeping an eye on them? -N*

*No. Those cameras aren't the priority right now, the bomb is. That's our orders. -Stevie*

Link shook his head at his phone in response. He knew the bomb was important, and it mattered to save as many lives as they could, but it still didn’t justify letting the agency get away with what they were doing. Would Rhett’s colleagues—or minions, whatever they were—intercept the agents on their way to install the cameras? Would the Resistance murder the agents involved, or would they let them go? Link didn’t want to know, but he knew he had to find out. His phone buzzed once more.

*Rhett's safety is also a priority, isn't it? -Stevie*

Link blinked down at his phone, feeling a tug at the back of his eyes. Of course Rhett was the priority—he always had been, probably always would be. But Link couldn’t shake the feeling that something was going to go wrong.
Regretfully so. -N

I expect him to be present tonight. I don't think he'd want to miss it. He's a man of his word. -Stevie

What do we do if we see him? -N

Stevie took a long moment to respond, and Link had to pause and locate her on his surveillance feed. There were over twenty cameras to go through, but with Ben's help Link managed to find her in under five minutes. She was standing alone, waiting on an elevator to take her to a higher floor, one hand raised to her earpiece. Link tuned into her channel so he could hear who she was talking to.

“I intercepted the transmission,” Noah's voice echoed in Link's ear, “'Attention. Assignment active. RMC in position. Begin offense at 1930 hours. Out.'”

Stevie cursed into the microphone and shifted her weight from foot to foot. “Come in, Chase.”

“Here,” Chase's voice sounded, and Ben managed to find the small man standing in camera nine with Alex by his side, looking equally as miffed as Link felt.

“It sounds like Resistance agents could already be in the building, watch yourselves.” Stevie told him. The elevator arrived and she stepped inside, effectively hiding herself from view of all of the cameras. Something about it unsettled Link, but when his phone buzzed in his pocket, it soothed his nerves a bit.

Tell me immediately. If Ben sees him, I'm sure I'll hear about it on the earpiece. Stay in contact, Neal, I'll need you once Noah locates the bomb. -Stevie

Link frowned down at his phone, then tucked it back inside his pocket and glanced at Ben sitting next to him. “Have you seen Morgan and Candace?”

Ben shook his head, then fingered his earpiece, “Stevie, where are Morgan and Candace?”

“Second floor lobby,” was the response Stevie gave, followed by, “I'm heading upstairs under Noah's supervision. He thinks the bomb is up there.”

“You're going alone?” Link asked, worry creeping up on him. His shoulders tensed.

“Yes, but I'll call you when I need you.” Stevie said softly in response, and Link realized just how much he cared about Stevie and her well-being in that moment. She had helped him through everything, had known about everything from the very beginning. She had intimate knowledge of Rhett before Link did, and she didn't judge Link for falling for him. She understood it, or at least, she almost did. The point was, Stevie was someone Link could depend on. And she was someone who he couldn't let get hurt.

“Be careful,” he managed. He watched as Stevie emerged from the elevator on a higher floor, looking around until she located a security camera. She looked up at it and gave a thumbs up for Link.

“Don't worry about me,” She told him, prompting Link to smile, “I've got plenty of time.”

Link's smile faltered instantly upon hearing her words. The subject of time made him terribly uneasy, something that Stevie was aware. Why would she say that?

“Neal, come in,” Chase's voice sounded in Link's ear, prompting Ben to highlight the man on surveillance camera eleven, “Neal.”
“I’m here,” Link grunted in response, not taking his eyes off of Stevie, “Go ahead.”

“Have you heard from Candace or Morgan? I can’t get either of them on the ear piece.”

“Yeah, just a second,” Link told him, then adjusted the communications channel. He hadn't noticed one of them going down in the middle of he and Stevie's conversation. Benjamin's was running fine, but not Link's. Typical. He reset the program and watched it re-scan for frequencies. “The channel malfunctioned, I'm trying to reboot it.”

“Great timing,” Alex sighed into Link's ear, prompting him to furrow his brow.

“Stevie told me they were on the second floor lobby.” Link told him.

“I don't see them,” Ben spoke up, scanning the security feeds for the second floor. “We have a lobby cam, right?”

“Should do,” Link leaned over and took control of Ben's laptop, searching for the two agents, anxiety evident in his voice, “When did you last hear from them, Chase?”

“Around fifteen minutes ago,” The smaller man said, and Link could imagine the frown decorating Chase's forehead. If Chase was worried, then Link definitely was. Morgan wasn't the type of guy to veer off course, so the fact that both he and Candace had disappeared, well...it wasn't good. It wasn't good at all. Where were they? Or more importantly, had someone taken them?

“Don't jump to conclusions,” Alex's voice tore through Link’s thoughts, evidently in response to something Ben had said. Link leaned back and away from the man on the couch next to him, afraid to be caught in the crossfire. He just wanted to locate Morgan and Candace, not argue.

“You shouldn't have split up the first place,” Ben shook his head wildly, “Safety in numbers. No one ever tell Stevie that?”

“It's not Stevie's fault,” Chase shot back, prompting Link to cringe as his laptop managed to reopen the camera feeds, “She's in charge, but that doesn't mean we aren't responsible for ourselves.”

“He's right,” Link offered, hoping to calm Benjamin at least a little bit. It seemed to work as the other man sighed and slouched back against the couch, arms crossed over his chest. He looked tired—with good reason—but acting up because of it wasn't going to get them anywhere. Link knew that all too well.

They spent the next ten minutes looking for Morgan and Candace on the security feeds, but came up blank. Link was beyond worried—he was petrified. What if something had happened to them? What if the Resistance had gotten to them, or worse, what if McLaughlin's agents had turned against them? Link also kept an eye out for Rhett, kept an eye out for a glimpse of auburn hair and striking eyes that could make him weak at the knees. Rhett hadn't shown his face yet, why? Where was he?

Maybe he was bluffing in the video, but it hadn't seemed like it. And the message that Noah had decrypted indicated that Rhett was in position, albeit without whoever CMC was. Someone related to Rhett? His partner? Link's blood ran cold, and he felt the color drain from his face. What if Rhett had someone else, what if he had all along? CMC...it could be a spouse of some sort, right? But Rhett didn't wear a wedding ring, did he?

Link couldn't remember. His mind was swimming. He couldn't think straight. Everything was a mess, the colors of the room blending and melted together into a daunting painting in which Link was the centerpiece.
“Neal,” a voice said, rousing Link from his dreamlike state of mind, “Come in, Neal.”

“Yeah,” Link croaked, then looked pointedly down at his shaking hands to avoid Ben's worried gaze, “I'm here.”

“I've found the bomb,” Stevie announced, which caused Link's heart to stutter inside his chest, pumping blood through his veins quicker and quicker, “It's the same. Of course it is.”

“Hidden inside a pillar,” Noah added, the sound of his computer keyboard in the background. Link could hear the noise of the keys echo around his mind and give him a headache. He couldn't concentrate.

“Neal, did you read me?” Stevie asked, more frantic now, “We only have a small amount of time before it self destructs. Or something of the sort.”

Link squeezed his eyes closed and nodded, “Yeah, okay. Okay, hold on.”

It wasn't difficult to get a look at the bomb in Stevie's arms. It was relatively the same as the previous bombs, sure, but it was double the size. Stevie's eyes were wide and her mouth was open, as if she were panting, but why, Link couldn't hazard a guess. Maybe she had been running around, sliding on the marble floors, barking orders at Noah. Maybe she hadn't been doing anything, maybe she was just anxious out of her mind and jittery. Link felt the same.

“I remember the pattern,” Stevie told him, a few minutes after she had rotated the bomb around in her arms for Link to look at. It would have been easier had he been present like last time, cowering in the arms of Agent F, caked in blood, but instead he was stuck in Los Angeles whilst his friends lay their lives on the line states away. He was bitter about it, especially now that they'd misplaced two agents. Things couldn't get worse.

He couldn't let Stevie know. Not while she held a freaking bomb in her hands.

“The order is yellow, red, blue and then green,” Link told her, sweat dripping from his brow. Something felt wrong this time. He didn't like the fact that Stevie was alone. At least before, another agent had accompanied her, even if he was erased from the case files. “Stevie, be careful.”

“You said that,” Stevie replied, and Link felt a strange sense of déjà vu. He and Rhett had had a similar conversation a long time ago—years ago, it felt like. Stevie was recycling a lot of things his ex-handler said, wasn't she? What was the deal?

“The wires look like they'll be tougher than before,” Link told her, judging the way the bomb had been manufactured, “You might need to twist the plastic coating to get them to budge.”

“Okay, yes,” Stevie nodded, her breath hitching in Link's ear. She managed to remove the yellow and red without complaint, surprising both of them. Link held his breath, his heart racing inside his chest and thumping in his ears. Ben sat next to him, chatting quietly to Chase and Alex on the earpiece, conscious of disturbing Stevie. Link almost forgot the guy was there, too focused on the task at hand.

Stevie struggled with the blue wire, using both hands to attempt to dislodge it. When she managed, she fell backwards, much like she had back in Salt Lake City. This time, a small cloud of smoke erupted from the device, prompting Stevie to slide backwards, her back colliding with the wall she'd recently been perched against. There was a beat of silence, everyone holding their breath, but nothing happened.

“Are you okay?” Ben asked Stevie, whose face looked like it'd seen better days. Link felt like he
was going to lose his lunch.

“Yes, I...” Stevie trailed off, seemingly in shock as she carefully moved back within reach of the bomb at her feet, “I’m fine.”

“One more,” Link reminded her, his own voice sounding far away. The woman nodded firmly and returned her attention to the bomb.

“We're on our way,” Chase's voice was in Link's ear, sounding like he was on the move. It settled Link's worries a little, knowing that Stevie wouldn't be alone much longer. Ben monitored Alex and Chase's movements, whilst Link's attention was still firmly appointed to Stevie. She was like a sister to him, similar to Jen, and he couldn't bear to watch her get hurt. Or worse. But no, he couldn't think of that. One thing at a time.

Stevie had difficulty with the fourth and final wire, as she always did. Just like Link had, too. It was designed that way, he was sure of it. Simply to cause panic in whoever was disarming the thing and nothing to do with its design. Perhaps Rhett had designed it—it had his obnoxious personality, alright. Link shook his head, ridding his brain of thoughts of his ex-handler. Not now, not here. Not when Stevie's life was at stake.

Chase and Alex made it to Stevie just on time to see her remove the green wire, and pull her out of the way in precaution for the blast that didn't come. Instead, a small cloud of vapor puffed from one of the inside containers, indicating that it was—surprise, surprise—another hoax bomb.

“Are you kidding me?” Alex sounded angry, but his expression seemed tired. Link kind of understood the notion.

“We knew it wouldn't be real, Alex,” Chase explained, because obviously Alex wasn't as in the loop as they were.

“What?” Ben asked, confused, “How'd you know it wouldn't be real?”

“Uh,” Chase said stupidly. Link could have punched him.

Stevie saved the conversation by opening one of the small compartments inside the bomb and inspecting its canisters. Her face fell immediately, and Link felt his heart racing in response.

“Stevie,” Link said, inching closer to his screen. Ben shifted too, until they were both hovering over the one laptop, “What is it?”

“There's two canisters.” She told them, removing one from the container and inspecting its contents. No explosion, nothing. No sanguine liquid staining Stevie's white blouse, no scarred memories of having a dead person's blood spattered across their faces. Nothing. It seemed like a blessing. That was until Stevie spoke again. “There's blood inside this, but it...it didn't explode.”

“Why not?” Chase asked, but he was obviously afraid of getting too close to the canister in the event that it was a controlled explosion, ready to trigger at any moment. That was plausible, too.

“It could be a timer, Stevie,” Link warned, “Be careful.”

“It isn't, it's just a canister.” She held up the small cylinder for Ben and Link to observe in the camera feed. After a moment, she handed the cylinder to Alex and returned her attention to the disarmed device on the marble floor. “There's another one.”

“Two canisters?” Link asked, confused. That was a first. He watched as Stevie removed the second
canister from the bomb and inspected it, tilting it in her hands and judging its contents by its weight. Link didn't think it looked too heavy, nothing compared to the first one. Human blood was relatively heavy, wasn't it? “What's inside?” he asked.

“I don't know, I—” Stevie began, feeling around the cylindrical tube for an opening. She must have hit something because the canister made a noise and popped open at one end, making Link jump in his seat, despite being miles away. Whether he was jumping for his own safety, or out of anxiety for Stevie's safety, was another story entirely.

The woman raised an eyebrow, waiting for Alex and Chase to come closer before she reached her delicate fingers inside the container and felt around. Link was afraid something would bite off her fingertips, but that was ridiculous. He was just paranoid. After a long moment, Stevie pulled out...a small piece of paper?

“What's that?” Chase asked, voicing the thoughts of everyone present. Alex took a step closer, as if to shield Chase from whatever was on the paper. Weird, Link thought, but not as weird as a larger bomb being manufactured to hold another canister. Not as weird as said canister containing a small, folded piece of paper. A note, perhaps? From who?

Stevie unfolded the paper slowly, as if she was scared it would tear, and paused before her eyes went wide with fright. Her voice was sharp, her hands shaking, “It's—it says, 'We told you to stay away from Washington. Might be best to do a quick head count.'”

Link's heart was in his throat. No, no. No, this wasn't happening. His mind reeled, thinking back to when Rhett had warned them not to go to D.C., he had warned Link that his time was running out. But had they listened, had Link listened? Of course not, of course not. And now they were all paying the price. No, not them, but Morgan and Candace. It was all Link’s fault.

“Chase,” Stevie's tone was quiet, fingertips digging into the small piece of paper in her hands, “Where are Morgan and Candace?”

“We don’t kno—” Chase began to answer her, but a sharp sound of static erupted in their earpieces, cutting him off and effectively stunning everyone in the room. Link and Ben were also effected,_link having flinched and thrown the laptop off of his lap and onto the ground. His ears were ringing, his head spinning. He couldn't tell which way was up and which way was down.

There was a shuffling in his earpiece, and a quick glance at the security feed now firmly secured on Ben's lap confirmed that it wasn't caused by Stevie, Chase or Alex. Noah's channel was silent, too. Which meant—

“What are you doing?” Morgan's angered voice was suddenly in Link's ear. It sounded like there was some sort of struggle. “Hey, let her go—”

“It's Morgan,” Ben noted absently, sounding far away. He searched the camera feeds frantically for the missing agents, making Link feel inadequate. He couldn't move his hands. His legs were shaking, or was it his arms?

More shuffling, sounds of a struggle in Link's ears. Ben heard it too if the expression on his face was anything to go by.

“Let go of me!” Candace shouted, voice high pitched and frightened. There were multiple grunts in response, like she had kicked people out of her way. Maybe she had, Link hoped she had. Get out of there, he begged, don't get killed, please. Don't get killed.
“Go, go!” Morgan shouted back, making Link think that maybe he’d done a number on the people hurting Candace. “Run!”

There was more shuffling, following by a lot of pained grunts. Someone was getting beaten, that much was obvious. Link couldn’t breathe properly, gripping onto the couch for balance. He needed to ground himself in the moment, remind himself that this was reality. It wasn’t some nightmare he’d fallen into and was about to wake up from any second, warm and safe in Rhett's arms. No, this was reality. This was his reality, and his mind wasn’t ready for that.

“I found them,” Ben said, his voice panicked. Link’s eyes darted to the laptop screen, watching the chaos on the camera feed. There were people holding Morgan’s arms, restraining him. Two men at either side of him, bracing themselves as Morgan kicked and thrashed at them.

“Let her go, you bastards,” Morgan spat, eyes on fire. Link followed his gaze towards the men who were holding Candace back, keeping both of them separated from one another. Candace had apparently ignored Morgan's instructions to run, or maybe she hadn’t and she’d been caught regardless. It didn't stop her from struggling in the bulky man's arms, elbowing him in the gut. Link enjoyed the discomfort which flash over the guy's face in response.

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” One of the men spat back at Morgan, and Link’s jaw almost dropped at the way Morgan seemed to shy away from the new figure who came into view of the feed a moment after. His back was facing the surveillance camera, but Link would recognize that hair anywhere.

“Relax,” Rhett scolded one of the men holding Morgan back, seemingly disappointed. A bead of sweat dripped from Link's brow and onto his jacket sleeve, sinking into the fabric there and tinting his clothes. “You don't need to terrorize the guy.”

Evidently, the terrorism pun made the others laugh in response, but it made Link want to dry heave. So he did, and Ben dodged out of the way in case Link actually brought up the remnants of his lunch.

“That's him, isn't it?” Ben asked, but he already knew the answer. He just had to hear it out loud.

“That's him.” Link managed.

His ex-handler was dressed in a dark red dress shirt and jeans, high tops on his feet. Had he dressed for the occasion, or something? Link didn't want to know.

Rhett made his way around Morgan, watching him as he walked, enjoying the way Morgan scowled at him in response. Candace wasn't as standoffish as Morgan, shrinking back into her captive’s chest and offering a small glare. Rhett didn't look as tired as he had before, not as exhausted as he had in the video. Maybe he was sleeping better, maybe he'd finally come to terms with himself. He was a killer, and now he'd accepted it. Something like that, Link thought. His ex-handler's hair was trimmed and styled, as was his beard which no longer touched his lips when he spoke. Link hated him for it, because the idea of Rhett not taking time to keep up his appearance only strengthened Link's theory that maybe his ex-handler wasn't the bad guy after all.

Link clutched at straws, but he hadn't to accept it one day to another. Rhett wasn't who Link thought he was, and Rhett would never be what Link wanted him to be.

Rhett checked his watch—ironically, or was it intentional?—and then gestured with his head for his colleagues, or minions, to take off. “Go, the others will come for them soon.”
The other members of the Resistance took off, dragging Morgan and Candace along with them with
great protest.

"Where are you taking me?" Candace demanded, but the fear was evident in her voice as she
struggled with the man dragging her away. Her face had paled, and strands of hair had fallen from
her bun and were now splayed across her forehead, matted to her skin with sweat and tears.

"You're coming with us," Rhett told her, voice icy yet monotone, his eyes trained on Morgan whose
only response was to spit at Rhett's feet. "That was rude."

"You deserve a whole lot worse," Morgan grunted back, elbowing a bulkier guy to his left in the gut.
Link had to hand it to Morgan for being so brave—it was admirable, and he sure as hell wasn't about
to let Rhett hurt him.

"So I've heard," Rhett replied, prompting Link to clench his fists in response. His ex-handler
appeared to hesitate once his followers had vacated the room, having successfully kidnapped both
Morgan and Candace. Rhett looked up at the surveillance camera, staring straight at Link, eyes wide
and bulging like they always were. Link's heart ached at the sight, hammering against his rib cage
and threatening to escape his chest. He felt like Rhett was looking straight through him, into his soul
and somewhere deeper than that, if it were possible.

Rhett looked perturbed by something, and despite watching him take both of his friends hostage,
Link still felt a pang of hunger for his ex-handler. An ache to help him. Why did the other man do
this to him?

"They're better with us, trust me," Rhett told the camera, but Link felt like his ex-handler was talking
to him and only him. Rhett glanced down at his watch once more and grimaced, then returned his
gaze back to the camera, making a move as if he was about to take off running. "I'm out of time. Just
trust me, Link."

Link paled and watched as Rhett took off, sprinting down the corridor and around a corner, out of
view and out of surveillance range. He disappeared again, this time taking Morgan and Candace
along with him.

It was all Link's fault.

\textit{tbc}

\textbf{Chapter End Notes}

I'm really sorry for the cliffhanger! But I had to do it, the chapter was going to be double
the length if I didn't cut it like I have. Hope everyone enjoyed this weeks chapter, I had
some trouble getting it uploaded on time, so please be gentle with me while I gather my
bearings. Writer's block makes things very difficult.

There's a small flashback segment in this chapter, back to a previous point in the story
(my favorite chapter). I missed being able to write Rhett and Link together, so I included
the small deleted scene for everyone to enjoy! Oh, and this will be the second last
chapter with parts. The finale will be separated into two parts, followed by an epilogue
(which will be within the next two months). Stay tuned and please let me know what
you think.
I hope people had a better view of the Blood Moon Eclipse tonight than I did.

No beta this week, so like normal I will get to errors momentarily! See you next week!
Merci et prends soin de toi!
Chapter Summary

**Story Title Translation:** Opération Clandestin - Clandestine Operation (An intelligence operation designed to remain secret)

**Chapter Title Translation:** Diviser Pour Régner (deuxième partie) - Divide and Conquer (part two) (lit. Divide and Rule)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**JULY 15TH 2007, present day**

“Does anyone have a visual?” Stevie's panicked voice sounded in Link's ear, resonating in his mind, “I repeat, does anybody have a visual on Rhett McLaughlin?”

“Negative,” Chase responded, sounding out of breath and distressed, “Stevie, he's gone. They're all gone.”

Link felt his abdomen distend rapidly, feeling like he was burning from the inside out. This was his fault, it was his fault. Wasn't it? Rhett had...Rhett had taken Morgan and Candace straight from under their noses, snatching them away from Link's grasp. He couldn't bare to think about what Rhett was doing to them. Hurting them, torturing them, murdering them. Using their blood for foul hoax bombs. Link tasted bitterness and he swirled his tongue around his mouth absently, sliding it along his teeth and fighting the urge to spit. A hoarse shout cut through his benumbed senses, and he managed to flinch just in time to dodge the glass that Benjamin threw at the wall in fury. Link watched the glass shatter against the plaster, observing it fragmentize at his feet, minuscule crystals bouncing against the wooden floor and landing on his shoes.

“I told you we'd lose people,” Ben sounded furious, his tone corresponding with his expression. The bulky man's eyes were on fire, glowing maroon orbs focused on the front door as he hollered into his earpiece, “Why did you let them go on their own? Why did you leave them, Stevie, huh?”

There was a short silence, nothing but static in Link's ears from the interference with the microphones. Ben did have a point, and Link was sure as hell wondering the same thing. Why had Stevie deserted both Morgan and Candace? Link had caught sight of her heading into an elevator once it came to his attention that the two were missing, but Stevie hadn't seemed perturbed in the slightest. So, both Morgan and Candace had to have been alright at that point. Right? Why couldn't they have accompanied her once Noah had decrypted the transmission?

Stevie had a lot to answer to, but for some reason, Link didn't think they'd get much out of her.

“Agent Eck, I understand the urge to point your finger at me,” Stevie replied, and Link watched her jog down a narrow corridor on the laptop to his right. He'd since moved to a standing position after watching Rhett on the surveillance feeds, Ben rising with him only so he could break multiple things in quick succession. Link understood the impulse, though he didn't indulge. “But my number one priority—”
"—should be the safety of your agents, Stevie!" Ben shot back, spitting in all directions with Link in dead center of the splash zone. He didn't mind, not really. It wasn't important. He couldn't even form words, anything he'd been thinking slurring once it reached his tongue. "You prioritized the bomb and disregarded the security of the agents involved."

"Ben," Chase interjected, as if trying to be the voice of reason despite Ben being unequivocally correct, "You're projecting your personal feelings about Lizz—"

"Don't," Ben snapped and immediately silenced Chase, "Don't dare."

Link shook his head frantically, replaying those last few moments on the surveillance cameras over and over in his mind. He should have done something, anything; maybe then Morgan and Candace would be alive and well. The rational part of his mind knew that there was nothing he could have done, given that he was States away, but his irrational mind had complete control. Seeing Rhett again had crippled Link and rendered him helpless, only cementing his knowledge of his feelings for the taller man. Link was in deep, infatuated, and most of all he was so wound in Rhett's web that he couldn't tell the difference between right and wrong.

But kidnapping Morgan and Candace right in front of Link's eyes, then having the audacity to claim that it was for their own good was not something Link could overlook. He couldn't defend his ex-handler from this one, and he couldn't let his mind dance circles around the real issue here. Rhett was dangerous—a dangerous man who remained true to his word and now Link was suffering the consequences. They all were, but Morgan and Candace drew the short straw and were probably gone forever.

No, he couldn't think like that. He couldn't.

"All this arguing isn't going to help nobody," Alex spoke up, making Link remember he was even there, "We need to find out where the Resistance took Morgan and Candace and why."

"And how to get them back," Link added, surprised at how level he was able to keep his voice.

"You're kidding, Neal," Ben grunted at Link with an incredulous expression, as if Link was betraying him. Maybe he was. "You're with Stevie on this?"

"No," Link responded instantly, not really thinking.

"Neal?" Stevie's voice sounded surprised, if not a little miffed, at Link's sudden refusal to agree with her. Link back tracked.

"I'm not with anyone. There isn't a side to choose, Ben," Link corrected himself because he didn't need his friends turning against one another at a time like this, not when they needed each other the most. "We can't turn against each other at a time like this. There's too much to lose."

"Yeah, well, some of us have already been lost," Ben retorted, and there was a sadness in his words, his expression disconsolate.

"I know," Stevie replied sincerely, prompting Ben to sigh heavily and look uneasy on his feet. Link took a step forward but kept his hands raised as a precautionary measure. Ben was a ticking time bomb—no pun intended—and Link wasn't about to get caught in the blast radius. He took a hold of the larger man's shoulder once he was close enough, and positive that Ben wouldn't lash out at him. Link was no stranger to physical conflict, but not with a friend, and certainly not with Ben. The guy had been like a brother to Link.
And all Link had done was lie to him and keep him in the dark. Guilt crept up on him like a ghost, and he had to shake off his unease in fear that it'd rub off on Ben and the hysterics would resume. Nobody wanted that.

"Neal, what happened on the camera feeds?" Chase asked after a long moment of silence. Link had sat back down on the couch and watched Stevie, Alex and Chase regroup in the first floor lobby of the museum in the mean time, keeping idle conversation with Ben in hopes that it would help calm him. It worked a little, but Link could tell that the wound was still fresh. He understood that, understood the feeling of loss; of feeling like he was in the dark, stranded and helpless with no light at the end of the pier. He felt for Ben, and ached to help him, but what could he say? Lizzie was done for, everyone knew that, and now Morgan and Candace were—no, they were alive. Rhett couldn't have killed them.

Not yet.

Link shook his head and rubbed at his eyes, voice hoarse, "A group of guys were holding Morgan and Candace apart. Morgan was holding his own until Rhett showed his face."

"What exactly did H do?" Noah asked, his voice sounding higher than normal in Link's earpiece. Noah's refusal to use Rhett's real name didn't go unnoticed by Link.

"He made a joke, a pretty sick one." Ben chirped in, but his expression was vacant as if he was miles away, somewhere better. Link wondered if he was thinking of Lizzie.

"Yeah, and Morgan spat at him." Link said.

"'Atta boy," Noah boasted, but his heart clearly wasn't in it.

"Neal," Stevie addressed Link with authority, so much so that Link sat up a little straighter when the woman looked up at the surveillance camera above her head and straight at him, "What was the significance of Rhett's words?"

"Significance?" Alex asked, and Link watched as the man grimaced at Stevie on the camera. Stevie broke eye contact with Link to glance over at Alex.

"He clearly wanted Neal's attention."

"How do you know he wanted Neal's attention and not the attention of someone else?" Ben asked, circumventing the couch so he could brace himself against the back of it, both of his hands at either side of Link's shoulders, peering over him at the laptop, "The guy didn't make any sense. You heard him."

"I did hear him," Stevie confirmed, "But so did Neal, so, if you please."

Ben opened his mouth to respond, but Link held up a hand to quiet him. There was no use in hiding the fact that Rhett had spoken to him directly at this point, Ben would have to just remain marginally in the dark. For now.

"He told me to trust him," Link informed them, voice expressing his conflicted feelings towards the matter. He couldn't trust Rhett. He couldn't, could he? No. No, he couldn't. "He said he was out of time, and that I had to trust him."
"Trust him?" Alex snorted in distaste, "Is he kidding?"

"Wait a second," Ben interrupted the speculation, a large hand landing on Link's shoulder, "You're 'Link'?"

Link winced in response, then nodded sheepishly, a little embarrassed of the fact. But not ashamed, no, he couldn't be ashamed of something he knew he still wanted. His heart ached for Rhett, his mind sitting on the fence, but it was a losing battle and he knew it. Maybe his time really was running out, maybe he would succumb to his feelings eventually and Rhett would win. Link's days were numbered.

"Why is he calling you that?" Alex asked, breaking Link's train of thought. Stevie shook her head at him in the camera, indicating that he should stop talking before Ben got even more suspicious, if that was possible.

"What's going on here?" The bulky man asked, his iron grip on Link's shoulder quickly becoming threatening, but Link didn't budge. He could take it. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing, man," Link lied, and he wasn't exactly sure if Benjamin bought it or not, but the other man didn't say anything in response. Link craned his neck to peer at the man behind him, but Ben's face was unreadable, his shoulders and jaw tense.

"It's possible that the Resistance plan to transport Morgan and Candace out of the State," Stevie noted, mostly to herself but gaining the attention of all agents on the communication channel, "It's going to be too hot to keep them here, but it'll be equally as challenging trying to get them through the borders. They must have connections somewhere, or something."

"Rhett had connections whilst he worked at Mythical Intelligence," Chase noted, taking a step back and more into Alex's personal space. The other man didn't seem to notice. "It'd be an easy task for him to sweet talk border patrol."

Benjamin leaned away from Link in favor of punching the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger, letting out a heavy sigh and murmuring, "What are we going to do?"

Stevie was right on the ball, having seemingly already prepared her response in anticipation, "Listen to me. This is what we're going to do."

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**JULY 17TH 2007, present day**

Two days had passed and Link hadn't heard anything from Rhett. Not that he really expected to, after all. Why would his ex-handler bother contacting him in the first place? Rhett had an abundance of other things he had to attend to, world devastation and the killing of innocent agents being at the top of his list. Link had been so blind. Not only that, but he'd also been stupid and inconsiderate, putting his feelings for Rhett above everything else, so much so that they masked his skepticism about the agency until it was too late.

Link splashed cold water on his face, letting the liquid sooth his burning skin. His bathroom felt smaller, the walls closing in and restricting his chest. His breath hitched in his throat and he had to
grip onto the edges of the sink for support.

Both Morgan and Candace's cell phones had been deactivated—probably Rhett's first move after he'd captured them—which eliminated the possibility of tracking their movements. Rhett was highly intelligent, and also had over ten years experience working for the agency to pick up a few things and then some. Who could have known he'd begin using it for evil?

Link paused, water dripping from his nose and splashing into the sink as he stared at himself in the bathroom mirror. Was Rhett evil? What did evil really mean, anyway? His ex-handler wasn't a supervillain, even if he was handsome enough to pull it off. Maybe he was some sort of vigilante trying to do what was best for the country, becoming caught up in all the action and getting his own morals twisted. Sighing, Link patted his face down with a towel and fought the urge to scream into it.

Everything was a mess, everything was falling apart. Morgan and Candace were gone and they weren't coming back. Rhett had won, the Resistance had won. Link thought about cutting his losses and shrinking into the background, disappearing into the crowd and leaving Los Angeles for good.

A shrill ringing assaulted his ears and made him drop the cloth in his hands. Stumbling out of the bathroom, he moved into his bedroom and fished around his discarded jacket pockets for his phone. He picked up on the fifth ring.

"Neal," Chase's voice was on the other end of the line, and Link felt his heart deflate a little bit. Had he hoped it was Rhett? Of course he had.

"Chase, hey," Link replied, perching on the edge of his mattress and letting the sun shining in from the window behind him heat up his bare back, "Any word on Morgan and Candace?"

"No, I—" Chase fell over himself, like Link had startled him, "No, that's not...why I'm calling."

"What happened?" Link asked, his heart pounding in his ears. If it was nothing to do with the location of his two missing friends then...what else could it be? Rhett? Had they found Rhett? Had someone killed Rhett? "Chase, talk to me."

There was a moment of silence, a beat that felt like an eternity before Chase replied. "Have you read today's paper?"

Link blinked in response, "Uh. Which paper?"

"Any of them."

"No, I haven't," Link responded. He was out of the habit of reading the newspapers in the area, sick and tired of seeing Rhett's photograph plastered all over the front cover of every magazine he could find.

"I really think you should read one," Chase said, confusing the hell out of Link. There was some quiet chatter in the background, as if Chase was with someone who was talking to him. After a short moment, Chase returned to the phone, "Actually, don't go buy one. Alex is coming to pick you up and bring you here. Don't open the door to anyone but him."

Link felt panic rise within him, and he stood up and looked around his home, paranoid. What the hell? What had happened? Was Rhett coming for him? Was McLaughlin? What did that have to do with the newspaper?
"Chase, you're not making any sense." Link managed, though his voice was strained.

"Neal, listen to me," There was shuffling on the other side of the line, the sound of keys jingling and a door closing, "Close the drapes, don't answer the door to anyone but Alex. He'll be there in ten minutes."

Link looked around himself, the unsettling feeling that he wasn't alone creating a dark cloud over his head. He felt like he was about to get rained on. In a swift, hurried motion, Link cast the drapes in his bedroom then proceeded to do so in the living room too. The light from the sun still shone through the cloth at the balcony, but Link didn't pay it any mind. Weakly, he asked, "Chase, what's happening? Is Rhett coming for me?"

The other man hesitated on the phone, and a quiet shuffling was heard similar to the rustling over papers. Perhaps Chase had a newspaper. What could the news have to do with Link? "No, but he knows where you live so we shouldn't exactly cancel out the possibility that he could."

Great, Link thought. He shrugged on a shirt whilst he waited, packing his laptop and a few other essentials into a rucksack and did his best to keep calm. His attempts were fruitless, however, since his knees gave out halfway to the couch and he had to grip the kitchen bar with one hand to stable himself.

"Link," Chase sounded alarmed in Link's ear, "What happened? Is someone there?"

"No," Link croaked, somewhat embarrassed but mostly drowning himself in worry, "I'm fine."

He settled for pacing the perimeter of his small apartment in the meantime. Every now and then he swore he could make out the sound of hushed chatter and footsteps just outside, probably just tourists heading to the beach, he told himself. There were distinct clicking noises every few moments, prompting Link to search his apartment for the source of the irritating noise. They were coming from his front door. Link's brow furrowed. What the hell was that noise? And there were definitely people gathering outside his apartment now—he might have sneaked a peak behind the drapes, maybe.

A large group of people—dressed primarily in suits and skirts, a few in more casual wear—were hovering around the outside of Link's apartment. He didn't recognize any of them; not a single face came to mind which only confused Link further. Had something happened? Was there some sort of commotion in Santa Monica?

Or was it the volleyball tournament already? Link huffed to himself, dreading it. Too many people and too much noise was always the outcome of events like that. Not what Link had in mind for a comfortable afternoon, but if that's all this was, if that's all these people were there for, then that suited him just fine. It calmed him, actually, but it was short lived when he was startled by a loud knocking at his door.

Alex?

Link sauntered to the door slowly, sliding into his shoes on the way there and not bothering to tie up his laces. He looked through the eye hole of his door to peer at the person who just wouldn't stop knocking.

It wasn't Alex. Instead, Link felt himself staring at numerous men and women dressed in an entirety of gray, pens and paper in their hands. One of them held a camera, the other a video camera, another
held a large microphone similar to one he'd seen on TV before. They looked enthralled and filled with adrenaline, so much so that Link practically flinched back and away from the door.

What was going on? Who were they? Was Link going to be arrested?

"Lincoln Neal?" He heard from the other side of the door, the knocking momentarily subsiding. Link felt the blood drain from his face. "We want to ask you some questions."

"Charles!" Another voice said, a woman this time, "One quick picture!"

Link shook his head and backed away from the door, tripping over his own feet as he scrambled for his phone. The knocking resumed, followed by more attempts to get his attention. They had it alright, but he wasn't about to alert them to his presence. If he could convince them that he wasn't home they'd just go away, right? They'd give up, cut their losses and go bother someone else?

Unless they'd been following him. Unless they'd been logging his movements, tracking his whereabouts, waiting for him to be vulnerable. He'd been so careless. He hadn't checked for people following him when he really should have, especially with the possibility of running into a member of the Resistance at every corner. A strangled noise escaped his throat of its own accord as he frantically typed out a message to Chase on his phone, fearing that the sound of his voice on a phone call would alert the press outside his front door.

There's a group of people at my door. They have cameras and bright lights. I'm trapped in my apartment. -N

Damnit. Alex is on his way. Did the press say anything to you? -C

So it was the press, after all. Link felt sick. No. They want pictures and to ask me questions. -N

Stay put. Alex will get you. -C

To hell with that, Link thought. He was a sitting duck in his own apartment, hiding like a coward. He had to get out of there, but how? Gnawing at his bottom lip, he shoved his phone into his jeans pocket and grabbed his rucksack from his bedroom, attempting to ignore his name being called.

What was happening? Had Rhett ratted him out? Had McLaughlin? Did McLaughlin implicate Link just like had his own nephew? Link felt his face heat up, his skin tinting red down his neck and disappearing into his collar. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, inhaling poison into his lungs and hoping for the best. At least, that's what it felt like. But the poison wasn't really poison, it was the essence of his ex-handler that Link had tried so hard to get rid of. After weeks of cleaned sheets and spring cleaning, Link still couldn't shake the scent of Rhett from his bedroom. The sweet but subtle cologne, the faint smell of hair product, all of it made Link's head swim. They clung to Rhett's pillow —no, it was Link's spare pillow because Rhett didn't live there—and made Link want to curl into a ball and never leave his bed, as embarrassing as it sounded. He was betraying his own morals, his own family, and perhaps his own country by loving Rhett. But those didn't seem to be factors in his heart.

"Charles Neal!" A reporter's shrill voice tore through Link's agonizing thoughts, somewhat welcomed because he was just digging himself a deeper hole the more he let his mind wander, "Are you with the Resistance?"
"What's your involvement with Rhett McLaughlin?" Someone else shouted.

More complicated than he could describe, he thought, but he wasn't about to open the door and discuss his love life with a bunch of strangers. A bunch of strangers who would inevitably inform the whole country. No, that wasn't happening.

Link looked around for the quickest getaway route. His bedroom window was out of the question after a quick glance out of the drapes confirmed that there were news vehicles parked outside his apartment. The Hispanic couple beneath him were standing outside too, obviously upset by the turn of events. Another reason for them to dislike Link, despite his coming home late and slamming his door most nights. He'd have to apologize some day, but not now. It wasn't important. He had to get the hell out of there.

His balcony was the best option; it was facing a small alleyway at the opposite side of his apartment complex. If Link could jump over the railing and land on his feet, he would make it without breaking his knee, or something. He was capable enough, lean and reasonably athletic, but he hadn't had training for months now which left him skeptical that he'd even be able to hook his leg over the railing in the first place. Link opened the drapes in one swift motion, squinting at the offending sun that assaulted his vision as soon as he let light into his apartment. There was television crew equipment alongside the road leading to his apartment, a few parked vans scattered around the area.

Alex would never be able to get into the street, never mind to Link's door. Jumping out and attempting to escape was Link's only option.

He fumbled with the balcony door lock, feeling it slip and slide under his clammy palms until he managed to slide the it open with a grunt. The warm L.A. air graced his skin and made his mouth dry, his lips cracking against the harsh sunlight. He slid the door closed behind himself and took a deep breath, placing his palm against the glass and taking one last longing look inside his apartment. He might not be able to return there any time soon, so he had to bid farewell. It didn't feel like home anyway, it never did. It probably never would. But he would miss the memories he shared with Rhett there, after all.

But the world wasn't ending, and Link knew he was being overly dramatic. He had to get the hell out of dodge, had to figure out what was going on and why. Why was he suddenly the target of public scrutiny? And by who's hand?

Sighing heavily, Link turned around and propped himself up and onto the railing lining his small balcony. He sat with one leg at either side of the rail, left foot hanging in mid air as he peered down at the street below. It wasn't that high, admittedly. Around seven or eight meters, give or take. He could make it. He would make it. If he could make a jump for it, there was a pair of garbage cans a few meters away that he could land on before hitting the ground. The chatter from the neighbors on top of the surging crowd of people clamoring for attention at Link's door only fueled his determination. Taking in a single deep breath, Link brought his right leg around the railing and jumped.

He landed on his left foot first, fighting gravity and steadying himself before he could topple over. The noise of his body weight hitting the metal garbage cans was enough to rouse suspicion, and he quickly leaped onto the asphalt and took off running.

A distinct sound of tires skidding against the road beneath his feet startled Link as he rounded the corner, out of the alleyway and gaining distance between himself and his apartment. He came head to head with an oncoming car, having sprinted out and onto the road. He flinched instinctively, both
hands stretching out in front of his body, half to shield himself and half to prevent the car from coming closer. Miraculously, the driver slammed on the brakes on time for the car to skid to a stop centimeters away from Link. The bonnet just graced the front of his kneecaps. Link panted, adrenaline coursing through his veins and igniting him from head to toe. He’d almost been hit by a car; he’d almost been hit by a car and killed.

This day couldn't get any worse.

At least, that's what he thought until he saw the man steadily getting out of the vehicle, a mortified look on his face.

“Neal?” Alex's alarmed voice reached Link's ears before he could register that the universe was actually on his side that day, and that his near death experience had actually came out in his favor. “What the hell are you doing? You're supposed to be at home!”

“Change of plan,” Link panted, shrugging off his rucksack on one shoulder and circling Alex's beat up car, heading for the passenger's side door. He opened it and gestured towards his apartment building with his head, “There's press everywhere. Video cameras, photographers, the lot.”

“And, what? You decided to do a little parkour?” Alex asked, evidently still stunned by the sudden turn of events. The other man slid back into the driver's seat just as Link was closing the door to the passenger side, shrugging off his rucksack and sinking back into the seat. That's when he noticed he hadn't even tied his laces.

“Whoa,” Link managed, the reality of what just happened hitting him dead in the chest.

“Whoa,” Alex agreed, before putting his foot down and letting Link's apartment disappear in the rear view mirror. “You're insane, Neal. You could'a been killed. I could'a killed you.”

Link looked dead ahead, watching his surroundings blur in his peripheral. “Yeah.”

Surprisingly, Alex laughed, “Wow, I nearly kill him and all he has to say is yeah.” The man driving shook his head and spared a curious glance and Link, whose attention was elsewhere, his mind miles away, somewhere better and somewhere not so warm. “Putting yourself in harms way won't change anything, you know.”

Link's head snapped towards Alex, eyes wide open, “What?”

Alex eyed the road pensively, “This thing you've got going on with Rhett. I see the way you act when you talk about him—or when someone else does—like it's affecting you personally. I don't know what happened, but it's obvious you care about him more than you're gonna admit to me.”

“I—” Link opened his mouth to respond, but he couldn't think of anything to say. He was as transparent as glass, and Alex had looked right through him, straight into his chest and seen the horrors which lay there. They manifested in his rib cage and made him bitter, made it difficult to breathe. Maybe Alex could see that, too.

“I'm not going to make you tell me, Neal,” Alex continued when it became evident that Link couldn't bring himself to form a sentence, fearing whatever words he managed would just slur on his tongue, “But if you need—look, if you need to talk to someone, you can talk to me. I'm not going to bring it to the cognizance of the team, trust me.”

Link winced slightly. Trust me. He shook his head. Just trust me, Link.

Maybe Alex was right, maybe Link did need to talk. But could he? Could he really admit to Alex
that he was harboring some pretty intense feelings towards a man so cruel? Even if he could, Link wasn't ready to say it aloud. Thinking it was a big enough step for now, but he appreciated the chance Alex offered.

“Thank you,” Link said quietly, returning his gaze to the road ahead.

Alex nodded, and that was that. No prying, no pushing, just the knowledge that he was there for Link. Everybody was. Maybe Link wasn't alone after all. Even if the company surrounding him wasn't the company he ached for. Not really.

Link let his rucksack fall from his shoulders, allowed it to land in a slump on the hardwood floor of Chase's apartment. He held one of the day's newspapers in his shaking hands, struggling not to drop it but at the same time fighting not to tear it to shreds. Chase stood before him with a solemn look on his face, having just handed the newspaper to Link's awaiting hands. Now Link wasn't so sure he could face the outside world ever again. He peered down at the paper with a scowl on his face, battling the urge to dry heave despite himself.

The headline read: Another Agent From Mythical Intelligence Implicated in Terrorism Conspiracy! in thick, bold letters. There was a subheading, directly underneath that sentence which read: Charles Lincoln Neal III in a Romantic Relationship with Rhett McLaughlin? Here's the inside scoop!

Link read and reread the headlines multiple times, allowing each word worm their way into his brain so he could let them sink in. There was a photograph of him printed on the front of the newspaper, seemingly taken on one of his many attempts to avoid the press on his way out of HQ. Evidently, he hadn't tried to shake them well enough, because the picture was not only high quality, but also relatively flattering. Not that any of it mattered, in the end. Link was totally and royally screwed. It didn't take long before he managed to gather himself, letting out the breath he had been holding and mouthing a loud, “Shit.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Alex added, though his face didn't match the lighthearted joke he'd made. Link's eyes were scanning the paper, having anxiously flipped through it to the correct page to further read the article.

“Who the hell told the press?” Link demanded, furiously scanning the article for further information. Chase sighed to himself, shaking his head at Alex who was still out of the loop. Well, no one was really out of the loop now. The entire population of Los Angeles were now privy to the details of Link's traumatic love life. There was no privacy for him anymore.

“So, it's true?” Alex asked, eyebrows shooting up so much that Link thought they'd escape his forehead.

“Yes, Alex, it's true,” Link dismissed him with a shake of his head, losing interest in the shock that some people had in reaction to his illustrious relationship with Rhett. It was old news, it didn't matter anymore. Link was still hung up on someone who only caused him problems, and it was killing him. On top of that, it was destroying his reputation—or rather, it was giving him a reputation—in the entire city. His job was in jeopardy, no. No, Link was definitely and truly fired.

“Shit,” Alex agreed. Link groaned in response, trying to make sense of the words before him.

Evidence has come into the light that another—yes, you heard it!—one of our secret
agents, formerly tasked with protecting this country, has committed treason. Special Agent Charles Lincoln Neal III, known to his colleagues only as Neal, was observed and attested to fraternizing with the enemy from the beginning of this year. Why nothing was done about this, we are currently unsure, but it's possible that Mythical Intelligence were not aware of the romantic relationship occurring between two of its trusted agents. A romantic relationship that, by terms of the Mythical contract, is strictly prohibited. Not only did these two men engage in romantic and/or sexual activities whilst employed by Mythical Intelligence and disobeyed their contracts, but it could be possible that they are working together against the country as a duo.

Are Rhett McLaughlin and Charles Neal the leaders of the infamous 'Resistance'? No, they aren't. As of right now, we are currently unaware of either man's whereabouts and therefore cannot grant an interview from Neal. But if our sources are correct—they haven't failed us before!—then the two men's relationship dissolved months ago. This lead to the speculation that these terrorism threats are nothing as much as a lover's quarrel between the two, which—we know!—is both frightening and tedious. What's love got to do with it, you ask? Well, a lot!

It just got worse from there, and Link didn't have the stomach not the stability to read on. His knees were wobbling, his body swaying from side to side. Chase's firm grip on his elbow was the only thing grounding Link in reality, and also to the floor, if he was lucky. Things blurred in his eye line, his vision nothing but a mirage of colors and people and objects that he couldn't put a name to. That was it, it was over. They'd been discovered. Jen would find out—she would read the newspaper and she would know the truth about Link. If she believed it, that was. If Link had any luck, she'd wait to hear his side of the story before jumping to conclusions.

He certainly wasn't working with Rhett, no. He couldn't work with Rhett again. The Resistance had a clear message, one that Link agreed with; stop the agency from capturing innocent businesses for the sake of surveillance. But then the kidnapping agents came into play, then the murdering and draining of those agents for the use in fake bomb canisters. What was the point? Link didn't understand, he didn't understand anything. Had he ever been in the light, or was he always in the dark?

Regardless, even if he was in the dark, Rhett was there with him, their hands interlinked. It was better to walk with a friend in the dark than walk alone in the light.

“Look, I know you don't want to hear it but,” Chase looked like he was fighting with himself, “I'm sorry, Neal.”

“Yeah.” Link managed.

“We should've foreseen this,” Chase continued as if he was blaming himself, but Link didn't have the energy to stop him, “We should have prepared for this. McLaughlin knew about the two of you from the beginning. Of course he'd do this to you.”

“McLaughlin,” Alex echoed, looking to Chase, “The head of Mythical Intelligence, right? That asshole on TV?”

“Yeah,” Link croaked, “That asshole on TV.”

“Neal met him in person a couple of weeks ago,” Chase explained, slowly taking the newspaper from Link's shaking hands and folding it up to place under his arm, “And threatened him. It was about Rhett, if I'm not mistaken?”
Link shook his head despite Chase being entirely correct. He just couldn't believe it. He couldn't believe this was happening to him. “He told me to back off. So did Stevie, but in a nicer way. Now she's with us.”

“Where is Stevie, anyway?” Alex asked suddenly. Chase frowned, prompting Link to raise a curious brow in his direction.

“I couldn't get a hold of her this morning,” Chase told them, fishing his phone out of his pocket and fingering it delicately. He was calling Stevie.

The woman seemed to pick up almost instantly, both Link and Alex staring at Chase as he spoke, “Hey...yeah, he's read it. He's here,” a pause, and Link felt his breath catch in his throat, “I'll give him the phone.”

Link accepted Chase's cell phone with a shaking hand, struggling to level it on his palm and hold it to his ear, “Hey, I—”

“Neal,” Stevie sounded on the other side of the line, sounding a little breathless and somewhat panicked. Link understood her concern. “Are you alright?”

“I'm fine, I—” Link paused, because even he couldn't believe the lie, “No, I'm not. I'm not alright. Stevie, how the hell did this happen?”

“I don't know.” The woman replied honestly, and there was some shuffling as if she were moving some files, “My best guess is that it was McLaughlin. He's known about your relationship with Rhett since the beginning, hasn't he?”

Link looked at Chase, whose face was contorted sadly. Alex was hovering by the couch as if he was unsure of what to do, unsure of where to put his hands. “Yeah, he has. I don't know how he found out.”

“He has connections. It's likely he assigned someone to monitor Rhett, who then led him straight to you.”

“So I was being followed,” Link thought aloud, gaining the alarmed glances of both Alex and Chase. Thought, Alex seemed reserved about something, but what, Link couldn't hazard a guess.

“Most definitely,” Stevie confirmed, then sighed as if she'd had a very long and hard day. Hadn't they all? “I think I have a lead on where they took Morgan and Candace.”

“A lead?” Link echoed, gesturing for Chase to come closer, which he did. The smaller man's brow was furrowed in concern, but Alex stayed put. “What do you mean? Do you know where they are?”

“No,” Stevie said, her voice a little sad, “But I think I know where they're going to be next. It's not set in stone yet, but when I know something, you'll know something.”

“What?” Link blinked, confused at her deflection, “Stevie, if you know something, we should know too.”

“It's not certain.”

“I don't care,” Link retorted, gaining the attention of Alex who was now moving nearer to the phone so he could listen in, “Stevie, they're our friends too.”

“I'll tell you when I know for sure,” Stevie deflected once more, and then there was some more
shuffling on the other side of the line before the woman said, “I have to go. I'll contact you later.” and then hung up.

Link stared at the cell phone, dumbfounded. Chase was aphonic when Link glanced up at him for support. What was Stevie doing? Where was she, and why couldn't she just talk to Link? They'd spend enough time dancing around one another, Stevie dodging the truth and feeding Link lie after lie until he couldn't take them anymore. He felt like Stevie was hiding something. She had disappeared and left Morgan and Candace on their own during the last assignment, and in doing so both of them had been apprehended by the Resistance. By Rhett. Did Stevie know Rhett was going to—

No, Link couldn't think that way. He remembered the look on Stevie's face when she'd read the note in the canister. There was pure dread there, thick and raw emotion scattered across her face that was impossible to feign. Right? Link shook his head, then suddenly he couldn't stop shaking it.

“Does she usually hide things from you?” Alex asked, somewhere close to Link's right ear. Not that he could tell; his surroundings were becoming nothing but circumstance.

“Not usually. She's private, but nothing like this before,” Chase's voice this time, somewhere in front of Link, “She lied to Neal in the past, but that's behind them. She's with us.”

“Huh.” Was Alex's only response. There was a brief silent exchange between the two men, but Link might have imagined it, having trouble refocusing his eyes and bringing himself back to the present. What was he going to do? He couldn't go home. Not that it was really his home, but it was somewhere to sleep, somewhere to gather his bearings and bathe. Now he didn't have that, since those vultures that people called the press were crowding the area and bothering the neighbors.

“You can stay with me,” Chase said, as if he was replying to Link's thoughts. It dawned on Link that he'd accidentally voiced what was on his mind considering both men were staring at him. He shook his head and reigned his sanity back in, or what was left of it.

“No,” Link replied, fearing that his presence at Chase's apartment would do more harm than good, “I can't risk implicating you too, man.”

Chase waved his hand as if the prospect of being fired and arrested didn't bother him. “Forget about that. You can sleep here on the condition that you lay low. No leaving the house. If you need something, myself or Alex will do a run for you.”

“Chase, I can find somewhere,” Link pressed on, gaining a scornful look from Alex who looked just as tired as Stevie had sounded, “I can jump around places.”

“Where?” Alex asked.

“Uh.”

“Exactly.”

“You'll stay here,” Chase bent down and recovered Link's slumped rucksack from the floor, “Let's hope the laptop in this didn't break.”

“It'll be fine.” Link said, dragging his feet on autopilot. Alex offered him a clap on the shoulder in support, but it didn't really do anything. Link appreciated the gesture, though. He knew his relationship with Rhett would jeopardize his career one way or another, but he hadn't expected it to be in such bad taste. Was it possible that Rhett had talked to the press? No, he couldn't risk being seen in public never mind speaking out. There would have been a public outcry had he showed his
face again. So, McLaughlin had done it. Why? A threat, or something more?

Link couldn't begin to understand the complexity of the situation, nor the complexity of McLaughlin and Rhett's relationship. How could family treat each other in such a way? Link almost snorted, recalling that he didn't exactly speak to his family at all, so he couldn't judge. At least his family weren't borderline serial killers. There was always that.

Link slumped down onto the couch in the living room and put his face in his hands, willing away the unwelcome thoughts of self loathing from his mind. He didn't need that kind of negativity, not now. Not when he couldn't hide it. Not whilst he was vulnerable. Rhett made him vulnerable, soft in the middle and wobbly at the knees, when realistically Link should have been the exact opposite of that. He had to be hard and determined, but also emotionally unavailable. In reality, he was emotionally naked, laid bare for his ex-handler to manipulate. Rhett and Link had opened a door without looking back, hand in hand, and now Link was alone, wandering aimlessly in hopes that he could return through the door back into normalcy. Perhaps the opportunity to do so had already come and gone, and was now tucked away in Rhett's warm embrace that Link wanted to melt into.

Rubbing a hand over his face, Link sighed heavily and watched as Alex took a seat next to him and offered a small, sad smile. Link didn't return it.

“I don't wanna be the one to tell you this, but,” Alex began, and already Link felt tension bubble in his gut, “You know Ben is going to be pissed about this.”

Link cursed to himself, but it ended up coming out of his mouth louder than intended. Alex hummed in response as if he was agreeing, because Ben finding out that Rhett and Link had been intimate just added to the list of problems Link really didn't need right now. Link was in a relationship—was it really a relationship?—with a killer, not only that, but he was in a relationship with the man responsible for the kidnapping and murder of Ben's girlfriend. Now ex-girlfriend, Link figured, then proceeded to grimace at his own vulgar thoughts. Had he always been so dark? Had the agency brought it out in him?

“We can't really do anything to keep him away from you,” Alex continued when it became evident that Link was at a loss for words, “He'll come here eventually, whether he's looking for you or not. We can hide you, but—”

“No,” Link replied instantly, because the last thing he needed was to hide from his own friend, “No, I've had it coming. I deserve whatever he has to say.”

Alex was quiet for a long moment, eyes looking behind them and towards Chase's office, obviously following where the smaller man had disappeared to. Link had fallen into a haze by the time Alex spoke up again, rousing him from his dreamlike state, “You love Rhett, don't you?”

Link hesitated, the weight of Alex's words laying heavily on his chest. Quietly, he answered, “I do.”

Without a further word, Alex wrapped an arm around Link's shoulders and smiled sympathetically. Link appreciated it, because it was certainly a load off of his shoulders to talk about it. Not that he really wanted to, but he wasn't about to lie to Alex's face. He wasn't sure if he even had the strength to lie. Not with everything that was happening, everything that was working against him. Now he had Ben to worry about.

The guy was never going to forgive Link.

Chapter End Notes
Hope this acted as a suitable part two from last week's cliffhanger. I'm going to estimate that there are around a maximum of seven chapters left for this story (that's seven more weeks of waiting until the end). That is, unless I run into any scheduling issues. The ending to this story has been written and rewritten so many times so I want to make sure it's something we'll both enjoy before anything is set in stone.

Other than that, nothing really exciting to point out in this chapter. Only that Benjamin is only just arriving at his own conclusions with Rhett and Link, but following Link's exposure in the local newspaper, who knows what Ben will do? Or what Stevie is up to? You'll find out next week.

No beta this week, so like normal I will get to errors momentarily! See you next week! Merci et prends soin de toi!
JULY 17TH 2007, present day

It didn't take long for Ben to find him. A total of two hours passed, and then Ben was banging at Chase's apartment door, demanding to be let inside. Link had basked in the silence whilst it lasted, swaying between consciousness and unconsciousness, struggling to keep his coffee down. It bubbled in his chest and sent a blazing heat searing up his throat, similar to heart burn. Similar to how Rhett made him feel like he was burning from the inside out. Rhett was a viscous flame, and if Link didn't extinguish him soon then he'd be toast.

"Neal," Ben slurred as he entered Chase's kitchen, coming face to face with a readied Link. The bulkier man's cheeks were tinged pink in anger, his ears a dark red color. "It's not true."

Link braced himself against the counter with both hands behind his back, his body angled away from Ben and his shoulders tense, ready for a fight. That's what was surely coming, and Link had been preparing for it ever since he'd read the damn news. Ben had good reason, too, since Link had shared a piece of his heart with the man who was responsible for the disappearance and murder of Lizzie. Link didn't blame Ben for how he was acting, not one bit.

"It's true," Link told him, not bothering to hide it. What would be the point? They'd come this far, and Ben was still in the dark. It was time to invite him into the light. "But I'm not working with Rhett, I'm—"

"You're what?" Ben demanded just as Chase entered the room behind him, a firm hand on a shaking shoulder, "His lover?"

"I—" Link began, but Chase interrupted him.

"Ben, Neal isn't the enemy here," he said, forcing Ben to look at him, "He's with us. The press don't know what they're talking about."

"You're what?" Ben spat back, eyes returning to Link who looked a little like a wounded animal. One you would shoot out of mercy, instead of going through the trouble of nursing it back to life. "And you trust him? You're with him?"

"I—" Ben began, but Chase interrupted him.

"Ben, Neal isn't the enemy here," he said, forcing Ben to look at him, "He's with us. The press don't know what they're talking about."

"He's in a relationship with— with you know who."

Link's hands began to shake, his fingers gripping onto the counter in restraint. Chase seemed to be fairing better than either of them, calm and collected, and speaking in monotone, "I trust him with my life. He's not the bad guy here, Ben."

"If he isn't, then who is?"
“Rhett is,” Link spoke up finally, despite his words feeling like tiny daggers heading straight for his heart, “Rhett is the one who did this to us.”

Ben was quiet for a moment, and Link thought his words might have gotten through to the guy. Abruptly, Ben's expression returned to anger and he spat, “How do I know you didn't help him, huh?”

“You don't.” Link said.

“Neal...” Chase began, a disapproving look on his face as he moved to stand between Ben and Link. Link shook his head in response, because it was the truth or silence. He was done lying to Ben, he was done lying to everyone. His cards were officially on the table whether he liked it or not.

“And I'm meant to take your word for it,” Ben continued, and it didn't sound like a question. He looked at Link in disbelief, his fists balling at his sides, reading to pounce. Link was prepared, arms locked and steady, ready for the opportune moment to launch himself from the counter and at the bulky man. Not that he stood a chance, really, but he would give it his best shot. He wouldn't let Ben just hit him. “What the hell are you thinking, Neal? If you're not working for them, you at least know something. You've had your head stuck up H's ass ever since you started working for the agency.”

Link saw white. He felt his ears burn. He launched himself forward, aiming for Ben's face and connecting with...Chase's chest. The smaller man grunted in response, having stepped in the way of the blow and was now holding Link back and arms length, Ben panting behind him with a smirk on his face. Link glared at him and pushed at Chase's arms to let him go, but they didn't let up.

“You've seen what he does to people,” Ben continued, voice like ice and sending shivers along Link's forearms, “The lies, the deceit, and now the killing. What the hell are you thinking being with someone like him?”

There was a long moment of silence where neither of the three men spoke, simply looking at one another. Chase stood between the two of them, eyes darting nervously from Link to Ben in case one of them made a move. But Link didn't plan on it, not anymore. Instead, he took a cautious step back from Chase, who released him, and then looked down at his feet. Link took a deep breath and spoke quietly, “I love him.”

A beat of silence, then, “What?”

Link looked up at Ben, eyes hard and legs unsteady, “I love Rhett.”

“How can you love him?” Ben asked, or more demanded, a look of disgust on his face that made Link want to shrink away from him, “He's a monster. You're a monster.”

Link's brows furrowed together, hurt flashing across his face in an instant. Ben's eyes were cold and determined to hurt Link, and he was doing just that. Link's heart felt like it was deflating, the air from his lungs escaping his chest in one swift motion and leaving him empty. He wasn't mad at what Ben had said, of course he wasn't. Maybe Ben was right. Rhett was a monster, and that made Link a monster by proxy. Link loved a monster, a beast, and this entire time he'd been thinking he was the
prey.

Maybe Link had been Rhett's accomplice all along. He wasn't Rhett's prey, he was Rhett's equal. His partner in every way, shape and form.

“He loves you too,” Chase said suddenly, tearing through Link's reverie and bringing him back to the present. Link looked at the younger man curiously, and it felt as though Chase could read Link's train of thought. Maybe he'd sensed that Link had gone somewhere dark, somewhere he wouldn't be able to come back from if he went too far. Chase was trying to save him, but Link knew he couldn't be saved.

“I know he does.” Link replied simply.

Ben’s eyes darted between him and Chase, a silent battle behind his eyes. Link saw the fire there, the confusion, the hurt and the betrayal. But most of all, Link could see the loss in Ben's eyes. He'd lost Lizzie. He'd lost her to Rhett, just as Link had lost his family to Rhett. Link fought the urge to close his eyes and will sleep to come so he could escape this nightmare.

“You're all repulsive,” Ben said lowly, spite and anger in his words. He turned on his heel and shouldered the kitchen door open, before storming off. Chase jumped when he heard the front door slam, but Link remained relatively still. But after a moment, he shriveled up and put his face in his hands, a shudder spreading through his body.

Rhett was isolating Link from everyone. Even if it weren't intentional, he was still managing it, and there was nothing Link could do. He'd lost Ben, he was surely going to lose Jen, too, and they still couldn't get a hold of Stevie. What was he going to do?

Cool air hit Link's face as the wind aided him forwards, pushing his slim body in the direction he was running. The sun was high in the sky, not a cloud in sight, no threat of rain hovering over his head. He was dressed in shorts and a white t-shirt, black skate shoes on his feet. Weird, since he was never a skater, he'd simply worn the shoes out of comfort when he was younger. Weeds and stray twigs collided with his calves as he ran, leaving thin red lines on his skin. He could hear his feet squelch in the mud and enjoyed every bit of it. There was a man ahead of him, running at the same pace—calm, in no hurry, more of a jog—with long legs and arms, towering over Link a good couple of inches. Rhett.

The taller man turned his head as soon as Link realized it was him, smiling and laughing over his shoulder as Link struggled to keep up with him. Rhett had longer legs than Link, that much was obvious from first glance, but he was also a lot faster than Link was. And a lot more capable. He dodged through the brush easily, occasionally pausing to hold back a branch so it wouldn't hit Link square in the face when he passed. It took Link a few minutes of this before he realized where he was, where they were. It looked like somewhere he'd been before, and now it all made sense.

They were running alongside the Cape Fear River. Link could identify the area like the back of his hand when he was younger, but it'd been years since he'd spent time there. But why now? Why were they there? Link was home, back in North Carolina, but Rhett was there too. And they were running and laughing like teenagers, no care in the world and no agency to hang over their heads. It was calming, and great—no, it was wonderful.

Together, they raced the current of the river to their right, Link managing to catch glimpses of water
splashing up the sides of the bank as he ran. The sun was beating down on them and heated up Link's cheeks and the tip of his nose. Rhett's cheeks were tinged pink, either from the sun or from the run, maybe both. But Link didn't mind. It made Rhett look...really, really good.

“Here seems like a good spot,” Rhett slowed his pace as he spoke, startling Link who managed to crash into the taller man's back before looking where he was going, too focused on the motion of the water alongside them. Rhett huffed a startled laugh, then shook his head and spun around to face Link. Two very long, and very strong arms encircled Link's slim waist and held him close, their hips pressed together gently. Rhett was smiling down at him; sun-kissed skin and pink lips were all Link could see.

“Hey,” Link breathed, letting himself be held by the taller man and melting into the embrace. He placed both hands on Rhett's biceps and kept them there, steadying himself.

“Hey,” Rhett responded in the same gentle tone that Link used, “Didn't see you there.”

Link's heart felt like it was going to vacate his chest, ricocheting inside his rib cage and making him breathless. The sun really brought out the specks of green in Rhett's eyes. “You're hot,” Link blurted without thinking, then realized what he'd said and quickly attempted to reel it back in, “I mean, your arms. They're warm.”

Rhett's smirk slowly began taking over his face as Link spoke, obviously enjoying the smaller man's discomfort. Jerk. Link half expected a cheesy you're not so bad yourself line from the taller man, but instead, Rhett replied with a quiet, “You're beautiful.”

Link looked up at Rhett in surprise, embarrassment creeping up on him. Beautiful. Rhett had called him beautiful. “No.”

“Yes,” Rhett replied, the smile on his face stretching to a grin. He tilted his head slightly and leaned down, and Link let him. He didn't fight it, he didn't want to. He wanted this. He wanted Rhett. The taller man kissed him softly, tenderly, and left Link weak at the knees. He felt like he was floating on a cloud, and maybe he was. This had to be a dream, right? This wasn't real...none of it was. He could never share this small paradise with Rhett in the real world. The real world was harsh and cruel, dismal and bleak, offering nothing substantial to Link. He'd much rather exist here in his subconscious than return to that misery.

“You're really here,” Link noted once Rhett had pulled back, but kept his arms around Link possessively.

“No,” Rhett replied, as if he knew Link was dreaming. “If only.”

“I miss you,” Link admitted, and watched as Rhett's face contorted in response. Sadness flashed across the other man's features, followed by hurt, before he cleverly masked it and his regular straight face returned. Rhett was always hidden from view, disguised in a mask even in Link's subconscious, it seemed. Typical.

Rhett raised his hand to touch the side of Link's face, trailing his thumb along his cheekbone and tracing a line down to his lips. Link exhaled, warm breath hitting the taller man's thumb, and fought the urge to shiver. His reaction obviously did something to Rhett, whose grip tightened around Link's waist in response.

“You're going to be caught.” Link told him.

“I know, Link,” Rhett replied, and it felt like the most honest thing the taller man had ever said to
“I'm afraid,” Link said weakly, closing his eyes and fighting the urge to bury himself in Rhett's chest. He settled for squeezing the taller man's biceps. “I'm afraid that we'll never be able to have this.”

“I know,” Rhett repeated, like it was the only thing he could say. Link opened his eyes once more to look up at the other man. Rhett's eyes were downcast, his shoulders slumped, brow furrowed.

“I'm afraid that when I wake up, this,” Link gestured between them with his hand for emphasis, “won't be real. I'm afraid I've been imagining it all along.”

Rhett returned his gaze towards Link momentarily, before heaving out a breath and leaning forward. He grazed his lips along the corner of Link's mouth, trailing a line to soft, closed mouth kisses along Link's jaw. Link sighed to himself, and let Rhett do whatever he wanted to do. He let himself melt into the feeling, into Rhett's touch, because when would he be able to do that again?

Never?

Probably never.

And maybe, Link thought, whilst they stood under the heat of the midday sun, maybe he could escape to this reality any time he wanted.

JULY 20TH 2007, present day

Link jolted awake, heaving himself into a sitting position and ignoring the way his abs screamed in response. He looked around the room, frantically scanning his surroundings, momentarily disoriented. He was in Chase's apartment. Everything was fine. Rhett wasn't there—not fine—but that wasn't the point. He felt around his chest with his hands, fingers gripping to the fabric there as he clutched for balance, for a hold on reality. His heart was hammering, his breathing fast and uneven.

Is that really what being with Rhett would be like? Could be like? Calm and tender and everything Link thought it couldn't be, everything Link wanted out of a relationship? He shook his head slowly, mostly to himself, because loving Rhett was sure as hell screwing with his brain. The bearded man seeped into his subconscious and made a bed there, watching and waiting for a moment to pounce on Link when he least expected it, when he was most vulnerable. And Link melted into Rhett's embrace, just like that. No questions asked, no trepidation. It was like Rhett had done nothing at all. Like he was innocent in all of this, even when he wasn't.

Link couldn't let himself view Rhett as harmless. That was stupid, and dangerous, and Link couldn't afford to be reckless. Not now. Not when things had come to a head and it was a race against time, trying to save as many lives as he could until the inevitable end.

A quick glance around the room confirmed that Link was alone, which wasn't exactly odd, no, but something felt wrong. The apartment felt colder than usual, the air conditioning being up too high, or something. Link rubbed his bare arms and slid into a sitting position, calling out to Chase in hopes that the other man would answer him and Link wouldn't be alone in the apartment. He'd been alone for the past two days, only seeing both Alex and Chase occasionally when they came back from
work, or running errands, all of which Link wouldn't take part in because he was under house arrest. He wasn't bitter, not much. His hideout seemed to be working, anyway. No one had bothered them. Not a soul.

It was convenient, maybe, but Link didn't think about that.

His eyes lit up when he saw Chase emerge from his office, a coffee mug in his hand as he made his way over to Link. Absently, the smaller man brushed his hand over Link’s shoulder. It felt like an intimate gesture, and Link tried not to melt into the contact. He missed Rhett. He missed Rhett a lot.

“Hey, you've been out for hours,” Chase told him, voice groggy, sounding tired. He looked it too, if the dark circles around his eyes were anything to go by, “I wasn't too keen on waking you.”

“How long was I asleep?” Link asked, a small smile on his face at Chase's tired form.

Chase glanced at his watch. “Four hours, give or take.”

Link raised an eyebrow in response, surprised that he'd managed to sleep for so long. He'd been exhausted, however, from staying up late into the night to track Rhett's whereabouts. If they found Rhett, they found the Resistance. And if they found the Resistance, they found Morgan and Candace. They had to do it before McLaughlin did, that was for sure.

“How's Alex?” Link asked, absently scratching at his forearm and watching as Chase rounded the couch and took a seat next to Link, heaving a sigh.

“He had to run some errands,” Chase said, taking a sip of his coffee and looking away from Link, “He won't be long.”

“Errands?” Link asked, but Chase seemed to ignore him in favor of reaching forward and fetching the spare newspaper on the coffee table in front of him. Alex was running errands, huh? Nothing unusual, Link guessed, but the way Chase avoided Link's gaze was unusual. What was he hiding?

Was it something to do with Alex? “Did you two have a fight, or something?”

“Not exactly,” Chase replied after a moment of silence, the sound of him changing page on the newspaper echoing throughout the room, “We had a conversation.”

“An argument, then,” Link offered. Chase looked at him.

“Something like that.”

Link frowned in response, but didn't pry any further. It was a suitable enough response from the younger man, and it would explain why he was acting so strangely. Still, what did they have to fight about? Probably a hell of a lot given how much stress they were all under, after all. Link was surprised he'd managed to keep his cool for as long as he had before launching himself at Ben, whom they hadn't heard from since. He wouldn't answer Link’s calls, not that Link really expected him to.

They couldn't get a hold of Stevie, either, which was nothing short of worrying. Link hadn't gone so long without contacting her before, not whilst they were in this mess, and he felt himself missing her companionship. He felt himself missing the support she offered, making him realize just how reliant he had become on her. It made him sick. He shouldn't be relying on people, not anymore, not when he'd pulled the short straw one too many times.

“Looks like every newspaper in town has ran your photograph,” Chase noted, sending Link's mind straight back into turmoil. Link's photograph had been broadcast in the exact same way Rhett's had;
local news stations and newspapers had shown it, blown it up for all to see. Sometimes he and Rhett's photographs would be aired together, and a stuck up presenter would call them something corny like lovers on the run, which made Link want to punch a hole in the television set. Sometimes he was nothing but an accomplice, or a romantic interest. Other times, both he and Rhett were labeled as criminal masterminds, but Link wouldn't go that far.

McLaughlin had curiously refused to make a statement regarding Link's recent notoriety. Why, Link had no idea, but it raised a lot of questions. Hadn't McLaughlin been the one to tell the press in the first place? The guy should have been having a field day with the media, enjoying the attention and lavishing in the publicity for the agency, but no, instead he had refused to comment on the matter entirely. Link rubbed a hand over his face, groaning in frustration. He couldn't get a read on McLaughlin, just like he wasn't able to get one on Rhett before everything had gone to hell. They had that in common. They really were related.

“Want to help me clear our Larry's dirt bath?” Chase asked suddenly, rousing Link from his thoughts with a small smile. Link returned it, letting it touch his eyes and warm him from head to toe. He could appreciate the distraction, so he agreed, simply because handling a chinchilla might actually do him some good. Wasn't there something about cute things being calming for the body and mind? Something like that, Link didn't know, but he'd give it a shot. He'd give anything a shot at this point.

Chase and him spent the better part of an hour messing around with Larry's cage and bath, making much more of a mess than the small chinchilla ever could. It didn't matter, really, because Link could tell Chase was simply trying to keep his mind off of Rhett. And it was working, marginally, at least. Link smiled to himself whilst they worked, laughing at something Chase had said, ignoring the small clouds of dust and dirt surrounding them. It felt good to relax again, and to forget about the horrors that awaited them in the near future. Something bad was coming and they both knew it, but if they could savor the few moments of peace they had, then they would damn well do it.

It was early evening when Alex returned to the apartment, both Chase and Link sitting on their laptops in the living room, discussing a strategy to track down the location of the Resistance base. If they had one, that was, but Link assumed as much. You couldn't operate such an advanced rebellion group without having a proper base of operations, right?

Alex's eyes were sunken in, as if he hadn't slept in a couple of days, and his expression was solemn, if not a little frightened. Link's brow furrowed as soon as he laid eyes on the guy, but Chase was instantly rising to his feet and making his way to Alex's side. Alex closed the front door behind him in something of a daze, standing awkwardly in the room with a small, beige envelope wedged under his arm.

“Alex?” Chase asked, putting a gentle hand on Alex's upper arm just as Link placed his laptop onto the coffee table a made a move to stand, “What happened?”

Where had Alex been? Running simple errands, huh? Link made a face.

“What's going on?” Link asked, making his way over to the two men, both clearly distraught.

“Where were you?”

“He was running err—” Chase began, but Alex shot him a look and interrupted him.

“I was tailing Stevie.”

There was a beat.

“You were tailing Stevie?” Link echoed.
“Alex.” Chase said, as if he was scolding Alex for telling the truth.

“Why?” Link asked, staring Alex down, anxiety bubbling in his gut, “What the heck, guys?”

“You're not going to believe this,” Alex told them, but his eyes were trained on Chase. Link watched as they exchanged some sort of private information with a single glance, before Chase's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Link frowned at them. What was going on? What happened? Was he missing something?

“Is she okay?” Link inquired, worried, “Is Stevie okay?”

“She's better than okay,” Alex replied, but his tone seemed bitter about it. It didn't ease Link's nerves in the slightest.

“Why were you tailing her?”

“You can't tell me you don't find it peculiar that she randomly sports new information all the time,” Alex responded, making a face and waving his free hand emphatically, “And without even a hint at the source.”

So Alex suspected Stevie, then. Link had half the mind to punch him in the face for the lack of distrust because they didn't need any more uncertainty in the group. Their numbers were limited enough without there being bad blood between them.

“Let me see,” Chase said suddenly, taking the envelope from Alex's arm and fiddling with it with his shaking fingers. Alex shook his head in response then proceeded to run his calloused hands over his face, as if wishing he wasn't there. Link understood the feeling, but he wasn't about to retreat in on himself. He had to find out what was going on and what was happening. What the hell was in the envelope?

“I tailed Stevie from HQ this evening,” Alex explained, and Link watched as Chase opened the envelope and withdrew a couple of photographs from it. Chase's eyes hardened instantly, and he dropped the envelope to the ground, settling for clutching at the photographs in his hands with a shaking grip. Link leaned into his personal space to look at them, too.

His breath caught in his throat. His mouth went dry, a migraine tugging at the back of his eyes. He took the first photograph from Chase's hands and took it into his own, as if he couldn't really believe what he was seeing until he got it closer. Until he held it in his hands. On the small, dark photograph were figures of two people. One of them was Stevie, face solemn and turned to the side, but unmistakably her. She was facing another person, someone who towered over her in height, someone Link could pick out from a crowd. Rhett.

Stevie was with Rhett in the middle of what looked like an alleyway. They didn't look like they were arguing. They didn't look like Stevie was arresting him. They looked...they looked like they always did. Rhett's hand was grazing Stevie's forearm in what looked like an intimate gesture, his face concerned.

Stevie had been with Rhett all along. No, no. No, that wasn't...that couldn't be right. Stevie couldn't, could she?

“I couldn't get close enough to hear what they said,” Alex spoke up, tearing through Link's mind and causing a ringing in his ears. Alex took the other photographs from Chase's shaking hands and showed them to Link, pointing at them and hoping Link could see through the tears threatening to fall from his eyes. “Look, they've clearly been meeting like this for quite some time. She knew
exactly where she was going when I was tailing her. She's probably been feeding Rhett the information we have on the Resistance all along.”

“You know this means she's responsible for Morgan and Candace being taken, right?” Chase asked, but his voice sounded distant, betrayed. Link understood the feeling. He couldn't breathe. “She left them alone on purpose, knowing that Rhett and the others would be there.”

“She's working with the Resistance,” Alex confirmed. “Probably has been all along. I knew there was something fishy about her, Chase, I just knew it.”

Link blinked. “You suspected her for a while?”

“Well, yeah,” Alex replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, as if Link's knees weren't shaking in light of this new information, “I'm not as emotionally involved as the two of you. I barely know her.”

“What are they—I mean, what were they—” Link struggled to form words, struggling to put them together into a sentence, “What were they doing—”

“It's hard to tell from the pictures.” Chase noted. Alex shook his head in response.

“They were hugging and talking,” Alex said slowly, observing Link's reaction. “Neal, man, I don't know. They might be together after all.”

“No,” Link replied, because that felt like all he could say. No, they couldn't be together. They'd both denied it and—well, since when were either Stevie or Rhett trustworthy? Had they really played Link for a fool this entire time? And he'd fallen for it, hard and fast without a second thought. Stevie was just as evil as Rhett was, if not more. She'd been the inside woman this whole time, extracting information from them and feeding it right back to the Resistance. She'd probably told them about Link's feelings for Rhett, too, but he couldn't imagine how that would have went down.

Didn't Rhett care for Link? Had it all really been a lie? Link had witnessed Rhett and Stevie embracing before, back in Salt Lake City—a lifetime ago now—and he had his suspicions that they could have been an item back then. But both Stevie and Rhett had denied it, and Rhett had continued his courting of Link. Maybe it was a trap. Maybe Link hadn't seen it coming. Maybe he was done for, maybe they all were.

“Did they see you?” Chase asked suddenly, raising his voice in alarm, “Rhett's looking right at the camera in this one.”

Alex grimaced, “I think they saw me. That's when I sped outta there.”

“Where?” Link asked, “Where were these taken?”

“In an alleyway just by the pier.”

“You thinking that could be where the Resistance base is?” Chase asked Link, relating back to the work they'd been doing before Alex crashed the party. Link nodded in response. Maybe Alex had accidentally stumbled on the base of operations for the Resistance, and maybe Stevie had led him straight to it. Was luck really on their side this time?

“I doubt it, Neal,” Alex replied, stepping on Link's hopes, “It was just an alleyway. Rhett was already there waiting. And I don't think they'd be stupid enough to meet outside the Resistance base.”
After a moment of consideration, Chase said, “He's right.”

Link sighed to himself and rubbed a hand over his face. “I can't believe this. This entire time, and she was...she was with them.”

“I don't get it,” Chase interjected, “Stevie's been helping us with assignments since the beginning. She's been trying to stop the Resistance alongside us.”

“Not to mention she looked petrified when that blood canister exploded on her,” Link added.

“She's a good actress,” Alex grunted, pinching the bridge of his nose, “Who knows how long she's been with Rhett? I bet he's taught her a few things, and then some.”

Link looked away grimly, because he knew it was true. Rhett was talented, skilled at deceiving people including Link. He'd managed to get away with being a double agent for who knows how long, so no doubt Stevie had picked up a few things on her own without Rhett's assistance. Maybe he was her mentor, maybe one day she would surpass him. Link wouldn't be around for that day, at least.

After a small moment of silence, Link fished around in his jeans pocket and took out his cell phone. He thought that maybe, just maybe, he would be able to contact Stevie and she could explain everything. She could explain what the hell she was doing with Rhett and why, and why was she lying to them. It was possible that Stevie could be playing Rhett, too, making him think she was on his side whilst working with Link and the others to take down the Resistance. But that seemed like a long shot. Link's luck certainly wasn't that good.

Unsurprisingly, Link's call failed and the text message he'd attempted to send shortly after only gained him a fatal bounce notification. So Stevie had deactivated her phone, or worse, she'd programmed it like Rhett had. Maybe Rhett had programmed it for her. The two were close after all, perhaps closer than close. Too close for Link's liking. Was it jealousy or anger that he felt? A mixture of both, and all for the wrong reasons. This wasn't about Rhett and Stevie being in a relationship, and it wasn't about Link's childish jealousy on the matter, it was about saving the lives of agents and the general public who were bound to be affected by both the agency and the Resistance's actions.

But no matter how hard Link tried, he couldn't fight the feeling of rejection. And betrayal.

Stevie was going to go down, and Rhett was going down with her. Link would make sure of it.

Chapter End Notes

Another plot twist incoming. Did anyone expect it? I'd love to hear everyone's thoughts on the matter, and on the progress of this story! Nothing too exciting to point out this week except that the Cape Fear River is a real place where Rhett & Link spent a lot of time during their teenage years. In this story, however, Link explored the river alone as he didn't know Rhett back then. I thought it'd be fun to include a dream sequence where they spent some time together like that. I hope everyone enjoyed it.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** There will be no update next week, for I am taking the week off to catch up on some university work. I hope you understand. Regular updates will resume October 25th. Thank you for your patience.
No beta this week, so like normal I will get to errors momentarily! (There will be a lot of them, sorry). See you in two weeks! Merci et prends soin de toi!
Dévoiler

Chapter Notes

**Story Title Translation: Opération Clandestin** - Clandestine Operation (An intelligence operation designed to remain secret)

**Chapter Title Translation:** Dévoiler - Unveiling

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**JULY 21ST 2007, present day**

The photographs were gruesome. Link couldn't shake the nausea bubbling in his stomach whenever he caught sight of them, or whenever he forced himself to study the people in them. Stevie and Rhett looked close. Too close. Were they together, or were they just really that familiar? The better question, had they been working together all along? Of course they had. Link couldn't let himself doubt it, not this time. He'd had enough of the ambiguous situation, and he was just about to lose his mind. Alex had scanned the photographs onto all of their computers, per Chase's request. Chase wished to study them, analyze them and perhaps find some answers hidden within them. So far, after a sleepless night's searching, they'd came up blank. Rhett and Stevie had betrayed them all, and there was no running from that anymore.

Link's laptop heated up his bare thighs, scolding his skin from overuse and mistreatment, but he couldn't find it in him to care. It wasn't that painful, not really. Nothing compared to the ache in his chest or the shaking of his hands. Nothing could compare to that. Ben could storm into Chase's apartment and take a swing at Link, hitting him square in the jaw, and Link was sure it would hurt less than the grim reality of Rhett and Stevie's exhibition of disloyalty. He'd gone through everything with Alex more than once in great detail, and it still didn't ease the pain for Link. It didn't ease the pain for any of them.

Chase hadn't spoken as much as a few words since the recent revelation, remaining quiet in his office, out of sight. Link had barely seen the smaller man in hours, save for the few times he'd escaped to the restroom. Alex had been in and out of Chase's office all night, sometimes with a somber expression on his face and other times holding coffee mugs. Link had drank around six mugs of black coffee to keep himself awake, but it had only resulted in elevating his agitation towards the situation. He'd snapped at Alex numerous times, whose response was to snap right back, fueling the fire in Link's belly. Alex seemed to understand the need to get angry at the situation, angry at Rhett and Stevie, and he met Link's fury head on. It made Link feel better, albeit marginally, but he appreciated the opportunity to let off some steam. There were no hard feelings; there couldn't be. Not now. Not when they needed each other more than ever.

Link had been sleeping with the enemy—so to speak. Rhett and him hadn't exactly been...intimate in that way. Not even close, He'd been Rhett's, what, mistress? The idea made him feel sick to his stomach, bitterness coursing through his veins. He'd been an idiot. So stupid.

“How did I not see this sooner?” Link asked aloud, mostly to himself. Alex glanced over at him, looking up from the papers in his hands in surprise. There was a moment of silence where the other man didn't respond, probably weighing Link's question before speaking carefully.
“It wasn't your job to see it,” Alex replied, straightening his back against the armchair he was occupying, “And your judgment was clouded. Nobody blames you.”

“That's one way of putting it.” Link grunted back, to which Alex hummed in response. His judgment was clouded alright, masked somewhere between his affection for Rhett and his clueless attitude towards the agency. Link had suspected Stevie in the beginning, and he should have trusted his instincts. After all, those instincts knew Rhett was dangerous from the get-go, but had Link listened to them? Of course not. He was so foolish. Link had trusted Stevie—and Rhett—and it had blown up in his face, no pun intended.

They still couldn't get a hold of the woman who had betrayed them. Stevie's phone was either deactivated and destroyed, or she had purposely programmed it to reject incoming calls. Both plausible theories, really, since Link couldn't hazard a guess of the woman's next move anymore. They didn't even both trying to contact Rhett, for Link knew it would be a waste of time. Why would Rhett bother picking up the phone now? Everything was out in the open, all the lies and the deceit, all the betrayal, and there was nothing tying him to Link. Not even his personal feelings towards Link, if they were even genuine in the first place. Link didn't know anymore. He thought he knew Rhett loved him, but now he wasn't sure. Nothing was certain, nothing was set in stone. Link was trapped, floating in the abyss.

Alex had taken Chase out of the apartment by the time two o'clock rolled in, Link having nodded off on the couch, his head resting back and mouth hanging open. Alex had woken him to say they wouldn't be long, that Chase needed some air. They all needed air. But Link was on house arrest, and he could do nothing but twiddle his thumbs and await their return.

Right?

Wrong. Link was a sitting duck in Chase's apartment. He felt hopeless, like he was getting nothing productive done being trapped there. He'd spent the entire night looking into the Resistance, and looking into himself, given that he was now a popular face throughout the media. He couldn't face his emails for fear that Jen had sent him one expressing her disappointment and feelings of betrayal, and most of all her determination to capture him dead or alive. That was what was surely coming, and Link couldn't handle it. He couldn't handle the thought of the one person he'd been close with throughout the years turning her back on him. If the situation were reversed and if Jen had been the one implicated, Link being an innocent third party, he wasn't sure what he would do. Would he condemn Jen? Dedicate his time and effort into locating her and sentencing her to a lifetime in prison, or worse, let the agency deal with her?

Thoughts like these were what led Link to shrugging into week old clothes and escaping Chase's apartment. He sneaked out Chase's office window, the front door being locked behind Chase and Alex when they'd left and trapped Link inside. But Link was slim and flexible, so maneuvering his way out of a small window was easy. Marginally. He might have snagged his jacket on the window sill and ripped it on his way out, but other than that he was relatively unscathed. He landed onto a garbage bin before jumping onto the ground and running for cover. The sun high in the sky, the cool afternoon air encircling Link and causing him to shiver as it hit the layer of sweat forming on the back of his neck.

Link wasn't stupid. He knew he shouldn't be seen outdoors, but that was the whole point. He couldn't be seen outdoors, but he could still be outdoors. As long as he remained stealthy and acted
natural then there would be no problems. It helped to have a destination in mind, and he did. Stevie's apartment was the first and only location on the list. Perhaps she'd be there, hiding out, planning her next move, and that's where Link would pounce on her and apprehend her. Or maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he would just demand answers, then let her go. That seemed like Link's forte now.

Stevie's apartment didn't stand out among the row of dull, beige-colored buildings. It wasn't that far of a walk, really close by to where Jessie lived. Link had traveled there multiple times now, enough to know what direction to head in. He dodged the main streets and focused on alleyways, weaving in and out of parked cars and garbage cans as often as he could. When someone would pass him by, he would pull up his jacket collar around his neck and duck his head, looking down at his feet and avoiding any unnecessary contact. It must have worked, because he made it there in record time, perhaps quicker than if he'd driven.

He'd just about stepped out and onto the sidewalk, emerging from a small alleyway behind the corner market, when he spotted a familiar face a little down the way. Jessie looked concerned, brow furrowed and lips pursed as a car rolled to a stop beside her. She was carrying two brown paper bags in her hands, looking like she'd just been for her weekly groceries. A bulky man emerged from the car beside her, standing with the driver's side door open and leaning his arms on the roof. He was saying something Link couldn't make out. He tried his best to lip read, but to no avail, but it felt like something serious. Whatever the guy said caused Jessie to stop dead in her tracks, eyes widening and mouth hanging open. Link felt panicked for a split second, afraid that she was in some sort of danger, but no. She couldn't be, because he'd done his best to keep her out of all of this. She wasn't involved, and Link was determined to keep it that way.

Words that Link couldn't make out were exchanged between the two of them, with Link hiding in the shadows a block down from them, wedged between two trash cans. Jessie appeared to falter, before her expression hardened and she shifted the paper bags into one arm and used the other to open the passenger side door of the car. She got inside without another word and threw her bags into the backseat, busying herself with fastening her seat belt. The guy she was now with mimicked her, and Link finally got a good look at him. A bald guy, kind of bulky, nothing really memorable about his appearance, but Link felt like he knew him. He'd seen him somewhere, or something, but where? Had they met before? And how did Jessie know him? Was he famous or something? Maybe Link had seen him on TV.

They drove away before Link could come to any conclusions, having to duck behind the trash cans in front of him to avoid being seen by them. He wondered what Jessie thought of him now, after everything; after his face had been plastered on the news and he was revealed as a traitor. Wrongfully accused, he'd add, but still a traitor. Maybe she hated him. Or maybe, just maybe, she was waiting for a second opinion. Link should have reached out to her, but he didn't. He should have reached out to Jen, but he didn't. This was his mess, and it was his to clean up. No one else's.

The guy's face was clear in Link's mind as he crossed the street and moved into Stevie's apartment building. He couldn't shake the image from his brain, thinking back and forth where he'd seen that guy before. Maybe Jessie had been with him before, or something? No, Link hadn't seen her with anyone else. Maybe he was a regular at the market she worked at. Yeah, that had to be it. Something like that, anyway. Link must have seen him there a few times.

It wasn't important anyway, not as important as getting inside Stevie's apartment. No one was home, that much was certain. Link hadn't knocked, but he had peered through the window beside the door and scanned inside. It looked pretty empty, actually, un-lived in. Just like it had looked before. It was most likely a decoy home, one where Stevie could pretend to live whilst she worked as a double agent. Link had been so blind.
He managed to pick the lock on Stevie's apartment door with ease, actually managing to impress himself in the process. He'd picked locks before, sure, but not for a while and he was pleasantly surprised to discover that he was still able to do it. He closed the door behind him and flicked the light switch to his left, illuminating the empty living room in a harsh white light. Empty. No couch, no coffee table, nothing. The room had been ripped clean, even the wall sockets had been stripped bare. A hasty exit, or something? No, this must have been pre-planned. Maybe Stevie had intended to abandon Link and the others anyway, and Alex's discovery had only accelerated the process. That's what it looked like.

If the apartment hadn't looked lived in before, then it looked downright forgotten now. It felt strange; it felt wrong to be standing in it. Link could hear the echoes of Stevie and his past conversations there, deceit lining the walls and making him feel sick. He was sure if he listened closely he'd be able to hear Rhett's voice too, since he must have been there at some point. Maybe Rhett helped clear the place out. Had he stood where Link was standing? Had he sat on the couch Link had sat on, in the same spot? Link shook his head. He shouldn't think about that. That was old news.

Link made his way into what would have been Stevie's bedroom after wandering around the empty apartment floor, noting the places that used to be occupied and weren't any longer. It was eerie, and a little unnerving. Like visiting a home after someone had passed away and having to clear out their things. Stevie's bedroom had no bed, Link wasn't sure if it ever did since he'd never been in there. There were a couple of boxes on the far side of the room underneath the window sill, some of them open and some of them sealed.

"Forgotten to pack something, Stevie?" Link asked aloud, then kicked himself for it because what was the point? No one was listening, and it certainly wasn't helping Link's mental state by talking to himself. He was bitter about Stevie betraying him, sure, but he was more sour over the fact that he'd let two people close to him deceive him in such a humiliating way. Rhett and Stevie had walked all over him, and Rhett had trampled Link's heart along the way. Now he was just a broken mess, left behind and forgotten. Right?

Link shook his head and leaned down to inspect the boxes left on the floor. His knees cracked as he bent down and sat on the laminate, complaining from misuse over the past day and a half. Link hadn't really moved from his position on Chase's couch, and his legs were doing a good job of reminding him of the fact. The sun shone in through the bedroom window and caused Link to squint down at the boxes, the rays getting in his eyes and heating up his temples. The open boxes were empty, save for a few stray pieces of paperwork at the bottom of them. Nothing important; some things about transfers, and something about issuing vacation time. Stevie's workload, Link presumed. Exciting.

The sealed boxes, however, were another story. Link managed to rip one of them open with his hands, but settled for using his car keys—which he’d found in his jacket pocket, having forgotten to take them out that day he'd jumped from his apartment window—and sliced the other box open. Both boxes were filled to the brim with case files and folders, seemingly discarded pieces of information that Stevie deemed irrelevant. Link spent the good part of an hour searching through them, reading into some things, looking for anything he could use. There were some files detailing the upcoming volleyball tournament—well, today's volleyball tournament. Link had seen some people heading down to the beach when he’d ascended the stairs to Stevie's apartment dressed in shorts and t-shirts, with numbers stuck to their backs. Traffic would be a nightmare, Stevie had told him, which caused Link to frown. He'd certainly chosen the wrong time to escape his house arrest right when the streets were about to become jam packed.

If he had a watch, he would have checked the time to see how long he had until he'd be trapped in Stevie's apartment, waiting for the tournament to end and the crowds to dwindle. Maybe there really
was something to this time thing after all. Link smiled bitterly to himself.

At the bottom of one of the boxes lay a crumpled pile of cables, tangled and muddled up as if discarded without a second thought. Link recognized them as the spare wire Stevie had acquired for use against Rhett. It felt like years ago now in a much simpler decade in time, when in reality it had barely been two weeks ago. He could still see Rhett's face in his mind, burning a hole behind his eyes with its disappointment. Rhett had been hurt by the accusations Link threw at him despite everything that was said being the absolute truth. Well, all but one. The idea that Rhett held any feelings for Link was something still up in the air, hiding among the clouds and threatening to rain on Link at any moment. Link wasn't sure he'd ever be prepared for the real answer, whether it was in his favor or not.

Link sank back onto the floor and brought his knees to his chest, hands clutching at the ball of messed up wires from the box. He closed his eyes and sighed, letting the heat from the sun scold him from the inside out.

"Romantic relationships between assets and handlers are strictly forbidden."

Link blinked in response, fighting a shiver when Rhett nosed along his jaw, “Is that—is that what we are?”

Rhett hummed against his skin, “What, Link?”

“In a romantic relationship,” Link offered, breath quickening and mouth going dry.

“Aren’t we?”

Did he want to escape? Link wasn't sure anymore. He wasn't sure of anything. He looked down at his hands, fingering the chaos of cables he’d taken from the cardboard box at his feet in thought. If he had any hopes of taking Rhett down, he had to have a plan. He had to have a plan now and he needed help. Chase and Alex were on his side...and Morgan and Candace were still missing. Dead, probably, but Link couldn't think about that. He had to get them back. This wasn't about him anymore, or his warped sense of vengeance or redemption for his family, no. This was about saving the lives of his co-workers, saving the lives of his friends. Only then could Link hope to gather the pieces of his life back into some semblance of order so he could move on, so he could breathe freely without the agency towering over him and thwarting his progress.

Huffing out the breathe he didn’t realize he was holding, Link gathered a few files he deemed important enough and rose to his feet. He had to get out of there before the crowds began forming and he was inevitably recognized. McLaughlin had put a price on Link’s life, that was for sure.

Naturally, Link got caught in the traffic on his walk back to Chase's apartment. Holding a box in his arms was both a convenience and a hindrance in that regard, since he could hide his face from view behind the box when he needed to, but it also drew attention to him and made it difficult to maneuver
between parked vehicles. He had to meander through streets and alleyways just to get back to the main street, avoiding people left and right. Why was volleyball so popular, anyway? It was never even considered a proper sport back in North Carolina, at least, not to Link's knowledge. Buies Creek was big on basketball, or soccer, but never something like volleyball. Not that there was a lot of sand to play on where Link grew up, which might have been why it wasn't all that popular.

There were plenty of supporters walking the streets, some with cameras—which Link was careful to avoid—and some with home-made banners. A lot, if not all, of them read *Time Is An Illusion* in multicolored letters, causing Link's stomach to churn. Coincidence? It had to be. Was everyone concerned about there not being enough time in the world, or something? Did Link miss that memo?

Rhett had been the first to mention the concept of time to Link, always prodding at Link to mind his time carefully, and not to waste it. Time had to be monitored, or something, perhaps conquered. Link shook his head, a firm believer that time was a man-made construct. He thought time shouldn't define him or who he wanted to be. It didn't hold him back, but it clearly held Rhett back. And evidently it was important to the volleyball supporters, too, but why?

He'd read in the papers that this tournament was nothing special; a simple public beach volleyball tournament to raise money to fund a local team. Anyone could join in to play, for a small fee. Link thought about it, but he couldn't now, not while he and Rhett were wanted men across the country. The thought brought a strange smile to his face before he could fight it. He and Rhett weren't a couple, not anymore—were they ever really a couple?—but hearing it on the news made it feel more...real to Link. And that was something he shouldn't have been feeling. Not at all.

“Don't waste time,” Someone chanted to his right, making him flinch and pick up his pace, disappearing into a nearby alleyway, “Don't waste time.”

“Don't waste time?” Link echoed to himself, confused. He could hear more people chant it by then. The team's slogan, apparently, of course it was. The world was really against him. It was all a big coincidence, right? But Link couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong...that something bad was about to happen. It felt like everything had been building up to this particular moment in time, and that he was about to walk into a shit storm.

Coincidence, that's what it had to be. Link couldn't deal with anything more.

“Neal, are you kidding me?” Chase's angry voice was on the other side of the line, roaring into Link's ear and making his head ache. He deserved it, though, so he didn't complain. “I told you not to leave the apartment. I've been calling you since four. Where the hell have you been?”

“You're not going to like it.” Link replied, biting the corner of his thumbnail as he peered down at the paperwork on his lap. He had his laptop balanced on the couch beside him, having returned to Chase's apartment only to find it empty. Chase and Alex were apparently out looking for Link, fearing something had happened to him or worse, that Link had turned against them, too.

“Oh, I know I won't like it,” Chase snorted, and Link could hear Alex sigh in the background, “But you're going to tell me anyway.”

“I broke into Stevie's apartment—”

“Jesus, Neal.”
“—and I took a look through some things she left behind.” Link finished after Chase had interrupted him, “The place was cleared out, man. Nothing left. No furniture, nothing.”

“She moved out, right?” Link heard Alex ask on the other side of the line, followed by Chase's hushed confirmation.

“What'd she leave behind?” Chase asked, and Link flicked through some of the files he'd lifted. Nothing too important. Just some things about decryption, cracking codes and other equations. He figured Stevie was attempting to work out Rhett's note before she'd decided to leave them behind. But why? Why wouldn't Stevie have known about Rhett's note?

Had Rhett written that note behind her back? Was he... Did Rhett need Link's help?

“Just some files, and an spare mic from when you guys wired me.” Link replied distantly, mind elsewhere, “I took most of it. I'll show you when you get here.”

“We're on our way back now,” Chase told him, then his voice turned dark, “Don't go anywhere.”

“Yeah,” Link replied, already hanging up the phone. He didn't intend to leave the apartment again, he wasn't stupid nor did he have a death wish. Despite feeling more trapped than he'd ever been, Link settled for burying himself in his laptop and looking over Stevie's files. If she had really been attempting to work out Rhett's note, then maybe she'd gained some headway that Link could look at. But the real issue was why didn't Stevie know the true meaning of the note in the first place? If Rhett had left that note to Link, was it possible that he hadn't told Stevie about it? Maybe Stevie's surprise had been genuine when Link had told her about it, after all.

It only left Link feeling more determined to figure out what the hell Rhett meant by the piece of paper that had haunted Link ever since he'd read it. He fished the damned thing out of his jacket pocket—its permanent home ever since he'd gotten it—and read the text over and over again. It still made no sense to Link.

I am not who you think I am. I'm sorry, Neal, but in time I hope you understand. Wait for me.

Link frowned at the note in his hands. Yeah, Rhett totally wasn't who Link thought he was. He was much, much worse. Shaking his head, Link circled the underlined letters with a pen and then wrote them out underneath the note. L-I-N-K. So it spelled his nickname, but that didn't really get him anywhere. Now he had a keyword with nothing to use it on.

The reverse of the note was even more confusing.

9HEMSETNC DAACAAMC-H 2AVROVNOA IO&ATSAIA

So it was some form of code, right? Link was talented in decryption and cryptography, but he was no expert. He couldn't simply stare at a code and know instantly a way to decipher it. Stevie hadn't appeared to have much luck either.

“Dang it, Rhett,” Link cursed to himself, rubbing a hand over his face before using it to lean on, “Why couldn't you just be more straight forward?”

Link spent around ten minutes going over Stevie's files, searching desperately for something that would lead him closer to Rhett. She had noted down a lot of possible ciphers, all of which Link had looked into but so far had come up blank. Link was capable and determined, but it seemed that Rhett outsmarted him in more ways than one.
The way the reverse of the note was arranged indicated some form of pattern, or order that had to be implemented to the final code. Each chunk of data, in this case letters, were arranged equally and were of equal length. Four sections of letters, each with nine characters in them. That couldn't be a coincidence.

But what did it mean? Were they to be arranged in a certain way? Into a pattern, list, or maybe a column? Link wasn't sure, so he attempted all three.

That's when it all fell into place. Stevie had written down something about transpositions, but Link had skimmed over it, dismissing the idea and underestimating Rhett's intelligence; a big mistake on his part, he'd admit. Rhett was sure as hell smart, but Link wasn't aware he was that smart. A transposition cipher was something Link had dabbled in in the past, but not in great depth or detail. Stevie hadn't exactly looked into it either, presumably for the same reasons as Link hadn't. Maybe she didn't know Rhett as well as she thought, or maybe Link had been the one in the wrong. Maybe Rhett and Stevie weren't as close as meets the eye. Or maybe that was wishful thinking, he didn't know.

In terms of cryptography, transposition ciphers were a means of encryption that used regular characters and morphed them into unintelligible cipher-text. In simpler terms, Rhett's message was originally in legible English that could be understood, but it had been coded in such a way that made it impossible to understand without a means to solve it. That's where Link came in, now that he'd figured it out. Rhett's message was written down in a specific way, right? Four sections of letters, each with nine characters in them. No coincidence.

There were multiple types of transposition ciphers, but only one of them stood out to Link from the get-go. Rhett's message was written in such a way that pointed to the idea of columns being the only way to decipher the text, and that's when Link began to exercise the idea of implementing the column transposition cipher to the mix.

The keyword, being his nickname, Link was crucial in figuring it out. Link could kiss Rhett for leaving it for him, but the thought made his stomach churn. He had to focus, he couldn't think of Rhett's soft lips right now, nor his beard, or the way it felt against Link's face.

No. The task at hand was much more pressing. He numbered the sections of characters first, then numbered the letters L-I-N-K and rearranged them into alphabetical order. This would give him the order in which the four sections of characters would go in.

```
3 1 4 2
L I N K
```

```
1 2 3 4
9HEMSETNC DAACAAMC-H 2AVROVNOA IO&ATSAIA
```

Which then meant the order of the sections would be; 3, 1, 4, 2, leaving him with:

```
3 1 4 2
2AVROVNOA 9HEMSETNC IO&ATSAIA DAACAAMC-H
```

And then, Link could rearrange them into a column to work out the remainder of the code.
“An address?” Link voiced aloud, confused, but also pretty proud of himself. His heart was racing, his brow sweating. He'd figured it out. He'd figured out Rhett's note. It'd only taken him months, but none the less, he'd figured it out. Where was Rhett pointing him? To his location? The Resistance base? Where?

Link immediately dropped the paperwork onto the floor and searched the address on his laptop. It led him to a large, abandoned warehouse on the other side of town—a perfect space for a hidden bunker. A perfect area for the Resistance base. And definitely the location where Rhett's video on the news could have been filmed. But, why? Why would Rhett point Link there? He didn't know, but he didn't care. If that's where Rhett was, that's where Link was going. Frantically, he stepped into his shoes and struggled with the laces, racing against time in case Chase and Alex returned home to stop him. He had to get out of there, and he had to go now. No time for second guessing. If there was a chance to see Rhett, and perhaps save him, then Link would damn well do whatever it took. His only hope was that Morgan and Candace were alive and safe, too, and maybe all four of them could make it out alive. Maybe.

Link itched at his chest absently, feeling discomfort there, but it wasn't important. He made a break for the door, leaving his laptop running. If he left the page open where it was, with the solved cipher in plain view, maybe Chase and Alex would realize and call in backup. If they had to, that was. Hopefully the situation wouldn't end in bloodshed, which was a high possibility.

The second Link's hand touched the door handle to escape the apartment, it turned in his hand and
opened from the other side. The door swung open and Link barely had time to react, the air from the
swing hitting him in the face and splaying his hair over his eyes. But his vision wasn't thwarted
enough that he couldn't recognize the face of the man at the door.

“McLaughlin,” Link spat half in surprise, half in fright, before something collided with the back of
his skull and the room began to spin.

“Hello, Neal,” McLaughlin greeted him, somewhere in a distant circle of Link's mind, before
everything went black.

tbc

Chapter End Notes

Uh-oh, another cliff hanger. What's going through everyone's mind right now? I'd be
happy to hear your thoughts. Sorry for the longer wait this week, but I have currently
become extremely busy and have been unable to update as often as I would like. I may
need to implement a two-week gap between chapters. Not to worry though, since this
story is very close to completion.

If anyone is still confused about how to figure out the Columnar Transposition Cipher,
please let me know and I'll try to explain it better. I tried to limit the amount of
mathematics talk in the story, since I'm aware that maths isn't exactly a favored subject.
(Not for me, I love maths). Fun fact: the address 29 Idaho Ave & Armacost Ave Santa
Monica CA is actually bogus in real life, as for it to be a real address it would need a
four digit number at the beginning.

What would everyone think of a small trivia chapter at the end of this story? It would
include things that I've thrown in that some of you may not have noticed, as well as
some extra information about characters, times and dates, and deleted scenes. Let me
know. I wouldn't want to include something the readers won't enjoy. Other than that,
nothing important to note.

No beta this week either, so as usual I'll get to errors momentarily. (There will be a lot of
mistakes, this wasn't proof read before the upload.) See you next week! Merci et prends
soi de toi!
**TRIGGER WARNING**:
This chapter contains aspects of torture, violence and mild gore. If any of this is triggering for you, please do not read. Thank you for knowing your limits.

“Charles!”

There was a sharp pain in Link’s cheek, his skin stinging like someone had slapped him. He heard his name again, louder this time. His vision blurred. His skin was on fire and he could feel the assaulted side of his face turn red.

“Wake up.”

When Link opened his eyes he couldn’t see anything. The irrational part of his brain hollered at him, making him want to kick and scream and tear at his eyes. He was blind. This was it. He’d been hit too many times in the head and this was the result. He couldn't see anything. He blinked furiously, holding back the tears he knew would soon be forming at the corners of his stinging eyes. But as his retinas adjusted to the lack of light, Link could just make out a faint pattern in front of him. Was there...was there a bag over his head?

That would explain it. He wasn't blind, no, and a shaking sigh of relief escaped him once he realized it. It came out of his mouth as more of a choke; a strangled cry of ease. If he believed in something close to a God he would have thanked them, but not today.
Someone was standing by his side but he didn't know who. Something collided with his right cheek, the same cheek that had been stinging before. A hand, Link presumed, but who did it belong to?

“Wake up, Charles,” A voice ordered, and Link took a second to recognize it. McLaughlin. Link swirled saliva around in his mouth, tasting something bitter and metallic. He slid his tongue along his bottom lip and felt the tenderness there, furrowing his brow in confusion which quickly transformed to anger. His lip was busted and there was blood in his mouth. Had he taken a beating whilst he was unconscious? What kind of people kicked a guy when he was down?

McLaughlin's kind of people, evidently.

“Don't touch me.” Link ordered despite his voice being groggy from misuse. How long had he been out? His temples throbbed from a searing headache and there was a ringing in his ears that made it hard to focus on other sounds around him. He managed, though, since McLaughlin's menacing voice was piercing enough that he couldn't ignore it.

“Rise and shine, agent Neal,” McLaughlin's laugh tore through Link from somewhere to his right, sounding closer than he probably was. He wasn't the only one in the room, that much Link could be certain of. There was the sound of a gun cocking to his left, hushed chatter on an earpiece, too. Where was he? How did they find him?

“Take the bag off of him.” McLaughlin ordered, and after a second the bag was pulled roughly from Link's head and caused him to jerk his neck back in surprise. He grimaced at the brightness of the room, squeezing his eyes closed and panting from both panic and adrenaline. He had to get out of there; he had to find Rhett and Stevie and Morgan and Candace. He couldn't do this; he didn't have time for it. McLaughlin sure could pick his moments.

There was a man standing to Link's left with a machine gun in his arms and a stern look on his face. He looked younger than Link, but his face was hard and his eyes were creased like he was wise for his age. Link had never seen him before, not even at the agency. Promising. McLaughlin was dressed in some variance of his usual attire; a gray pinstriped suit jacket and trousers, with a white shirt and light blue tie. Overdressed much, Link ached to say, but he wasn't sure his lip could take another swing. He wasn't sure his teeth could withstand the impact, either. Without a word, he swirled saliva around in his mouth and spat out blood in the direction of McLaughlin.

In an instant, there was a violent grip on his hair as the armed guard yanked Link's head backwards. His face was angled towards the ceiling. He let out a startled cry in pain, looking up at the bright light in the middle of the room. Evidently, spitting at his captor was not an intelligent thing to do, but screw him.

“That's enough,” McLaughlin said calmly, having dodged Link's spit gracefully. He actually seemed a little impressed that Link had the audacity to attempt such an assault on him. Bastard. The grip in Link's hair loosened and he jerked forwards, away from the offending grasp.

“How much do you pay these guys, huh?” Link asked, watching the guard instead of watching McLaughlin. As if not looking at the guy would be more disrespectful than spitting in his face.

“Shut your mouth, lover boy,” The guard barked in response, cocking his gun menacingly, “Or I'll show you how much I get paid.”

Link didn't respond, settling for looking up at the guy glumly. He must have looked like a wreck with his hands tied around his back, strapped to a chair with a busted lip. His chest ached in multiple places, too. Broken (or at least bruised) ribs as well then, he could assume.
The room he was in was small and decrepit, like no one had been there in a long time. Where was he? Why had McLaughlin taken him there? What was going on? Placed dead ahead of Link, as if deliberately, was a large computer. It looked like something that would be found in a space station, or something. Or somewhere incredibly old. Link's head was swimming. None of it made any sense. Why was he there? And where exactly was 'there', anyway?

“You have no idea what's happening, do you?” McLaughlin asked Link, circling him like a lion observing its prey. Link felt vulnerable, stripped bare and unable to defend himself. His hands twitched behind his back, and he wished his nails weren't so blunt so that he could attempt to untie the knot of rope around his wrists. His silence acted as his answer, and McLaughlin shook his head with a menacing smirk, coming to a stop just shy of Link's left side. “You're as clueless as Rhett is.”

Link snapped to attention, head whipping around to glare at McLaughlin. “What?”

“I thought that would get your attention.” McLaughlin replied, a sick smile on his face that made Link want to claw at him and tear him open. Would there even be anything inside? A hollow shell of a man, no doubt, nothing but darkness in the center. “You deserve each other.”

“Where is he?” Link demanded, shaking his shoulders in attempt to loosen the rope around his wrists. It was only then he noticed that his feet were bound, too. He was really trapped, and at gunpoint. There was no escaping this. There was no escaping his fate. He always knew Rhett would be the cause of his downfall, didn't he? It was only a matter of time. Time was everything, after all. Link understood that now.

McLaughlin appeared to hesitate, but Link wasn't entirely sure if he caught it or not because in the next moment the taller man was gesturing for his goon to come closer. Link braced himself for impact that didn't come, having thought he was about to get beat on. Instead, the armed guard busied himself with activating the boulder of a computer in front of Link, side-stepping around his boss to do so. Link's brow furrowed in response, sending a sharp pain along his forehead and scalp. Maybe his forehead was bleeding, too, but there wasn't any blood in his eyes so he couldn't be sure.

“Rhett thought he was so clever,” McLaughlin started, zoning in on Link so much so that he felt cornered despite being positioned in the center of the room. McLaughlin placed both of his hands on either side of Link, fingers curling around the armrests of the chair he was strapped to. The taller man leaned down, getting face to face with Link, eye level. McLaughlin's breath smelled of mint, but the undertones of cigarette smoke were there. Smoker, figures. “Going behind my back, sneaking around and falling for one of his own agents. Embarrassing, really. He was always something of a disappointment.”

Link readied himself to spit in McLaughlin's face, but the man pressed a firm hand over Link's mouth before he got the chance. Link fumed silently, unable to do anything but glare up at McLaughlin and hiss against his hand. The idea of biting it was tempting, but not appealing.

“I'll admit he convinced me for a while that it was purely to keep you from discovering our true intentions,” McLaughlin continued as if nothing had happened, keeping his hand firmly covering Link's mouth, “But then he started missing meetings, making excuses, you know. Typical red flags.”

Link was shocked at the air of nonchalance surrounding McLaughlin, as if the topic of conversation wasn't the most serious and ominous thing in their lives right now. McLaughlin glanced behind himself, as if checking the status of the computer, before returning his gaze back to Link. “And in the meetings he would attend, he'd be taciturn and morose. Out of character. So, I contrived a plan. It wasn't difficult considering where you park your car, not even in a garage. It was a simple task of manipulating the engine to your rental, knowing exactly when and where that pile of crap would give out on you.”
Link blinked in response, his mind going a mile a minute. He shook his head in response despite himself, lips brushing against the calloused skin of McLaughlin's palm. McLaughlin had been responsible for messing with Link's car. Why? It felt like such a long time ago now, but it wasn't really. Had McLaughlin planned for that group of people to attack him too? Link was almost a goner that night.

McLaughlin removed his hand from Link's mouth once he was sure he'd been stunned to silence. Link remained quiet, watching, waiting, anticipating McLaughlin's next move. "I planted those agents to take you out if they could. It wasn't a test for you — if it had been, you'd be dead by now," McLaughlin paused to look down at Link, as if disappointed, prompting Link to fight the urge to stick his tongue out like a child, "It was a test for Rhett. I told him what I'd done, and what was going to happen to you. Ain't never seen that boy charge so fast outta the office."

Link blinked slowly in response, letting the words sink in one by one. McLaughlin tried to have Link killed. That's how Rhett knew exactly where Link was that night, and that's why his arrival had been so perfectly timed.

"Were you following me?"

There was a deliberate pause as Link looked at Rhett under the dim lighting. The taller man's expression remained hard until he said, finally, "No. I was in the area. I got a feeling."

It was more than a feeling, though, and Link knew that now. Rhett had saved Link's life that night, but why? Out of guilt? Or was McLaughlin, for once, telling the truth? Did Rhett really fall for Link? McLaughlin tried to have Link killed to test Rhett, after all. All Link had to do was listen and maybe he'd find out why.

"He got to you just in time, didn't he?" McLaughlin asked almost mockingly, "Came out of nowhere?"

Link's silence was enough of a confirmation. He was breathing heavily, half in anger, half in fear. Just how long had McLaughlin been controlling Rhett like that? And why had Rhett allowed it to continue? Rhett had been angry that night, more furious than Link had ever seen before, but that was the night they'd really bonded. That was the night of the BB gun battle, for lack of a better label, where they acted like kids and Rhett had almost kissed him. They'd laid next to one another and fallen asleep, Rhett actually being there when Link woke up. Perhaps McLaughlin had frightened Rhett more than Link could ever understand. Maybe Rhett hadn't come to terms with his feelings for Link before that, but the idea of losing Link only set them in stone. Maybe Rhett really had fallen for Link, after all.

The idea should have warmed Link from head to toe, and it did a little, but mostly Link was filled with a feeling of dread that he couldn't contain. He made Rhett weak, didn't he? Link was the reason Rhett had been so distant, all of his attempts to leave now made sense. Link had stopped him every single time, and for what? To torture Rhett, albeit unintentionally.

No. Rhett loved Link and Link loved him right back. Nothing could change that, not even if Rhett attempted to distance himself from their relationship. What they had between them was raw and powerful, making the hairs on Link's arms stand up at the thought. No one had done that to him before, not even his late wife, as disrespectful as it sounded. Link shook his head because Rhett was still a monster. He was the monster that Link had fallen in love with.

"A waste; both of you," McLaughlin interrupted his thought process with his shrill voice, eliciting a grunt from Link, "Rhett was never the same after what happened back in '98."
Link's gaze hardened, his heartbeat becoming irregular inside his chest. 1998, the year Link's life fell apart. The year Rhett tore Link's life apart. What did McLaughlin mean by that? Rhett was never the same? Link opened his mouth to respond, but the guard beat him to it, letting McLaughlin know that the computer was up and running. McLaughlin leaned away from Link and let him breathe, albeit shakily.

Link got a good look at the screen before him once McLaughlin had stepped out of view. Suddenly he found himself wishing he had turned blind. The computer displayed a surveillance feed of some sort, high quality and in color, but it didn't make Link feel any better. There was a churning in his gut, a searing heat rising in his throat as he fought hard to keep what little food he had in his stomach down.

“Is there an audio feed?” McLaughlin asked, somewhere far away and irrelevant.

A moment later, after a couple of high pitched beeps and the sound of pressing keys, there was finally audio attached to the feed. A deep grunt in pain assaulted Link's ears, making him want to cover them and squeeze his eyes shut tightly. But he couldn't — all he could do was watch.

There were three or four people in the room, Link didn't have the patience to count. Rhett was there, but he was in terrible shape. In a similar predicament to Link, Rhett's hands and feet were bound, but his arms were tied in front of him instead of behind the chair he was perched on. His shoulders were slumped, his chest heaving, his hair ruffled, askew and matted to his forehead. It was wet from sweat and blood. Sanguine liquid dripped from the side of Rhett's temple, soaking into his beard and coloring it, making him look much more sinister than it should have.

Link jolted forward, the force of it causing the legs of his chair to wobble in response. “Rhett,” he said as if maybe somehow Rhett could hear him. He didn't, or if he did he didn't show it, “Rhett!”

As if on cue, Rhett was struck in the face by one of his captors who was dressed in an entirety of black, unarmed. The others around the room, however, were holding machine guns in their arms similar to the guard next to Link. What was happening? Link thought...he thought Rhett was safe. What was going on?

Rhett lifted his head after the blow to glare up at the surveillance feed, like he knew it was there. Maybe he did. Was Link under surveillance too? Rhett was panting, his lips parted and bloody, his teeth stained a dark maroon. Dried blood was crusted around his nostrils, making Link wonder just how long he'd been in this scenario. How long had he been suffering and Link didn't know? A part of Link was pleased it was happening, because he knew Rhett deserved it, didn't he? Link's life was untimely ripped from him by Rhett's cold hands, and this acted as some warped form of redemption. But the other part of Link, the larger part, growing larger every moment, dreaded the next blow Rhett was about to receive.

“Where's the rest of your people?” A guard demanded, striking Rhett in the face once more, making Link dig his fingernails into his palms. Rhett swirled blood around in his mouth and spat it out onto the ground, thankfully not at his captor, since that wouldn't have ended well. Link had learned as much already.

“Not here,” Rhett responded, sound rough and broken, tugging at Link's heart, “Or are you blind?”

It was evidently not the right thing to say, since one of the female guards decided to strike Rhett in the back of the head with the butt of her gun in response.

“Don't be a smart ass, McLaughlin,” She barked, sounding a lot like Stevie when she got irritated, “Tell us what we want to know, and we won't hurt him.”
In an instant, Rhett's eyes opened wide and he appeared to gain his composure, like it had been an act this entire time. “You don’t—”

“Yeah, we do. He's ours now.” The original guard interrupted, then pointed towards the surveillance camera, prompting Rhett to look up at it, his eyes wide and frightened. Link felt his heart ricochet inside his chest, threatening to escape his rib cage. “We've got an audience, schmuck.”

The hesitation was evident in Rhett's expression, looking like a lost child; incredibly innocent and vulnerable, stripped bare for Link to witness. It felt wrong; it felt like Link was intruding. He shouldn’t see Rhett like this. Rhett wasn't weak. Link made Rhett weak, but they weren't together anymore. Rhett couldn't afford to be weak, not now, not in this situation.

“You shouldn't have left your lover that note, nephew,” McLaughlin sneered, placing emphasis on the lover in his statement. He was leaning forward, a finger pressed onto the keyboard to allow himself to speak to the other room. Link's breath caught in his throat, his shoulders tensing and chest seizing up. They were going to die, weren't they? They were in the way, they were liabilities. McLaughlin had no reason to keep them breathing. “But that wasn't your first mistake, was it?”

Rhett didn't respond, but Link could see the anxiety rolling off of his shoulders in waves, shaking his entire body to the core. Rhett was scared; no, Rhett was terrified. And that terrified Link.

“Don't touch him, you sick son of a—” Rhett began, but his insult was cut short when the guard shadowing him landed a quick punch to his solar plexus, disabling him and eliciting a wheeze from his throat. Link struggled in his chair, attempting to free himself. McLaughlin raised a hand in warning and forced Link to keep dangerously still.

“Rhett,” Link croaked, which was obviously the wrong move as he received a sharp slap to the face after he'd spoken. It knocked the wind out of Link, and he bit his lip as his head snapped to the side from the force of the blow.

“Keep your mouth closed, Neal,” McLaughlin ordered, then added spitefully, “Or should I say Link.”

Rhett was staring straight at Link, or at least it felt that way. Link watched him, panicked, wanting nothing more than to break free and rescue him. That wasn't possible, though, and Link was having a difficult time coming to terms with that. They were both cornered and vulnerable, held down by armed men and women with no means of escaping. Link had drawn the short straw, since McLaughlin was also shadowing him. The man himself, responsible for everything, really.

Link knew it had been Rhett who chose to bomb the building with his family still inside, but it didn't make any sense. Why would Rhett carry out such an act, especially under orders from the agency? Under orders from McLaughlin himself, no doubt. There was something missing, this puzzle was missing a vital piece, and Link wasn't sure if he wanted to find it.

“That note you left might have made you feel smart, nephew, but it only led to your apprehension,” McLaughlin continued his speech, acting as if he had never been interrupted. Link struggled to keep up with him, too many things to focus on at once. He couldn't breath properly, he couldn't think straight. Rhett was going to die, and Link along with him if they didn't do something.

Where was Stevie?

McLaughlin turned to Link suddenly, a dark gleam in his eye, “You led us straight to him, Lincoln. Great work.”
Link blinked. “What?”

“I knew I could count on you,” McLaughlin smiled, bearing his teeth and looking more and more like some kind of super villain waiting to be struck down. If only Link could be the one to do it. “Did you think we wouldn't find you? You're a wanted man. Surely you knew better than break into Miss Levine's apartment.”

Rhett twitched visibly on the screen in front of Link, as if the words physically hurt him to hear. Where was Stevie?

“Well is she?” Link demanded, finding enough courage to tear his gaze away from Rhett to glare up at McLaughlin.

“She's alive and well.” McLaughlin told him and it sounded sincere, but Link had never been a great judge of character, “And not present, unfortunately. Your lover won't give up her location. Loyalty, and all that.”

“Don't tell him,” Link told Rhett, because to hell with McLaughlin and his threats. If Stevie was really working with Rhett, then that meant she was working against McLaughlin, right? He was the real enemy here. Right now, anyway, but later would be another story if Link lived to tell the tale. McLaughlin did nothing but roll his eyes in response, decidedly letting Link off the hook for speaking without permission. Rhett shook his head once, firmly, on the surveillance feed to indicate that he'd heard Link, but other than that he remained perfectly motionless.

Rhett looked dangerous. He looked feral. He looked like a murderer, all beaten and bloody like that. Link fought the urge to squeeze his eyes closed and shield them from the sight.

“I had an agent tail you from Miss Levine's apartment afterward you left, which led us to locating your hideout. It's only natural you'd seek solace at a friend's place.” McLaughlin continued, and Link got the impression that it was some kind of veiled threat against Chase and Alex. Before he could call the taller man out on it, McLaughlin spoke again, “I've got to hand it to you, you cracked that cipher just in time for us to apprehend you and locate the Resistance base.”

So, that was the address for the base, after all. Rhett had left it for him. Why? Did he...did he want to hand himself over to Link? No, that wasn't right, because he'd left that note weeks prior to Link even catching wind of the Resistance and their dealings. Perhaps Rhett wanted to let Link in on it, to join the Resistance and lead it with him, just like the news had told the public. Or something like that. None of it made any sense.

“Don't listen to him, Link,” Rhett interrupted Link's internal turmoil, the voice of reason out of a bad bunch, “You couldn't have known. It's not your fault.”

Link opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out. No stutter, no sharp intake of breath, nothing. He'd been so stupid. Breaking into Stevie's apartment had been eye-opening, and it had been enlightening enough for Link to not regret the decision, but now...now things were fifty shades of screwed. He'd led McLaughlin straight to the Resistance, he'd led McLaughlin straight to Rhett. Link was responsible for Rhett's incoming demise, wasn't he? He was responsible for both of their pain and suffering, even if Rhett might have deserved it, just a little bit.

“You're right, nephew,” McLaughlin actually agreed with him, causing both Rhett and Link to look at him in shock, “It isn't Lincoln's fault, it's yours.”

McLaughlin proceeded to order the armed guard standing next to Link to keep his finger on the keyboard of the computer, so Rhett could still hear McLaughlin's voice as he advanced towards
Link narrowed his eyes in response, giving a feeble attempt to shake himself free of the rope around his wrists, but failed miserably, naturally.

“It's Rhett's fault, you know that, don't you?” McLaughlin asked, then waited patiently for Link to respond.

“Go to hell,” Link spat back, gaining a shake of the head from the man now towering over him.

“His mistake was getting too close to you,” McLaughlin paused long enough for a grimace to decorate his features, “Falling in love with you knowing it'd be your end. He's selfish, don't you see? He destroys everything he touches, just like he destroyed your family.”

There was a beat of silence as McLaughlin's words sank in, stabbing Link in the chest. He felt himself bleed out for all to see. Rhett remained silent, nothing but his ragged breathing sounding in Link's ears from the surveillance feed. One of the guards cocked their gun. McLaughlin whistled once, loud and sharp in Link's ear. A command of some sort, as two of the guards on screen gripped at Rhett's arms and held him back, another guard yanking his hair and bearing his neck to the camera. That's when Link noticed the collar around Rhett's neck, a thin black contraption stretching around his freckled skin with a small, red light flickering at the front.

“What?” Link thought aloud, “What is that?” But did he really want to know?

“Whatever you do, don't listen to him—” Rhett was cut off by a sharp jab to the chest. Link could feel the blow against his own skin, a small area at the front of his chest burning.

“Quiet, nephew,” McLaughlin spoke, sounding disappointed, like this was nothing but a family gathering and Rhett had refused to wash his hands before dinner. He turned to the armed guard at the computer and instructed; “Show me the second feed.”

In a moment, the screen flickered and Link felt panic rise within him. He could no longer see Rhett; the video had changed and the bearded man was no longer in sight. What if they were hurting him when Link wasn't looking, or worse? He struggled in his chair, gaining McLaughlin's attention. Sweat was dripping from Link's brow and into his eyes. The new surveillance feed was equally as terrifying as the last; it showed both Morgan and Candace bound much like Rhett and Link were, but Candace had a rag trapped inside her mouth. Maybe she hadn't stopped screaming. Likely. Terrifying.

No sign of Stevie, or anyone else for that matter, which meant she was either safe and fleeing the country at this point, or that she was working with McLaughlin all along.

“You sick son of a—” Link started, but stopped as McLaughlin raised his hand offensively, readying to strike Link before he finished his thought. “Why are you doing this? Those are your people, your agents.”

“Wrong,” McLaughlin replied, lowering his hand, “They know nothing. They're simply Mythical agents. Nothing more and nothing less. That makes them dispensable.”

“Why are you doing this?” Link repeated, voice hoarse. Morgan looked miserable, more distraught than Link had ever seen him. Candace didn't even look conscious. Link noticed two similar collars strapped around their necks, just like Rhett's. A quick stretch of his own neck ruled out the idea that Link might have had one on too, but he didn't. What were they for? Were they keeping tabs on the hostages, or something?

“Tell me, Lincoln,” McLaughlin began, forcing Link to look at him by gripping at his chin, “You
care about your friends, don't you?"

Link raised an eyebrow in response, confused, but deep in the back of his mind he could tell where this was going. And he didn't like it. He felt his stomach churn again, but he wasn't against the idea of vomiting anymore. If he did, he'd be sure to aim it at McLaughlin's offending hands.

"Answer me."

Link stared straight ahead, eyes focused on the screen before him in some warped act of disobedience, like not looking McLaughlin in the eye would be insulting in some way. Maybe it was. “Go to hell.”

“You've got some mouth on you, boy,” McLaughlin replied, shaking his head in disappointment. To hell with him, Link thought. The air around him felt cold, pricking his skin like a thousand tiny needles, conjuring goosebumps along his arms and neck. But he knew the room wasn't cold. It was, in fact, incredibly warm and stuffy, something that was notable given the sweat dripping down the brow of the guard shadowing Link. From pressure, or nerves? Adrenaline, maybe. Certainly not from remorse, no, for anyone working with McLaughlin were clearly too warped for their own good, and weren't capable of feeling guilt.

Did that mean Stevie lacked humanity, too? Where was she? Link clung to the minuscule shred of hope in his gut that maybe, just maybe, Stevie was safe and working on a plan to rescue Rhett. But it didn't seem likely, Link thought with a tight grimace, noticed by McLaughlin who registered his expression as distaste at his earlier remark.

The man in question shed his suit jacket which left him in nothing but a gray waistcoat, the small, blue handkerchief poking out from his breast pocket only enhancing the obnoxiousness of his attire. It suited him. McLaughlin reeked of tobacco and spice, mingled with sweat and adrenaline, prompting Link to fight the urge to dry heave as the guy towered over him. McLaughlin gripped at Link's jaw, forcing his gaze, staring him down like a wild animal. It was a relief McLaughlin hadn't been foaming at the mouth, which didn't exactly seem all that far fetched now.

“Show both surveillance feeds,” McLaughlin told the guard behind them, not once breaking eye contact with Link. Once both Morgan and Rhett's torment could be heard, McLaughlin smirked to himself and Link felt bile rise in his stomach, scolding the raw flesh of his throat. “You might think you're brave by standing up to me. Think you'll be the bigger man and triumph over evil, right?”

“That's not—”

“This isn't a movie, boy. You aren't the hero and neither is Rhett. He's not some damsel in distress, and you aren't going to save him. He can't be saved.” McLaughlin acted like Link hadn't interrupted him, doing nothing but dig his manicured nails into Link's stubble-ghosted cheeks, leaving crescent shaped red marks across the rugged flesh, “Look at him. You think he's worth saving?”

Link tore his gaze away from McLaughlin to peer at the screen in front of him. Rhett was in a similar position to before, only now he was more hunched over, looking defeated as he heaved in ragged and pained breaths. Link's heart ached to help him, to call out to him, but he did nothing. Instead, he returned his gaze to McLaughlin and grit his teeth. “You don't?”

“My nephew is destructive, among other things,” McLaughlin replied, prompting Rhett to look up from where he was slouched in the chair he was tied to, his eyes looking glazed over and only semi-aware of his surroundings. “Look at what he's done to you. You were doomed the second you were assigned as his agent. You've had nothing but problems since you met him, haven't you?”
“Don’t let him manipulate you, Link—” Rhett began, sounding rough and slurring his words, however his sentence was cut short by an abrupt slap to the face, graciously provided by the female guard shadowing him. It looked like something from a comic book or television show, and if Link were feeling humorous he might have thought he could see stars circling Rhett's head.

“Answer me, boy.”

Link's eyes narrowed in response. Rhett had caused him problems, alright. An abundance of stress and complications trailed behind him like a veil, so much so that Link's head felt heavy whenever he moved. But was Rhett entirely accountable for that? Link had gotten himself this far, getting in too deep with the enemy and fraternizing with Rhett despite being fully aware of the rules against it.

“You have friends back home, back in North Carolina, don’t you?” McLaughlin asked, angling Link's face toward him and forcing his attention, “What'd you suppose they think of you now, knowing that you had been working with the enemy all along?”

Link felt his heart deflate, thinking of Jen and what she must be thinking of him now. Nothing good, that was for sure. He could picture her sweet face in his mind, riddled with sadness and guilt, worry framing her brow in response to his lack of communication. He could picture the look of shock on her face upon watching the news, upon discovering that Link had been the enemy all along — untrue, but the rest of the country wasn't aware of that. Guilt washed over Link like a suffocating wave, and suddenly he couldn't remember how to swim. He was swept away with the tide, perhaps welcoming the calming release the darkness offered. McLaughlin was getting to him, and Link was letting him.

He had to do something.

“And Rhett McLaughlin is worth more to you than your old friends?” McLaughlin continued his questioning, continued his manipulation, knowing fine well that Link's mind was in shambles. “Look at him,” he moved out of Link's way, allowing him full view of the screen before him, “Your wife, your family, your happiness; gone. Your hopes to settle down and live a regular life; gone. Because of him.”

Link felt tears well up at the corner of his eyes, eyelids stinging with anger. His arms were shaking in their binds, aching to tear free and break something. Or someone, but he didn't know who. Because McLaughlin was right, wasn't he? Rhett had taken that away from him; Rhett had robbed Link of any semblance of normality in his life. Rhett had robbed Link of the love of his life without a second thought, hadn't he?

“You see that now, don’t you?” McLaughlin asked from somewhere to Link's right, sounding farther and farther away, “He's trouble. He's nothing. Look at him.”

McLaughlin clicked his tongue once, and in response the female guard who had been shadowing Rhett grabbed a fistful of his hair and yanked his head back, forcing Rhett to look straight at the surveillance camera. Link could see the faint line of bruising along his ex-handler's kin, just stretching around the collar around his neck. How long had Rhett been wearing that thing? How long had Candace and Morgan been wearing theirs? And why didn't Link have one?

Link looked straight at Rhett's cold eyes, seeing nothing in them. Rhett looked drained of emotion as well as drained of energy. He could barely keep himself upright, swaying even in the guard's grasp. Link's brow furrowed in response as McLaughlin's words echoed through his mind. It's his fault. He did this to you. Link frowned harder, blinking furiously. He's nothing. He's trouble.

Link felt his fingertips begin to tingle with anger, sensing heat bubble within him and stretch across
his chest, radiating along his biceps and forearms until his palms began to sweat.

“I'm offering you an out, Charles,” McLaughlin continued, re-attracting Link's swayed attention, “A social experiment, if you will. Curiosity, and all that.”

“You know what they say about curiosity.” Morgan barked back, re-announcing himself to Link who had momentarily forgotten his presence, too emerged in his own mind.

McLaughlin pinched the bridge of his nose in an exasperated manner, like Morgan's voice was giving him a headache. Link understood; he'd been in a similar predicament when it came to Morgan's voice. Or Morgan's actions. Or just Morgan, really. But now wasn't the time for that.

“What are you talking about?” Link managed, but had to clear his throat loudly after speaking having not realized how choked up he'd become. McLaughlin spared him a bored glance.

“Link, whatever he says,” Rhett's voice was the one who answered, sounding strained and attracting Link's attention to the screen he occupied. Rhett’s eyes were clouded and watering, red around the rims and caused a swelling in Link's heart.

“Yes?” McLaughlin interrupted, eliciting a glare from Link, “What, nephew? Are you going to beg for your life?”

Beg for his life?

“Link,” Rhett continued as if his uncle hadn't spoken, panting with every sentence, “Don't listen to him. He's doing what he does best. He'll manipulate you. Make you do what he wants. Don't —”

“Silence.” McLaughlin ordered, and abruptly Rhett stopped speaking, as if stunned quiet. Link's heart was in his throat. “Even when he's down, he still cannot accept the blame that is rightfully his. You see, Lincoln?”

Link's head was swimming. He was torn between what both men were saying. Both of them could be manipulating him somehow, couldn't they? Who could he trust? Rhett, a distant circle of his mind screamed, of course he trusted Rhett. But did he trust Rhett enough to risk his own life? McLaughlin clearly had the upper hand, but that begged the question: what did he plan on doing with all this power?

A social experiment, he said. What did that mean? What did any of it mean? Link had to get out of there. He had to get Rhett out of there. Candace and Morgan, too.

After a beat of tense silence, McLaughlin spoke again after beckoning the armed guard. The guard, miraculously, untied Link's hands without a word. Link had half the mind to lash out and strike the guy, but it wasn't wise. There was a gun on him, and McLaughlin looked like he could give one hell of a beating if someone asked for it. Link didn't stand a chance. So he did nothing, like a coward. Like usual. Helpless.

His wrists were stinging, the flesh torn at the base of his palms and sporting thick red lines. He rubbed at them absently, keeping his attention on the screen ahead of him, watching Rhett with a concerned eye. The bearded man looked determined, evidently having gained a portion of consciousness in the past five minutes. His eyes were no longer clouded and were instead sharp and focused, scanning the room for an exit. At least that's what Link assumed. Rhett had to be scanning the area and judging his options, playing out scenarios in his mind should he attempt an escape. Link should have done the same in hindsight. Stupid.

“You could make this all go away,” McLaughlin informed Link, pushing a small device into his lap.
Link looked down at the device questionably, eyes blurry and struggling to focus. It fit in the palm of Link's hand, small a rectangular object with an aerial sticking out at the top similar to an old cell phone Link used to own. In the middle of the device was a dial of some sort, currently aimed to the left, which was labeled “inactive”. If the dial were to be turned, it'd be activated. But what did it activate, exactly?

“You see that collar around Rhett's neck?” McLaughlin continued, pointing at the screen and prompting Link to look, “And the collars around your friends' necks? Those are electronic collars containing an explosive. They can't be removed without this skeleton key,” McLaughlin paused to show Link the key, which looked a lot like a simple house key compared to what one might imagine holds a person's fate in its metal, “and if they're tampered with, they're set to self destruct. Do you understand?”

Link's face had paled considerably. That's what was going on. Rhett was in danger. Rhett was going to die, wasn't he? Link was going to be forced to watch the man he loved die. He would have his life ripped from him again, just like before. Was this real? Was this really happening?

Sweat dripped from Link's brow and into his eyes, momentarily blinding him and forcing him to blink furiously in response to clear his vision. Suicide collars. Explosive collars. What was this? A horror movie? Link's hands began to shake, but if it was in fear or anger, he couldn't tell. He almost dropped the device from his hands, settling for resting it on his twitching thighs.

“That device in your lap controls one of the collars.” McLaughlin continued with a dark smile on his lips, knowing exactly what he was doing and knowing exactly how it would affect Link. “You're clever enough to figure out which one, aren't you?”

“Neal, don't let him talk you into anything.” Morgan's voice rang in Link's ears, startling him and causing the device to slip between his legs and onto the floor with a loud clatter. McLaughlin hissed in response to being interrupted, flicking the surveillance camera screen to monitor Morgan's movements. The man in question still had his hands and feet bound. Candace was conscious and her eyes were watering, but she kept quiet, not even bothering to attempt to communicate with Link. He didn't blame her.

“It isn't very wise to piss of a guy who holds your life in his hands.” McLaughlin threatened icily, silencing Morgan effectively. McLaughlin retrieved an identical device from his pants pocket and ran his thumb over the dial. Link held his breath, terrified. If Link's device controlled Rhett's collar, then McLaughlin's must control Morgan's, perhaps Candace's too. The armed guard shadowing the room picked the fallen device off of the ground and placed it back into Link's hands without a word. Link's hands shook around the piece of tech, squeezing too hard and hoping he'd break it. Would that trigger Rhett's collar? He couldn't think about it.

“Now,” McLaughlin started, grabbing Link's attention and returning the surveillance screens back to Rhett and his room of guards, “You'll notice we have identical triggers. You know how these work. My sources tell me you used them during your time in North Carolina, correct? Yes or no.”

Link hesitated as he looked down at the device, recognizing the pale beige color of the dial and choking back a sob. “Yes.”

“And you know how it works?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me how.”
Link closed his eyes painfully and heaved in a shaking breath, struggling to find the words. He knew how this worked. Remote triggers to bombs tended to work similarly, if not identically, to one another regardless of their complexity. One click and boom, an explosion. Simple, clean, quick. Messy. Fire and heat, screaming and crying. Link's body shuddered.

“Tell me, boy.” McLaughlin prodded at him, tearing Link from his nightmares. He struggled with the words on his tongue, slurring them like a stumbling child.

“Turn the dial,” He managed, gesturing with his hand the movement and flinching when he pictured Rhett's collar go off. He cleared his throat before he could continue. “Turning the dial triggers a controlled explosion.”

“You hold a great deal of power in your hands, Agent Neal,” McLaughlin boasted, as if he was impressed that Link had managed to hold it together for this long. But Link was cracking at the seams, torn and frayed at the edges. He glared at McLaughlin, but something in the back of his mind was telling him this was the right decision. This was his redemption. “You hold Rhett McLaughlin's life in your hands, just like he held the life of your family's. How does it feel?”

Link's mind was on fire, torn between what was right and what was wrong. Where was the line drawn? Where did senseless killing and revenge blend together and become one? He could kill Rhett right here and there, couldn't he? He could kill Rhett and get his revenge; he could avenge his wife's life right here and there and be done with it. His heart swelled in his chest, grief bubbling inside his ribs and threatened to spill over. Not only grief, no, there was an intensity in his chest that he had grown used to feeling over the past months, but it didn't have a name. Or did it?

That same intensity he felt whenever Rhett was around, whenever his ex-handler touched him or called his name, his nickname. The intimacy of Rhett's hand in his, their fingers gracing each other, gently interlinked as they lay on the sand and gazed up at the night sky. Link's stomach did a somersault. But there was also anger in his chest when Rhett would keep things from him, or keep Link in the dark for his own good, only for the gruesome truths to come out in the light and screw him over. They were both done for. No escaping it now, Link figured, regardless of how he felt.

Link loved Rhett. Link loved Rhett more than it was healthy to love somebody. Link was addicted to that complicated and irrational love Rhett offered him, and allowed it to encompass and swallow him whole until all he could see and breathe was Rhett. And look where it landed him. Rhett's sorry life in the palm of his hands. Link was balancing on a razor's edge with no escape in sight. Not now, not ever. Maybe McLaughlin was right. Maybe.

“Righteous.” Link replied, for lack of a better word. Holding Rhett's life in his hands did feel righteous. A sick sense of karma, or something. Rhett looked up at the camera with dark eyes, but Link could just make out the glimpse of fear in them. Rhett was terrified, and that terrified Link.

“Do you think Rhett felt righteous the afternoon he murdered those innocent people? Your family included?” McLaughlin asked, but he didn't really expect an answer and Link didn't have one to give, “I present you with an opportunity here, Lincoln, a chance to right the wrongs in this world. You hold his life in your hands. A simple turn of that dial will trigger the explosive inside his collar, and it'll all be over. You will finally have your closure.”

“Closure?” Link echoed, mostly to himself. His eyes were glued to the device in his hands, fingertips twitching in response to what McLaughlin was telling him. The chance to make things right was dead in front of him, wasn't it? Rhett deserved what he had coming, but did he deserve to die? If he did deserve to die, then it would be ironic to be by Link's hand. A sick laugh bubbled within Link's chest but he swallowed it down, passing it off as grief mingled with adrenaline and disbelief. This was an opportunity alright, McLaughlin wasn't kidding about that. But then...what would be the
result of Rhett's death? He would be gone and Link would be a murderer. Or would McLaughlin cover for him?

“Now I don't have all day to wait around, Charles, I'm a busy man,” McLaughlin continued, straightening his waistcoat absently and fingering the dial in his hand. Link's breath caught in his throat in panic, waiting for him to turn the dial, but he didn't. “So to help you make your decision — or, to help persuade you to make the right decision — I've made this interesting. The device in my hand,” he paused to show the trigger to Link, “operates both Morgan and Candace's collars. Their lives are in my control. Now, here's the thing. Are you listening?”

Link nodded shakily, hearing the device creak in his hand from him squeezing it too tight.

“It's them or Rhett,” McLaughlin stated simply, as if the choice didn't really affect him personally, “You kill Rhett — turn that dial and trigger the explosive — or I'll kill them. Sound fair?”

“What —” Link stammered, tears welling in his eyes which he didn't fight from spilling over and running down his cheeks. Rhett or Morgan and Candace. Rhett or Morgan and Candace. Someone was going to die. It was unavoidable. Link couldn't do anything. He had to watch the man he loved die by his own hand, or watch his friends be murdered. There was nothing in between. No way out, not sweet talking, no nothing. McLaughlin had cornered him and got him whilst he was vulnerable. There was nothing he could do. Nothing but play along. He had to play McLaughlin's game.

“Really, it shouldn't be too arduous of a decision to make, should it? One life for two.” McLaughlin coached Link into it, “Look at him. He's nothing. A speck on dirt on this earth. He's the man who destroyed your life, your livelihood, your future. He landed himself in this position, Charles, no one else did. He betrayed you and he betrayed me.

“One quick turn of that dial and it'll all be over. All the turmoil he's put you through, all the stress and the sense of disquietude, of alienation that he's caused you, will be over. You'll be a new man once he's gone.” McLaughlin paused his speech, as if to take a breath of air, having gotten ahead of himself. It gave Link time to process the information being fed to him through what felt like a feeding tube. He felt like a child whose parent was lecturing him on the quarrels of good and evil, though their judgment was clouded. Link didn't know what to do. His palms were sweating and he couldn't barely hold the trigger in his hands, it having slipped through his fingers and onto his lap multiple times during McLaughlin's speech.

He wanted Link to take Rhett's life and in turn, he would save Morgan and Candace's. But why? What was the goal? What kind of social experiment was this?

“What's stropping you from killing Morgan and Candace afterwards?” Link asked, surprised at the confidence in his voice. Perhaps on the outside he appeared to be holding himself together, or something. He could only wish it to be so, considering on the inside he was falling apart. His heart was shattered into fragments, his mind torn between what he wanted and what was right, what was easy and what was worth it. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't do anything. He could simply refuse to make the decision, couldn't he? “What if I refuse?”

“Ah,” McLaughlin hummed in response, “You refuse, they all die. Simple as that. As for your lack of trust in myself, that's understandable. Admirable, actually, that you'd considered every possibility that I may betray you. Nice thinking. I could use an agent like you,” he paused and offered Link a favorable glance, “however, you have my word that your friends will be spared, should you choose to rid yourself of that vermin.”

Link's eyes flickered to the screen in front of him, watching as the guards circled Rhett like a wild animal. Rhett's shoulders were slumped and his head was leaning forward so much that Link couldn't
see his face. Was he unconscious, or was it something else? Link's heart was on the verge of escaping his chest, hammering against his ribs painfully. He couldn't do this. He couldn't make this decision.

But he had to. He had to make this decision. If he didn't, they'd all die, and Link wouldn't be able to save anyone but himself. And even that was debatable. McLaughlin was sure to off him the second he got the chance. No one was safe. No one.

He was glad Stevie made it out, traitor or not. He wouldn't wish this on his enemy.

“Clock is ticking, Charles.”

Link flinched in response, fighting with himself not to fall into full blown panic. He fiddled with the dial in his hands, watching in distress as the screen in front of him flicked periodically between both Rhett's room and Morgan and Candace's. You refuse, they all die. Simple as that. Link had to choose one or the other, there was no saving all of them. He couldn't think, he couldn't breathe. It was all too much. He couldn't afford to lose himself, not now. Not when it was literally life and death. No, he had to focus.

He shook his head wildly, attempting to correct his blurring vision by squeezing his eyes tightly closed and wishing he was somewhere else. Anywhere else. Maybe somewhere warm and safe, somewhere with Rhett and the others, far far away from Mythical Intelligence. Maybe back in the south. Maybe he could show Rhett his home town. Or maybe...

No. No that wasn't about to happen. Link had to choose. He looked up at the screen, gnawing at his bottom lip, swearing he could taste blood. Rhett looked deflated and motionless as if the life had been sucked out of him and then some. Link had the power to take it all away from him, if he had the guts. But did he? Could he really turn that dial and kill Rhett so gruesomely in front of his very own eyes? The man he'd shared so much with these past months?

Could he watch McLaughlin do the same to Morgan and Candace? They were both innocent and deserved none of this. Candace especially, who was nothing but an outsider. There had always been something about Morgan since the beginning, something suspicious, but now he was as screwed as Link was. And as good as dead if Link didn't make a decision, and fast, given that McLaughlin was looking more and more impatient the longer Link took to decide.

There was a loud clattering somewhere behind Link where he presumed the door to the room he was trapped in was placed. It gained the attention of the armed guard shadowing Link whose expression changed instantly, snapping into action, fully focused on the door. There was a beat of silence where neither of the three men moved. Then there was a crash.

The door slammed open and collided with the adjacent wall, denting the concrete at the other side. Link craned his neck to see who had forced their way inside. Three people barged their way inside, all armed and aiming their weapons towards McLaughlin and the armed guard. None of them pointed their weapons at Link.

“Lower your weapon, asshole,” The man in the front of the trio exclaimed towards the armed guard, who slowly lowered his weapon with a scowl, seemingly judging he was outnumbered. Link recognized the man who had barged in. But that was only once the woman next to him had spoken.

“McLaughlin, head of Mythical Intelligence,” she spoke with authority, yet addressed McLaughlin like he was nothing but filth at the bottom of her shoe, “You're under arrest.”

Jessie. Jessie. It was Jessie's voice, Jessie's face, Jessie. Link had never been more happy to see
her...and so confused to see her. What was going on? Why did Jessie have a gun? What was happening?

“Under what terms?” McLaughlin asked, unfazed. He crossed his arms in front of himself, tucking the trigger under his armpit and looking back at the surveillance footage, “I assure you this is all a misunderstanding.”

“Don't try to worm your way out of it this time, McLaughlin,” Jessie's voice was rough and harsh, and nothing like Link was used to. Had it all been an act? Had Jessie been a cop or something this entire time? “We've got you right in the thick of it. Y’can't talk your way outta this one. Hand over the trigger.”

McLaughlin smiled menacingly, “Perhaps not. But you can't do anything with he-said she-said, and there's nothing a little money can't even out. You have nothing on me.”

In an instant, Jessie side-stepped towards where Link remained tied to a chair, keeping her gun trained on McLaughlin's menacing form. She leaned down and reached into Link's pants pocket. Link flinched in alarm, disturbed by her actions, but once her hand re-emerged with a bundle of wires his eyes widened in realization. Was that...was that Stevie's spare wire from her apartment?

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**JULY 21ST 2007, eight hours ago**

Link sank back onto the floor and brought his knees to his chest, hands clutching at the ball of messed up wires from the box. He closed his eyes and sighed, letting the heat from the sun scold him from the inside out.

“*Romantic relationships between assets and handlers are strictly forbidden.*”

*Link blinked in response, fighting a shiver when Rhett nosed along his jaw, “Is that—is that what we are?”*

*Rhett hummed against his skin, “What, Link?”*

“In a romantic relationship,” *Link offered, breath quickening and mouth going dry.*

“Aren't we?”

Link opened his eyes, startled, feeling around for Rhett despite knowing fine well that the other man wasn't there. His mind was playing him like a fool, forcing him to relive old memories that would only hurt him. First came the dreams — the could have been’s, the could never be's — and now he was plagued with thoughts of Rhett during the day, too. Would it ever end? Would he ever escape this nightmare?

He sighed, huffing out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. There was no use in pondering over such things, not when they'd do more harm than good, and now wasn't the time to start wishing things were different. Not when there was so much on the line. Not when Rhett and Stevie were gone and Morgan and Candace were missing. There were more important things at hand than Link's warped feelings of affection.

Mindlessly, Link tucked the wires responsible for his nostalgia trip into his jeans pocket with a sigh
and began retrieving any other pieces of information he could find in Stevie's discarded boxes. He gathered a few files he deemed important enough before rising to his feet. He had to get out of there before the crowds began forming and he was inevitably recognized. McLaughlin had put a price on Link’s life, that was for sure.

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**JULY 21ST 2007, present day**

Link choked on his own breath, thanking his own stupidity for keeping an active wire in his jeans. McLaughlin had removed his jacket and hadn't bothered patting him down, hadn't he? Link was wearing a wire the entire time. This entire time McLaughlin had been being recorded and...wait. Who had been listening to the wire? Who had hacked into the channel? Did someone know Link had been kidnapped? Was it Jessie, of all people, who had figured it out?

“We've been listening to you this entire time, smart ass,” Jessie told McLaughlin, holding up the wire with her free hand and aiming her hand gun at him with the other. The color drained from McLaughlin's face within the next few seconds, and the sight prompted a sharp laugh out of Link's throat before he could stop it. If it were joy or relief, or perhaps he was going into shock, he'd worry about it later. “You're under arrested for conspiracy, embezzling, multiple accounts of assault and attempted murder. Hand me the trigger and put your hands behind your head.”

“You've got no right—” McLaughlin exclaimed, but was interrupted by a sharp punch in the solar plexus that even Link felt. A sick sense of satisfaction coursed through Link's veins at the sight, gaining pleasure from seeing the older man go down. On the surveillance screens, still flickering between cameras periodically, Rhett's room had been broken into and the guards subdued by people dressed as Jessie was. Morgan and Candace were untied and removed from view, panicking Link.

“What's happening? Where are you taking them?” He demanded, hysterical, attempting to rise from his chair but catching himself in his restraints. “Jessie!”

Jessie looked over to him with a concerned eye as she was strapping McLaughlin into handcuffs, then proceeded to hand him over to another agent in the room. The bald man, the one who'd entered to begin with, Link now recognized as the man whose car Jessie had entered earlier that day. He'd spotted them on his way to break into Stevie's apartment. His stupidity had paid off, so it seemed, considering those wires are what had saved all of their lives. The bald guy looked at Link strangely, as if trying to place him, and Link was doing the exact same thing. Where had he seen that guy before? He wasn't famous, since he knew Jessie.

Though Jessie seemed full of surprises, so Link couldn't be surprised if he discovered she had been socializing with movie stars.

“Weal, thank god you're okay,” Jessie exhaled as she moved closer to Link, and made a scene of untying his restraints to free his feet. “You gave us quite a scare.”

“Us?” Link asked, momentarily rooted to his seat. He was having trouble wrapping his head around what was happening. “Jessie, what's going on? What're you doing here?”

Jessie was quiet for an agonizingly long moment as she watched Link carefully before offering him her hand to help himself rise to his feet. He stood shakily, carefully, with Jessie's firm gentle grip on his arm. She observed him briefly before pulling him into a firm hug. Link felt the urge to crumble into her embrace, but fought it and settled for awkwardly wrapping one arm around her back.
“I thought you might be dead,” Jessie told him from where her face was buried into his shoulder, “I thought you were all dead. I thought we might've been too late. How did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“How did you know to wire yourself?” Jessie asked, pulling back to look at Link with watery eyes, “If you hadn't have had that wire, Neal, I don't know...”

“I didn't. I mean, it wasn't intentional,” Link explained, “I forgot I even had the damn thing in my pocket.”

“It's a good thing you did.” The bald guy from before had re-entered the room and chirped in on their conversation, before turning to Jessie and giving her a quick nod of his head, “McLaughlin's in the truck. You ready to take off?”

“Take off?” Link asked, panicked. Where was Rhett? Where were Morgan and Candace? There were too many questions unanswered. “Jessie —”

“Neal, I know you’ve probably got a ton of questions that need answering,” Jessie hushed him, leading him towards the doorway with one last fleeting look around the room, “But I need you to trust me right now.”

Trust me. Rhett's voice echoed in Link's head. Trusting people always seemed to be Link's downfall, but hey, what was one last mistake for the road?

The sky was dark when Link emerged from the abandoned factory building. Stars shone brightly above him, and the air seemed clearer than it had before. McLaughlin was loaded into the back of a black security truck decorated with thick white letters on the side reading M.I.A.. Mythical Intelligence Agency, huh. Jessie had been working for them all along, but she hadn't been working for McLaughlin. She'd been on Link's side ever since he'd met her, and she'd played him like all the others. Played him like a fool and kept an eye on him until she couldn't any longer. Why hadn't she warned him about Rhett and the others? Link's mind was on fire, racing a mile a minute, going in circles around everything and never once slowing down.

He was ushered into a white van, accompanied by Jessie, the bald agent, and a couple others all armed to the teeth. Jessie sat cross-legged in the seat beside Link, her gaze diverted, attention on her phone in her hands. Occasionally, once the vehicle was in motion, her phone would ring and she would speak quietly into it. Mostly orders, nothing substantial. Link didn't pay much mind to it; he didn't pay much mind to anything.

He lay his head on the headrest and looked out the adjacent window, watching the city lights blur as they sped past. Warm orange and white lights flooded the interior of the van from passing street lamps and vehicles on the road, mingling in Link's brain and forcing him to close his eyes. He was exhausted. The day's ordeal had taken it out of him and even if Jessie was tricking him, even if McLaughlin had arranged his own arrest or something, Link didn't care. He didn't care about anything anymore. He felt hollow, like a shell of the person he used to be.

He didn't remember falling asleep.
When Link awoke, the van was stationary and it was still dark outside. Jessie was still perched next to him, but otherwise the vehicle was empty. Link moved a little, wriggling in his seat, somehow still expecting to be gagged and bound. It was a miracle he wasn't. His movements alerted the woman next to him, who placed her phone into her jacket pocket and gave him a once over.

“Sleep well?” She asked, a tinge of humor in her voice, but then she seemed to re-think her words as a grimace appeared on her face, “Stupid question. You're probably exhausted.”

“That's one word for it.” Link replied, “Where are we?”

Jessie opened her mouth to respond, but was interrupted by a sharp banging against her window. She reached over and unlocked the door, opening it to the offender. Link braced himself automatically for a blow that never came, and no one but the bald guy from before greeted Jessie.

“They're ready for him now,” the guy told her, and Link could just make out the way his eyes flickered over to him under the dim lighting of the car. Who was ready for him? What was going on?

Jessie nodded once, firmly, then looked over to Link. “Come on, let's go. I'll explain on the way.”

Getting out of the car was another ordeal entirely. There was a stabbing pain in Link's abdomen that intensified every time he took a step. Bruised ribs, maybe some broken. He'd forgotten about that. There was a throbbing in his lip and cheek, probably torn and bruised, busted and bloody. If someone had given him a mirror, he might not have recognized his own reflection. He would bet on it.

The night air was cold against Link's bare arms, rising the hairs on the back of his neck. He winced, limping with every step as he followed Jessie into yet another grim factory building. Had they drove in circles and led him back to the same place? He wouldn't be surprised.

Bald guy held the door open for Link as they entered, which Link felt weird about. Who was this guy? Where did Link know him from? And why did he keep looking at Link like he was food, or something? Link's mind offered a welcome distraction to the pain in his ribs, but his distracted attention also caused him to stumble and trip over his own feet. He fell into the bald guard as he was entering the building, whose first response was to wrap a strong arm around Link's torso to hold him steady.

“What happened?” Jessie asked, worry framing her brow as she took over holding the double doors open.

“I've got him,” Bald guy said, prompting Link to huff in response, but he couldn't really go anywhere. He didn't have the energy to refuse the help. “I'll help him walk to the elevator.”

“I can do it myself.” Link protested.

“Yes, you can,” The guy replied, escorting Link through the double doors and down a large corridor. The walls were painted white with a thin gray line traveling down the middle of them, as if pointing them where to go. Link had to squint against the harsh lighting. “But I'm helping you whether you like it or not.”
“Neal!”

Link heard Morgan before he saw him, complaining about a woman being too rough with him. There was a petite girl dressing a wound he’d gotten on his cheek, applying butterfly stitches to it as Link entered the room. Or, well, as Link was basically carried into the room. As soon as Morgan caught sight of him, he was on his feet and over to Link’s side in an instant, both arms wrapped around him in some kind of...embrace? Was Morgan hugging him?

Link felt like he had been caught in a dream and was about to wake up at any moment.

“Damn, is it good to see your sorry face,” Morgan told him, patting Link's back gently, as if aware that he was injured. Hell, everyone was probably aware of that. It wasn't like Link walked into the room on his own, after all. He had his human crutches to thank for that.

“You're okay,” Link said breathlessly, having trouble coming to terms with the idea that everyone was alright, that everyone and everything was okay. It seemed too good to be true. Maybe it was. Jessie was smiling softly beside them, watching the exchange from the sidelines. “What happened? How did they get you?” Link paused, rethinking his words, because it wasn't 'they' who kidnapped Morgan and Candace, it was Rhett, “How did Rhett get you?”

Morgan pulled back slightly but kept both of his hands firmly planted on Link's shoulders like he was afraid Link would disappear at any moment. Link understood the impulse, for he was feeling similar when it came to Morgan. He hadn't noticed the way his fists had bunched in the lapels of Morgan's coat until his knuckles began to ache.

“Neal, there's a hell of a lot of things we need to talk about.” Morgan told him, and Link felt like he'd been given a glass of water after weeks of dehydration. Finally, finally, somebody was being clear with him. Someone had acknowledged that he'd been in the dark this entire time. Someone was about to bring him into the light, standing by his side. He couldn't have been more grateful. “You look like shit.”

Moment ruined. Typical Morgan.

“You're not so pretty yourself,” Link retorted, prompting Morgan to bark out a laugh that Link didn't know he'd ever learn to miss.

“Don't I know it. Come here, this girl's a little rough, but — hey, you could do with a fingernail trim, don't look at me like that.”

“You want to patch yourself up, Locke?” The girl asked in response, looking like she'd had a long day and was working overtime. Maybe she was. She was dressed in navy overalls which were bunched at her hips, with nothing but a white tank top decorating her torso. She looked like she could take Link in a fight if her biceps were anything to go by. For the briefest of moments, Link felt a pang in his chest, missing Jen something fierce. “'Cause, by all means.”

“Alright, fine. Statement retracted.” Morgan ushered Link over toward the medical bed he'd previously been perched on, helping get Link sat down and lifting his feet up and onto the sheets. “What hurts?”

“Do you wanna do my whole job for me, Locke?” The girl asked Morgan, a glare on her face as she
pushed her glasses further up her nose, “I could just go home.”

Morgan lifted both hands in a defensive manner and shuffled to the side. Link marked it in his mind that he'd physically witnessed Morgan be silenced by someone. Instead of making a smart ass comment, Link replied, “My ribs. I think some of them are broken.”

“Let's have a look. Shirt off.” The girl ordered, helping Link undress himself. His stomach was glittered in purple and pink, some terribly dark circular bruising patterns stretching around his rib cage as if he'd been trampled on by a stampede of people in a hurry. Maybe he had. In reality, it was all McLaughlin's doing. By his hand or not, Link was hurt and he only had McLaughlin to blame. Maybe Rhett, too, but that wasn't —

Rhett. Rhett. Where was he?

“Morgan,” Link stammered, and evidently Morgan noticed the change in Link's expression, returning to his side in a hurry, “Where's Rhett?”

Morgan didn't respond instantly, nothing but the crease in his brow indicating that he'd heard Link at all. The girl who was addressing Link's injuries paused, her hands faltering over the bruising. Link's breath hitched in his throat, his temperature rising.

“Morgan, where is he?” Link asked, raising his voice and gaining the attention of the other people scattered around the large room. Jessie made her way over to Link's bed but he didn't look at her, keeping his eyes focused on Morgan and trusting him to give an honest answer. “Is he alive?”

“Rhett is alive, Neal,” Jessie replied for Morgan, prompting the guy to shoot her a look for speaking for him.

“He's fine,” Morgan placed a hand on Link's arm in a painfully intimate gesture that shook Link to his core. “He's —”

“Where is he?”

“Not here.” The girl feeling around Link's rib cage responded, eyes hidden behind the rims of her glasses.

“Becca.” Morgan warned, giving a name to the girl's face, “Rhett had to deal with some things. He isn't here right now. But he will be. Right, Jessie?”

“I think so,” Jessie replied. Link looked at her suspiciously, prompting her to rub the back of her neck awkwardly. “So, I haven't been entirely honest with you.”

“No shit.”

Morgan grinned at Link's cursing, as if proud of him, tightening his fingers around Link's forearm. Jessie shook her head and continued, “Before you ask, my name is Jessie. And I really do live around the corner from the farmer's market.”

“But?” Link prompted, not taking any more crap from her. He needed answers. He deserved them. And if learning about Jessie distracted him from thinking of Rhett, then so be it.

“But,” Jessie continued with a sigh, watching the girl — Becca — fetch some gauze from an adjacent table to Link's gurney and bring it back to the sheets so she could wrap Link's torso in it. No broken ribs, then, just some bruising. Not that Becca had told him that. Maybe she hadn't wanted to interrupt. Wise. “I don't work at the farmer's market. I never have. I was undercover. I'm an agent for
Mythical Intelligence, and I have been since I was seventeen. I was appointed undercover work soon after your transfer to Los Angeles, and I was instructed to keep an eye on you, keep tabs on you and get close to you to figure out what you knew. Calculating whether or not you were a threat was also one of my assignment components. As you can probably surmise, you weren't as aware as I thought you were.

“So, I got close to you. We're close, aren't we? However, when it became apparent you were mingling with the...wrong crowd, so to speak, and fraternizing, well, I took a step back. That went directly against my orders, and it got me into hot water for a while. When you were too busy to call or make lunch plans, I wasn't exactly available to meet with you anyway.”

Link was quiet for a long moment as he let Jessie finish speaking, taking it all in. So, she'd been in on it the entire time. All this while Link had assumed Rhett had been tasked to keep an eye on him, but it had been Jessie. He couldn't have been more surprised. He'd underestimated Jessie and her abilities, as he had the habit of doing to most people. Jessie was sweet and kind and deserved none of the brutalities that Mythical agents faced on a day to day basis, yet here she was, dead in the thick of it with her gun at the ready. She'd found Link and saved him from almost certain death. She'd saved everybody, hadn't she?

Although, despite his surprise, this new information explained a few things. Such as Jessie's peculiar behavior at dinner a couple of weeks prior. Now it all made sense.

“That's how you knew my rental car broke down, isn't it?” Link asked, already knowing the answer but wanting to hear it from Jessie's lips. Jessie cringed slightly, as if the memory was embarrassing for her to recall.

“You never told me about it; I messed up. Luckily you were too tired to register my mistake.” Jessie explained, “But, yes. That's how I knew. Everybody knew. McLaughlin planned it, as you're aware, in order to —”

“To test Rhett.” Link finished.

Jessie looked away. “To test Rhett, yes.”

“How did you find me?” Link asked suddenly, “How did you know to track the wire?”

“It wasn't her,” Morgan replied, smiling a little which looked foreign on his face. There was sweat formed on his forehead and threatening to drip into his eyes, and Link figured the entire situation was incredibly stressful for ever the likes of Morgan who liked to bottle everything up and explode on others at any given moment. Usually on Link, but not now, to which Link was grateful.

“It was me.”

A new voice interrupted Morgan, one that Link recognized instantly. Jessie moved out of Link's view to make way for the newest addition to the room.

“Stevie,” Link breathed, so overwhelmed with emotion and alleviated by Stevie's presence that he let out a strangled sob the moment she emerged. Stevie's eyes were watering and she looked tired, but she made her way to Link's side elegantly and thanked Morgan for giving them the space they deserved. Her hair was tied into a loose pony tail and her shirt was torn, but otherwise she looked like she usually did. Link couldn't have been more happy to see her.

“Agent Neal,” Stevie greeted him with authority, but her voice cracked at the end and she folded. She wrapped her arms gently around Link's shoulders and brought him into a hug, one which Link
returned happily, never been more grateful to be able to see her again. “When Rhett went quiet, I knew something had happened. Chase and Alex bombarded me with messages, telling me you'd been kidnapped and there had been a struggle. Telling me you'd figured out the note. God damn it, Rhett, he can be so...”

Stevie trailed off, shaking her head into Link's shoulder and letting out a much needed breath. Warm air collided with the bare skin of Link's shoulder, but he couldn't find it in himself to feel awkward about it. Embracing Stevie shirtless was nothing compared to what he'd been through.

Abruptly, he pulled back, surprising everyone. “You'd been working with Rhett the whole time, hadn't you?”

Stevie didn't hesitate with her response, finding no reason to lie, “Yes, I was.”

“She was convincing, I'll give her that.” A new voice, male this time. Chase was shaking his head, accompanied by Alex who now stood at the base of Link's bed with a grin on his face. “Good to see you, Neal.”

“They came with me, I hope you don't mind.” Stevie explained, making it feel like some kind of hospital visit, and Link was the one stuck in the bed. Chase looked like he'd been through hell and back, his eyes were narrowed and his cheeks were sunken, and if Alex's arm hadn't been around his waist Link was positive Chase would have fallen over. Alex looked to be fairing better, even if his beard was ruffled.

“Go back a second,” Morgan interrupted, waving his hand for emphasis, “You tricked them this entire time?”

“Pretty much, yes,” Stevie replied, returning her attention back to Link, “Rhett and I have known one another a very long time. When you came to me with information that could incriminate him, the first thing I did was take it to him. Nothing personal. But he wasn't worried, if anything he was...impressed that you two had managed to figure it out.” She gestured between Link and Chase with her hand, then glanced towards Chase, “The idea was to monitor your progress and make you think I was on your side, and that's what I did. For a while, at least, before it became evident that McLaughlin was up to a lot more than Rhett knew about. Then it became dangerous. I couldn't balance both sides effectively, and ultimately Alex discovered me.”

“Should've been more careful,” Alex told her, eyeing Stevie like he wasn't entirely convinced she was innocent even now, “It could have been anyone tailing you. Be thankful it was me.”

“I am,” Stevie told him, not in the least part offended by his iciness, “It set things into motion. The realization that I could no longer juggle all of you at once hit me harder than it should. It hit Rhett even harder, and he ordered me to get the hell out of dodge before it was too late. We cleared my apartment, and shredded my files, and I got a plane ticket booked for New York. Smart thinking on Rhett's part, considering he was kidnapped within the next few days.

“But after figuring out that fact, I knew I couldn't leave. I couldn't abandon my work, and I couldn't abandon Rhett. We couldn't abandon the Resistance.” Stevie paused, then took Link's hand in her own and gave him a meaningful look, “I didn't mean for you to get wrapped up in all of this, Neal. None of us did.”

“It's not your fault.” Link told her honestly, because it wasn't. Not really.

“He's right,” Alex agreed, “If it's anybody's fault, it's Rhett's.”
“Alex.” Chase warned, but Stevie raised a hand to silence him.

“No, he’s right.” Stevie said, surprising the hell out of Link, “If Rhett hadn’t been so careless in his dealings with you, you wouldn’t have been involved. However, knowing that, without your involvement we might never have put a stop to McLaughlin’s reign. He might still be in control to this day if Rhett hadn’t seen something in you from day one.”

“What happened to McLaughlin, anyway?” Chase asked, worming his way out of Alex’s grasp to make his way to Link’s side. Link smiled up at him and withdrew his hand from Stevie’s grasp to place it on Chase’s shoulder in appreciation. He was grateful that Chase was alive and well, uninjured and breathing. He wished the same could be said for himself, but necessary sacrifices had to be made. Becca resumed her job of wrapping Link firmly in gauze until he could get to a real hospital and have an x-ray, or a few. She seemed to know what she was doing, at least, so Link let her work.

“He’s been incarcerated.” Jessie told them easily, running a hand through her hair and making eye contact with Stevie. It felt weirder than weird to see them in the same room, breathing the same air and conversing with one another. But that must happen often, right? They all work together, after all, don’t they? It was gonna take some time getting used to, that was for sure. “He’s being processed downtown as we speak. It’s gonna be all over the news tomorrow morning. Rhett and Neal’s names will be cleared. Neal will be a free man.”

“And Rhett?” Link asked, noting how Jessie claimed on Link would be free, and not Rhett.

“I don’t know, Neal,” Jessie admitted, “After the bombing, you know. I couldn't stop certain things escaping to the press. I don't exactly know what's going to happen to him.”

“I’ll talk to him, don’t worry,” Stevie told him, nodding to herself, “I’ll sort it out. Rhett is innocent, he isn't going to spend his life behind bars.”

“Innocent? Are you kidding me, Stevie?” Chase exclaimed, anger in his voice at the audacity of Stevie’s claims. Link removed his hand from the other man’s shoulder in surprise, but admittedly he was a little miffed at Stevie’s words too. Rhett was innocent? Did she miss a memo, or something? Rhett had murdered innocents. Rhett had triggered the demolition of a hotel building with its occupants still inside. There was nothing innocent about that. “You’re honestly going to stand there and defend him, after everything? He's killed people, Stevie.”

“We all have.” Stevie replied simply, silencing the group momentarily. Link had killed before, sure, but in self defense. Not senseless, nothing like Rhett had. Nothing like the others had.

“That’s different.” Chase replied.

“He has a point.” Alex added, crossing his arms over his chest and looking to the side. “Whether the Resistance turned out to be good or not in the end, it doesn't excuse Rhett’s actions before all of this began.”

“You don't understand.” Stevie replied calmly, not letting the other’s tones of voices get to her. Link watched her carefully, silently, trying to measure her reaction. Something wasn’t right. If Stevie truly believed Rhett was innocent then it wouldn’t be the first time she’d bee correct, would it? Maybe she knew something Link didn’t. Surprise, surprise.

Or maybe it was wishful thinking, since Link had done enough of his fair share of that. Rhett being innocent would be the icing on the cake to this marginally happy ending, it seemed. Maybe Rhett hadn't murdered his family, after all. Maybe they'd run away together like in the movies, carefree
with nowhere to go.

This wasn't a movie, and Link sure as hell wasn't as optimistic as that.

“The Resistance is one thing. The movement created to act against McLaughlin and his goons, to fight for what was right for this country. There were some casualties, yes, none of which blame can be assigned to,” Stevie lectured, sighing and pinching the bridge of her nose, “It's a long and complicated story.”

“We have time.” Link offered, not going anywhere until he'd heard it all. He needed answers. If the Resistance were truly the good guys, then what about the hoax bombs? And the blood canisters, and the kidnapping of agents? What about Lizzie? What about Ben's girlfriend? Was there to be no justice for her?

Stevie was quiet for a short moment, seemingly weighing her options. She gnawed at her bottom lip and shifted her weight from foot to foot, wincing as if it caused her discomfort. Perhaps she'd been injured whilst trying to find him, or something. Link was going to find whoever did it and give them a piece of his mind, and then some. But maybe once his ribs had healed. That would be wise.

Stevie turned to Morgan suddenly, then gestured with her hand, “Do you want to take the floor?”

“What?” Link asked in surprise, looking at the man in question. No, no. It couldn't be. Could it?

Morgan sighed as if resigning himself for the speech to come. He made his presence known by clearing his throat and getting everyone's attention. Link's breath caught in his throat, his heart in his throat in anticipation. “So, I have a confession to make.”

“Go ahead,” Stevie prompted once Morgan took a long pause, as if he needed further permission, shocking Link further into silence a his obedience.

“I don't work for Mythical Intelligence. At least, not officially. I'm first and foremost a member of the Resistance.”

“You're what?” Chase exclaimed. Alex cursed. Stevie simply hushed them into silence with a wave of her hand, like they were pesky children who had to be silenced during church. Link couldn't find words.

“I have been since the beginning. I've been working under direct orders from Rhett McLaughlin this entire time.” Morgan told them, looking to Stevie for confirmation, who nodded in encouragement, “I'll tell you first hand that we ain't the bad guys. Those bombs were ours, yeah, but only to scare the agency. They were never real. They were always hoax bombs. Any explosive devices on the premises belonged to Mythical Intelligence and them alone.”

“And the blood canisters?” Chase prompted, unconvincing, crossing his arms over his chest.

“From transfusions.” Stevie replied, looking towards Link, “From agents we captured during assignments, and converted to Resistance agents. It wasn't difficult. As soon as the agents became aware of what was really going on in Mythical Intelligence, they were on board with everything the Resistance stood for. Going as far as donating a pint of their blood to contribute to the facade that we had captured agents and murdered them.”

“Lizzie is still alive, isn't she?” Link asked suddenly as it all came together in his head, “Ben's girlfriend. She's alive, isn't she?”

“She is,” Morgan confirmed, then frowned, “But she's been in hiding. Her disappearance created an
uproar at HQ, so she had to return to New York for a while until everything blew over. Not before she had the chance to donate her blood, though. Hence why one of the first bombs you even encountered contained traces of her blood, among others.”

“Speaking of the first bomb you encountered,” Jessie interjected, then proceeded to call someone over. The bald guy who had helped Link to his feet made his way over to the bed with a frown, pertaining to why he had been beckoned. “Neal, this is David.”

“He was the agent who was with me the first time the canisters exploded,” Stevie told him, “The one who got buried in the paperwork. Erased from the Mythical database. Converted to Resistance shortly after.”

Link knew he recognized the guy. Now it all made sense. There had been another agent present when Stevie had disarmed that bomb in Salt Lake City, and Link knew it. It explained the big cover up, and how that agent seemed to simply slip from the agency's fingers.

“So, you're Resistance now?” Link asked.

David nodded, “Being soaked in another person's blood can change your perspective on a lot of things, as I'm sure you're aware.”

Link nodded solemnly, a little overwhelmed by the entire thing. He and another agent, Fischbach, if he remembered correctly, were both covered in the sanguine liquid from a bomb scare in Nevada and since then Link had been mentally scarred by it. Not so much now, after discovering it was from a living and breathing person. If that blood had belonged to the deceased, then it would have been more disturbing in a hell of a lot more ways.

“I thought the blood in the Salt Lake Bomb had more than one set of DNA in it?” Chase asked with a frown, watching Becca make quick work of cleaning up the dried blood on Link's face, “One from an agent that disappeared three years prior?”

“That's me,” Jessie told him, “It was my blood. I'm the agent who disappeared three years ago.”

“I thought you were still a Mythical Intelligence agent?” Chase asked.

“I am, but I'm under a different name. Files like that are simple to doctor, especially with Rhett's influence. Or H's influence, as it were.”

“So you gave your blood to, what?” Link prompted, “Throw the agency off?”

“Precisely,” Stevie replied for her, placing a hand on Morgan's shoulder in what looked like camaraderie, “Then the agency were made aware how far back the Resistance went, and how serious we were.”

“Rhett kidnapped you and Candace,” Alex interjected, scowling suspiciously at Morgan whose only response was to scowl back, “Why would he kidnap his own man? Or is Candace part of the Resistance too?”

“It was only a stunt,” Morgan told them all, eyes darting around everyone, “Rhett needed me back to take care of some things and the only way to separate me from all of you without rising suspicion was to stage a kidnapping. Stevie helped it happen. Candace simply got caught in the crossfire. She's fine now. She's a Mythical agent, but as far as I'm aware she desires to join me.”

“To join the Resistance?” Alex asked.
“Yeah.”

“This is...” Link struggled, “This is a lot to take in.”

“Understandable,” Stevie confirmed, nodding in understanding and taking her hand off of Morgan's shoulder. A lot of things were falling into place now, but the biggest piece of the puzzle was yet to be placed. Rhett. What was his story? And why was everybody dancing around the subject of Rhett anyway?

Suddenly, Stevie said, “But, the last thing you need right now is people crowding you. We should let Becca work. I'll be here,” Stevie placed a hand on Link's forearm, “when you want to talk. I imagine you have some things you want to ask.”

“I'm not goin' anywhere,” Morgan professed, motioning to the battered and bruised flesh of his eye, “Not until this clears up.”

“Fine,” Stevie shook her head and motioned for the others to give Link some space, “Chase and Alex, come with me. Jessie, return to your post and take David with you. Give Neal some space to process all of this. It's all new to him.”

Link winced as Becca dabbed some rubbing alcohol on the tender skin around his eye, where he didn't know he'd been hit until she attracted his attention to it. It would explain his blurred vision from before. His jaw ached and a sharp pain shot along his chin when he flexed it. At least nothing was broken, miraculously. Nothing but his dignity, which he managed to salvage a decent portion of, at least. His mind wandered to Rhett, and what he was doing. Rhett made it out alive, that much was certain from what the others had told him, but what else? Where was he? What kind of things did he need to take care of?

Shouldn't Rhett be spending time with his people rather than spending time alone? Morgan didn't seem to mind Rhett's absence, so maybe it was nothing. Maybe Link was over thinking it. It did beg the question, though, that if Morgan had been Resistance from the beginning, did that mean he knew about Rhett and Link?

“Morgan,” Link began, then stopped since he truly had no idea how to go about asking someone if they were aware of a scandalous affair. Link felt his ears go hot in the process, earning a strange look from Becca who simply ignored it in favor of applying butterfly stitches to the cut along Link's left eye. Link cleared his throat, and Morgan looked over at him passingly, before returning his attention to his phone in his hands.

“I know.” He said.

Link blinked. “What?”

“You're going to ask if I know about you and Rhett.” Morgan offered, glancing over at Link as he spoke, thumbs still working away at the device in his hands, “The answer is yes, I know. I've known from the beginning.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Link looked away, back towards Becca and studied her as she worked away, humming lowly to herself a tune that Link didn't recognize. He was out of loop when it came to music, which wasn't like him. He hadn't had the time recently to simple listen to a record. Or a CD, that's what it was now. People were big on CDs, weren't they? Link was in way over his head.
“I can hear you over-thinking from where I'm standing, Neal,” Morgan commented, having placed his phone on a spare medical table next to Link's gurney before lifting himself up and onto the sheets at Link's feet. Becca grunted in response, as if Morgan had hindered her in some way, when in reality he hadn't gotten in the way at all. Link adjusted the position of his feet to accommodate the other man on the narrow bed. “You think I think less of you because of it?”

Link looked away instantly towards the far away wall, watching a silent exchange between David and Jessie as he attempted to avoid Morgan's question. The other man shook his head in response to Link's silence and said, “Well, I don't. It's none of my business.”

“Thanks,” Link managed.

“However,” Morgan continued, and Link felt his stomach drop because of course that couldn't be all the other man had to say, “You two couldn't have chosen a more complicated time to fall for each other, I'll say that.”

To Morgan's surprise and his own, Link laughed. “You're right about that. I didn't plan to... I mean, I didn't...”

“I know. I don't think Rhett did either,” Morgan responded quietly with a tenderness that Link wouldn't have thought the other man was capable of, “But I know he cares about you. I know he cares about you more than he's willing to admit to me, maybe more than he's willing to admit to himself. But I'm not the person you should be talking to this about, you know.”

Link frowned to himself, knowing he should talk to Rhett directly, but he couldn't. Rhett wasn't present. It seemed like Rhett was never present when Link ached for him. Would that be a common thing if everything worked out between them? Link's stomach churned at the thought. He couldn't envision things smoothing out between them, not now, not after everything. Having this kind of history with someone, a history that revolved around lies and betrayal, on top of the livelihood of their friends and themselves, would seriously meddle with the progress of a relationship. If that's even what they had before.

“Is that—is that what we are?”

“What, Link?”

“In a romantic relationship.”

“Aren't we?”

Link's ears were ringing. He couldn't get Rhett's voice out of his head no matter how hard he tried. And every time Rhett's lips ghosted his earlobe, Link would fight the shiver that trailed its way down his spine. The hold his ex-handler had over him wasn't healthy, but none of this really was, was it? Carrying a gun to work wasn't healthy, yet here they were, armed and ready for the next attack. Maybe Link was doomed to this sort of horror his entire life. Perhaps he belonged with Rhett. They were both destructive enough.

“Neal,” Morgan tore Link from his menacing thoughts with a firm hand on his calf, “Talk to Stevie. She'll be better at this whole, I don't know, pep talk. I don't know what I'm doing.”

Link breathed out a laugh, “Yeah. Maybe. Maybe I'll do that.”
JULY 22ND 2007, early hours of the morning, present day

Link was back up and on his feet in the next couple of hours, walking around and limping, trying to get a feel for the factory he’d been brought to. There were only two floors, each of them laid out like a hospital. There were multiple areas, designated wards and offices containing multiple agents who were handling incident reports. All Resistance controlled, all manned by ex-Mythical Intelligence agents. It was hard for Link to come to terms with, but he was managing. He hadn't been able to put his shirt back on, but didn't exactly feel too naked given the amount of gauze and bandaged he had wrapped around his midsection which stretched up to his right shoulder which he'd managed to sprain as he tripped his way inside the building.

Morgan had offered to accompany him on his exploration in the event he “got lost”, but Link got the impression the other man simply wanted to keep an eye on him in case Link did a runner and sprinted out the front door, putting distance between himself and this nightmare. He would have been lying had he said the thought hadn't occurred to him. The idea remained appealing, but Link wasn't big on running from his problems anymore. Any hardships that arose would be dealt with in a calm and dignified manner. At least, as dignified as he could manage.

Time to himself was rare nowadays given the drama with the agency and after being on house arrest for a few days there as the news ran his photograph and deemed him the second most dangerous male in America. Link pictured Jen's face as she saw the headline, imagining the shock and horror glittering her features. He couldn't face her again, could he? Not until his name was cleared. There was no use contacting her now, not when she'd surely be after his head. Would he be the same if the situation had been reversed? He'd like to think he'd have given Jen a chance but, if he was honest with himself, he probably wouldn't have. Orders were orders and that was that. He couldn't blame her if he tried.

The rest of his friends, or his colleagues, or whatever their label now was, had provided him with an abundance of information that his mind was still struggling to process. His head spun every time he attempted to make sense of everything, but he was damn well trying.

The biggest surprise had been Jessie's involvement which Link couldn't have foreseen. She'd done a good job of keeping him in the dark this whole time, acting like the friend who would be there for him when needed, for a shoulder or an ear or for a simple ten minutes of relief. Jessie did her job well and Link had to hand it to her for that. She was impressive, or maybe he was just easily manipulated. Maybe a bit of both, not that he'd tell her that, of course.

And Jessie knew Rhett. She'd known Rhett all along. Link had a theory that it had been Rhett who assigned Jessie to keep an eye on him, getting her an undercover position and shadowing Link wherever he went. It seemed plausible, but why? Why couldn't Rhett do it himself? Maybe he felt guilty about the whole thing, maybe that was it. Rhett had, after all, killed Link's wife in the past. Perhaps he hadn't intended to get close to Link like he had. That was the best scenario Link could come up with.

Then there was Stevie's involvement with Rhett from the beginning. So often Link had misinterpreted their closeness as intimacy, when in actuality the two had been scheming against the agency for a number of years. It explained why every time Link watched them interact he felt like he was intruding on something private, because in reality he was. Had it been Stevie's idea for Rhett to kidnap Morgan and Candace? Had it been Stevie's idea for Rhett to appear on national television and
claim responsibility for the Resistance attacks?

No. No, that couldn't be right. Link recalled the day McLaughlin had announced Rhett's name to the public, the day Stevie barged into his apartment and demanded the television to be turned on. She had held his hand so tightly, her fingers shaking, her nails digging into his skin. He recalled the fear in her eyes, the shock on her face, the shake in her voice. That was real fear. People couldn't fake that sort of thing.

“There'll be—there'll be—” Stevie tried, her voice quiet and shaking, and Link hated it, “There'll be a price on Rhett's head. McLaughlin has signed the death certificate himself.”

“What—what do we do? Stevie, what do we do?”

“I don't know. I don't know ,” Stevie managed, evidently as panicked as Link was. Hearing her speaking Rhett's real name aloud hadn't even surprised Link—he had suspected she knew it from the beginning. Her hand shook at her side, shaking Link's too by accident. Link attempted to stop her but only ended up making it worse. He was in no condition to help, not when he couldn't even prevent his legs from shaking.

“This was deliberate. It was deliberate, right?” Link asked, as if Stevie knew all the answers, “McLaughlin knows about us. About Rhett and I. Is this him getting back at me?”

“I don’t know, Neal.”

No, that panic was real and Link knew it. Stevie wouldn't have advised Rhett to meet the threats head on if that very idea of Rhett being in danger had frightened her so. She'd have advised him to go into hiding, wouldn't she? Something like that. No, Rhett showing his face and addressing the public had to have been his own idea. Maybe he wanted to take some of the heat off of other agents in his network. Maybe he was ready to take the fall for everything. It sounded like Rhett. Self destructive.

Asshole.

Then there was Morgan. Morgan had been working with Rhett all along, which should have been obvious, looking back on it. Morgan had a problem with Link from day one for no apparent reason, and for what? To throw Link off of his scent, or something? It had worked, since Link was more suspicious of Noah and his close relationship with Rhett, given their secret handshake in the office. That was the day Link had first met Rhett, or H, as he'd been known at the time. That felt like a lifetime ago.

“This contest still accepting participants?”

The team grew silent as they turned toward the voice that had disturbed them. Link had to peer over Noah's head to see the man that had spoken; his mouth dropped open slightly in surprise. The women of the team seemed to turn pink in the cheeks at the presence of the man that had entered who was now advancing into the room. He wore a white dress shirt tucked into suit pants and skinny black tie, complimenting his thin frame and ridiculous height. He looked like he was well groomed; a thick but tamed beard shaped his chin and mouth, and his auburn hair was gelled upwards. Link's heart skipped a couple times inside his chest before he had to avert his gaze; it was H.

Standing there like it was nothing.

The voice had given it away, but the appearance of his mysterious handler had made Link feel self conscious. This guy was on a whole other wavelength. Nowhere near his league to even consider him a friend; it made Link's heart race in his chest as he watched H be greeted by Noah in what
could only be described as a secret handshake. The other members of the team, however, did not seem as pleased by his presence. The other three men had retreated to their own desks like kicked puppies when H had emerged; both interested and frightened. The women, however, remained focused on H's every move and breath, completely infatuated with the taller man. Link could understand why. Intimidation and admiration; H seemed to have it all.

"I gotta say, Neal is a pro," Noah said as he patted Link on the shoulder from where he stood next to H. H was now observing Link with a small, yet infuriating, smirk. "You might want to swallow your pride."

"Is that right?" H responded, voice cocky and raspy like it always was on the phone. Link could feel his face heating up and it made him want to sink down into his chair in defeat. "We'll see about that."

Link's face changed color as the memory haunted his thoughts, even now feeling a bundle of nerves gather in his stomach at the thought of being in the same room as Rhett. He had been nervous then, hell, he'd been embarrassed then. But now was something else entirely. Now Link's feelings were something serious for Rhett, and it was fifty shades of complicated. He shook his head and attempted to rid himself of such thoughts, returning to what was more pressing.

Morgan's deception had worked, hadn't it? Link had no reason to suspect him. None whatsoever. Just another asshole at work. That's all Link had thought of him. Well, actually, there had been that one time where Morgan had been somewhat nice to him, hadn't there? Not too long ago Morgan had left the room in a hurry, worrying over his cell phone and prompting Link to wonder what he was up to. The other man had acted strangely in the hallway afterwards, once Link had bumped into him. Literally bumped into him.

"Whoa there," Link managed, straightening himself, vaguely aware of Morgan's hand gripping his waist to help steady him. His skin burned from the contact, body reacting negatively, readying itself for a fight that never came. Instead, Morgan withdrew his hand and flexed his fingers.

"Didn't see you there, Neal," The larger man replied, voice rough and tight. He grimaced a little and shifted his weight on his feet, "Going somewhere?"

"Uh," Link felt like he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar, "Home."

"This early?"

"Yeah. Figured I'd beat the press."

"Probably a smart idea," Morgan replied, much to Link's surprise. No fight, no smart ass comment, nothing. Link felt foolish for wishing Morgan would be hostile towards him, but it would mean nothing was wrong and that he didn't have to worry. Instead, Morgan shrugged and said, "See you around."

"See you around," Link replied as Morgan stepped around him and made his way back to the office. No shoulder brush, no pushing Link out of his way. Nothing. Jack squat.

Had Rhett been the one on the phone that day? Had he said something that had spooked Morgan, or something? All of this new information on Link's plate conjured up more questions than answers, it seemed, or perhaps he was just over thinking everything. That was a likely scenario. He had to talk to Stevie. He had to iron some things out and set the record straight. He had to do it before Rhett returned.
“I was wondering when you'd come speak to me,” Stevie greeted as she watched Link enter the room she was in. The woman was perched on the window ledge in the corner of the room, sitting with the window ajar and one of her legs hanging over the side as she watched the city pass by her below. Her back was pressed up against the concrete of an adjacent wall as she turned her head towards Link.

“I needed some time to think of something to say,” Link admitted as he limped towards her, stopping just short of the ledge and looking over, down at the road below them. A quiet night. Fitting for the situation, it seemed. McLaughlin’s reign was over and finally Los Angeles was quiet.

“Something to break the ice, you mean?” Stevie smiled at him softly, knowing how uncomfortable Link must have felt. Which was a great deal, if he were to admit it. He leaned against the other side of the window as Stevie pushed it further open so Link could sit down if he wished to do so. “We're past that stage in our relationship, don't you think? There's no ice between us.”

Link picked up on the double meaning of her words easily, feeling like he was talking to Rhett. Rhett and Stevie were similar in so many ways but particularly in their mannerisms and their ways of speaking. “Nothing but some aches and pains.”

“I expected as much,” Stevie responded before returning her attention to the city outside. She looked out towards the bright lights belonging to the high rises downtown longingly, as if she wished she was there instead of here. Link understood the impulse.

“No stars tonight.” Link observed, “Light pollution knows how to ruin the beauty in things.”

“Something doesn't have to be present for you to admire its beauty.” Stevie replied, glancing at Link purposefully. Link looked at her in response, weighing her words. Rhett wasn't present, he never was, but that didn't mean Link didn't care for him. Quite the opposite, in fact. Link ached for Rhett, and wished for his company. Just like he wished he could see the stars at night. But he didn't always get what he wanted, did he?

“I suppose not,” Link admitted, then sighed to himself and rubbed a hand over his face, “I'm tired, Stevie.”

“I am, too.”

“I need you to explain some things for me.”

“Shoot.”

Link hesitated before asking, “You tuned into the wire I was wearing. How did you know to do that?”

Stevie returned her gaze to the sky above, furrowing her brow in thought as she weighed the words on her tongue. “I went back to my apartment. Well, my assigned apartment. I thought I'd use it as a base until I could find Rhett and you, but then I saw that it'd already been broken into. As I logged what had been taken — some files, some incident and agent reports, my spare wire — I got a message from Chase. I ignored it, until I got three more in quick succession. You were missing, or kidnapped, which was the most likely case. That's when I put two and two together.”
“You thought I was the one who broke into your apartment?”

“Who else would?” Stevie asked, “If it were a simple thief, what would they want with case files and a bunch of useless wires? No, it had to have been you. Of course you'd have broken into my apartment, because that's exactly what Rhett would have done.”

Link remained silent at that, wishing he hadn't been so predictable even if it had saved his life in the end. He and Rhett were scarily similar, weren't they? Stevie had said so before, but now Link was finally beginning to understand what she meant.

“The first thing I did was gather my things and go to Chase's apartment. He and Alex weren't pleased to see me, but they had contacted me as a last resort. They were desperate.” Stevie explained, then paused as she turned her attention back to Link, eyes softening, “Chase really cares about you, Neal.”

“I know.” Link told her, “I know.”

“I went through your things trying to find something, anything to give me a lead on where you could have gone or who could have taken you. That's when I found my stolen things, and then I logged them and discovered the wire to be missing.” Stevie continued her explanation, shifting her feet and swinging her legs over the side of the window ledge so that both of her feet dangled over the side. She gestured for Link to join her, which he did after a moments hesitation. “I recognized the address from Rhett's note instantly, of course I did. I knew that's where you'd be, but I couldn't do anything with it. If I went there without knowing the situation, I'd have been captured or worse. I heard McLaughlin was trying to get Rhett to give up names of Resistance converts.”

“He was,” Link told her, swaying his legs as they dangled over the ledge, “But he didn't tell him anything. Not a single one.”

“Rhett's stronger than anyone I've ever met, and the most loyal. He wouldn't give up somebody that didn't deserve it,” Stevie told him, which left Link wondering at what point Rhett deemed someone to “deserve” to be handed over to the enemy, “But I tuned into the wire and, by some miracle, it had been turned on and was actively recording everything McLaughlin had been telling you. Chase handled the channel whilst I gathered up as many Resistance agents as I could to get you guys out of there. Jessie was an obvious choice, given that she was the closest. Turns out she had already heard about McLaughlin tailing you, and was working with David to find you before it was too late.”

“I saw them,” Link blurted, “I mean, I saw them before I broke into your apartment. They got into a car and drove off.”

“Yes, that's exactly what she told me.” Stevie smiled slightly, as if hearing that Jessie had been truthful to her caused her joy. Maybe it did. “We stormed the building and got you out of there. I'm sorry, but I...I went to Rhett's room first. Jessie took yours.”

“I understand.” Link told her honestly, because he did. If it had been the same situation, but it had been between Stevie and Rhett, he'd have chosen Rhett first too. “No hard feelings.”

“I'm glad,” Stevie smiled at him brightly, the brightest Link had ever seen on her face. She looked beautiful in the moonlight, and Link felt a strange sense of affection towards her, as if she were the sister he never had. He returned the smile crookedly, prompting a breathy laugh to escape Stevie's lips.

The two fell into silence afterwards, watching the city live and breathe before them. Link let his mind wander a bit, thinking of the past and what it meant for his future. Where would he go from here?
Los Angeles sure as hell had been a trip and a half, but was that all it was? A trip? Or was this his home now? He hadn't decided, but right then and there, sitting with Stevie and doing nothing but admiring the view, it felt like home.

“You still love him, don't you?” Stevie asked quietly after a while, once the evening chill had finally caused Link to shiver and wish he had been wearing a t-shirt. Stevie wasn't looking at him, which Link appreciated, since he wasn't sure he could have handled that sort of intensity. He thought for a moment about his answer, the silence stretching between them until he was able to respond.

“I do.” He told her, looking down at the street beneath them and inhaling deeply. He loved Rhett, of course he did. Not that it meant anything. Rhett wasn't there, and Link couldn't do anything but wait.

“He loves you too, you know,” Stevie told him, “Don't let him tell you otherwise.”

“Why would he do that?”

Stevie turned her head towards Link and looked at him strangely, before moving and linking their arms together. Link tensed slightly in response before relaxing into the contact. “Because he knows he isn't good for you — at least, that's what he believes. He thinks you deserve better than him. But don't let him tell you he doesn't love you, because I've never seen him like this before, Neal.”

“Like what?” Link asked, looking at Stevie curiously, feeling something warm bubble in his chest.

“Crazy like this. After he met you he's been caring and generous, more so than he ever was. There's an intimacy between the two of you that I can't even understand, and I've known him almost my entire life. You do something to him, Neal, something good.” Stevie told him, taking a deep breath and returning her gaze to the city ahead, “But also something frightening. I think it scares him a little, too.”

Link felt his chest constrict in response to hearing Stevie's words, his heart racing. He made Rhett feel like that? He made Rhett act like that? Maybe Rhett really did love him. Maybe, maybe...Link didn't know. He didn't know what to do, or what to say, what to think or feel. This was all so new to him. He'd never experienced a love so intense and terrifying. He didn't know how to handle it. He didn't know how to respond to it.

“Stevie,” He began, closing his eyes, “Where is he? Where is he, really?”

“He is...” Stevie hesitated, before seemingly making the decision within herself to actually tell Link the truth, “He's at home. He's recuperating, or something of the sort. He had some things to take care of that he couldn't do here. I don't think he could concentrate knowing you were in the same building.”

“Oh.”

“He's beat up pretty badly, maybe worse than you are.” Stevie told him, watching Link's reaction carefully. Link felt anger bubble within him that he couldn't seem to quench no matter how hard he tried. If he could get his hands on McLaughlin, he'd do some things he couldn't take back, that was for sure. “But he'll be fine. He always is. He'll be here in the morning.”

“You mean today.” Link reminded her, recalling it to be pretty early in the morning already, “It's past midnight. Hours past.”

“You're right, I mean today. He'll be here today.”

Somehow, hearing that Rhett would be arriving at the factory on that day did not make Link feel
good. It made him feel sick with nerves, or with grief, maybe both.

“You should get some rest, Neal, you look like you need it.”

“Maybe,” Link admitted, pitifully, un-linking his arm from Stevie's and maneuvering his way over to the other side of the ledge, finding comfort in having both feet firmly planted on the ground. “You'll be here in the morning, too?”

“I'm not going anywhere, Neal,” Stevie told him, and it felt like a promise. “Goodnight.”

Link hesitated before rising to his feet and placing a gentle, fleeting hand on Stevie's shoulder. “Goodnight.”

**JULY 22ND 2007, present day**

“So, you're telling me the Resistance are the good guys now?”

Chase grit his teeth, “It's a long story, but that's the gist of it, yes.”

Benjamin didn't seem convinced, and he looked just about ready to punch Morgan in the face. Morgan looked like he was readying himself for it, at least. “Stranger things have happened.”

“You mean like Link being innocent?” Morgan taunted him, looking for a fight like usual. Link could have strangled him for the trouble.

“Exactly like that,” Ben replied, looking towards Link with a somber expression, “Look, man. I shouldn't have lashed out like I did. I was angry, and I shouldn't have taken it out on you, brother.”

“Don't apologize, man,” Link replied instantly, clapping his hand down on Ben's bulky shoulder, pleased that he'd stood up for his actions, “I understand.”

And Link did understand. Of course he did. He would have been the same had his wife been kidnapped, only to find out that one of his friends and colleagues had been romantically involved with the man responsible. The hypothetical scenario disturbed Link to the core, leading him to convulse and earn the attention from Becca who was standing nearby. Maybe he wasn't ready to be up and on his feet so soon, even after tossing and turning for the past four hours on a lumpy bed upstairs. He'd been ushered into a small and private room by one of the many Resistance guards, knowing he should attempt to get some shut eye before his sleeping pattern was entirely screwed.

Sleep didn't come easy, however, not that Link expected it to. His mind swirled and ran circles around the idea that Rhett could be innocent. What if he was? What if Link had gotten it all wrong? Perhaps Rhett was framed. No. No, Rhett had admitted it to Link's face that he'd been the one responsible, hadn't he? Had he been lying?

“Don't you dare lie to me, Rhett,” Link seethed, so terribly close to initiating a physical altercation between them. Rhett's shoulders slumped in response and he looked away, towards the alleyway to his right. The dim light cast complex shadows on the taller man's face, making him look more frightening than they should have. But Link didn't back down. “You were involved in the bombing. No, you were more than involved, Rhett. You it, didn't you?”

There was silence for a long moment as Link blinked furiously, trying to keep his tears at bay. Rhett...
wasn't looking at him; he seemed to be looking everywhere but at Link. Eventually, when Rhett spoke, Link almost didn't hear him, “Yes.”

“And you knew,” Link spat out, eyes wide and probably frightening if Rhett's expression was anything to go by, “You knew this entire time and you still—you still—”

“Yes,” Rhett repeated quietly, gaze averted and shoulders tense. His fists were balled at his sides, his posture matching Link's. “You have to understand that I—”

“Understand that you took my life from me?” Link asked quietly, anger ebbing and flowing through him, “And, what? You wanted me distracted so I wouldn’t figure it out?”

“What?” Rhett asked, eyes flashing over at Link instantly.

“You murder my family,” Link watched Rhett wince in response, “And you had to make sure I didn't figure it out, so you started this — ” he waved a hand between them emphatically, “—so I would, what, forget about it?”

“You think I seduced you to keep you quiet?” Rhett asked, or more hissed, “You think I would do that?”

No, Link's mind responded. No, he didn't think Rhett could do that. Not anymore. Maybe at the time of the confrontation the idea had been plaguing Link's mind as he done his best to circumvent the possibility until it could no longer be avoided. Stevie had confirmed Rhett's feelings towards Link despite Rhett's silence on the matter. Maybe Link could get something out of him. Something, anything, something to reinstate Link's own feelings.

But could that really happen? Could Link really overlook everything Rhett had done?

He didn't know anymore. Link's ambivalence regarding Rhett clouded his judgment. The future was as clear as mud and it filled Link with apprehension and incertitude. Yet, the others' futures were looking as clear as day, pieces falling into place one by one until Link was left standing alone, suspended in time. Chase and Alex paired off, leaving Link the awkward third wheel in their trio. If they were happy, Link was happy, but somehow he doubted Alex and Chase would feel the same if Rhett were in the picture. Would they accept Rhett and Link as a couple? No, definitely not. And the idea didn't sit right in Link's stomach, either.

“There's another matter I feel we should discuss,” Stevie interrupted Ben and Link's heart to heart as she circumvented the group of men and perched up and onto a nearby bed, much like the one Link had occupied the day prior. He hadn't spoken to Stevie since their heart to heart, and admittedly his pulse quickened at her presence. “Benjamin, it's good to see you.”

Ben hesitated visibly before forcing a smile. “The pleasure is mine.”

“I'm certain it is,” Stevie responded, as if she knew Ben was forcibly being nice with her. Not a lot of people seemed to trust Stevie now, even after everything. Even after McLaughlin had been arrested. Link supposed some wounds would never heal, much like the one Rhett left inside his chest.

“What's the matter?” Morgan asked, a little peeved still. Link made the conscious decision to take a side step towards him, letting their shoulders brush as if it would offer the taller man support. Morgan exhaled heavily in response, leading Link to think that it might have actually worked.

“Benjamin, I recognize that you may feel disconnected from the rest of us after being kept in the dark for so long,” Stevie began, pausing to allow Ben to take it in. The bulky man folded his arms over
his chest and raised a skeptical brow, but remained quiet, ready for Stevie to proceed. “But given the recent circumstances, there's something you need to know.”

“Well, what is it?” Ben asked impatiently.

“Well, what is it?” Ben stammered in confusion. Morgan was fighting a grin by Link's side, prompting Link to look at him strangely. He followed Stevie's gaze towards the entryway of the room before his eyes landed on a woman standing in the doorway, hands shaking by her sides, tears welling up in her eyes. She was pretty short, with brown hair dancing around her shoulders as she trembled. Link opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't. Morgan place a gentle hand on Ben's shoulder to get his attention, but he didn't have to once the woman let out a strangled sob, unable to contain herself.

Link watched as Ben's eyes widened, shoulders stiffening and hands falling to his sides. The bulkier man spun on his heel, angling his body towards the doorway at the woman crying. There was a beat.

“Lizzie?” Ben's voice was shaking and his tone uneven, as if he were about to fall apart. Morgan gave his shoulder a squeeze of encouragement then let him go, and Link was afraid Ben might have swayed on his feet without the support. But he didn't. Link watched as Lizzie came further into the room before Ben's body caught up with his eyes. He all but sprinted forward and whisked the crying woman up in his big arms the second she was close enough.

Link watched the reunion from the sidelines, stepping back since he felt like the couple deserved as much space as they could get. He couldn't imagine living with the thought of Rhett being dead, and he couldn't imagine a reality where he'd deal with it healthily. He certainly respected Ben for being able to keep his head most of the time, with that kind of knowledge hovering over him and gnawing at the back of his skull day in and day out. But none of that mattered now. Lizzie was back in Los Angeles, never been kidnapped in the first place, having had no choice but to lay low in order to protect not only her own life, but Ben's too.

Morgan patted Link on the back in a friendly gesture, grinning to himself at the reunion before them. Link smiled in return and shook his head, feeling a warmth inside his chest at this new air of camaraderie which surrounded him. Perhaps he and Morgan could really be friends after all, after everything was over and done with.

“I never once thought you were dead,” Ben told Lizzie, voice muffled in the mess of her hair. It didn't look like he cared all that much, now that his girlfriend was back in his arms. Lizzie laughed shakily, flexing her small hands as she gripped at Ben's shoulders.

“I knew you wouldn't,” She told him, “You're too stubborn for that.”

Ben laughed in response, and Link could hear the difference in it already. He made himself look away, mostly to give the couple privacy, but also because it was difficult for him to watch them. He turned around and braced himself against one of the spare gurneys with both hands, exhaling the air in his lungs and hoping he'd deflate. He couldn't handle it. He couldn't shake his mind of thoughts of Rhett.

Would he and Rhett embrace like that once reunited? Would they kiss, or would Rhett rest his forehead on Link's like he had so many times in the past? Link's heart hammered inside his chest at the thought, and he had to force himself to breathe steadily. He was going to collapse, or at least his legs were about to give out. He'd been through one hell of a beating, Rhett having fared worse than both of them combined, and Rhett had still refused to see Link. No, he'd ran away before Link had
gotten the chance to grab so much as a glance of his ex-handler.

You do something to him, Neal, something good. Link squeezed his eyes closed as Stevie’s words replayed inside his head and made him feel like breaking something with his bare hands. But also something frightening. I think it scares him a little, too. Rhett was afraid. Link was afraid. They were both afraid, so why couldn’t they be afraid together? They were as stubborn as each other, weren’t they? Stevie had said they were alike, after all. Link shook his head to himself, tensing when he felt a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Neal,” Morgan's voice sounded in Link's ear, startling him. The hand on his shoulder tightened a little.

“Yeah.”

“Neal,” Morgan repeated, prompting Link to open his eyes and glance over at him. The other man's expression was tense, but there was a hopefulness in his eyes that confused Link. “There's somebody here for you.”

Link opened his mouth to respond, but ended up closing it in an instant and turning his head, looking behind himself hesitantly. Just past Ben and Lizzie, who were still wrapped in each other's arms, stood a tall and lanky individual, towering over everyone yet still managing to look vulnerable.

Link swerved his body around instantly, giving himself whiplash and causing Morgan to stumble and remove his hand from Link's tensing shoulder.

Rhett lingered uncomfortably in the doorway to the room, leaning up against the door frame with his right shoulder and crossing one leg over the other, as if placing a great deal of weight onto the suspended leg was causing him pain. The thin skin around his left eye was bruised and discolored, the eye itself terribly bloodshot most likely attained after taking a blow from the butt of an assault rifle. Thin red lines of torn flesh decorated the perimeter of Rhett's face, most of them disappearing into the fine hairs of his once tidy beard, now bushy and unkempt like he hadn't looked in a mirror in days. Not that his appearance had been the priority at any point recently, so Link couldn't blame him. Last time Link had seen him, his beard had been stained red with his own blood.

The taller man didn't make eye contact with Link instantly, instead watching the embrace shared between Ben and Lizzie, a thoughtful look on his face. Rhett unfolded his arms over his chest and carefully, wincing as he did so, straightened his back and returned to a regular standing position. He looked like he was about to emerge into the room, albeit hesitantly. Link watched him silently, unable to look anywhere else, not that he wanted to. He couldn't take his eyes off of Rhett. He could disappear in an instant, and Link wouldn't see him for weeks. He couldn't let that happen again. Not now, not when he had so much to say.

Rhett's eyes landed on Link after a couple of beats, his expression seeming pained. The taller man's eyes looked dark from across the room, as if the light had permanently left them given the recent circumstances he found himself in. Link felt like he fared the same, but Rhett had been through a lot worse and taken a hell of a lot more beatings than Link had. It was a miracle the bearded man still had enough courage to stand on his own, enduring his injuries with great fortitude. Rhett was something else.

Ben caught Link's eye from where he was standing, Lizzie wrapped tightly in his arms, and followed his eye line until he caught sight of Rhett standing in the doorway. Link observed the way Ben's shoulders stiffened in response, his back straightening as he maneuvered the woman in his arms to get out of the way. Lizzie caught Link's eye as she moved, trying not to trip over Ben's feet along the way, watching him like she knew all about their situation. Link wasn't surprised. He and Rhett's
relationship was public knowledge now, true or not.

The air seemed to thin around Link making him find it hard to breathe, heaving in gulps of oxygen as often as he could. The hair on his forearms was standing up as if the air were electric. Maybe it was. Rhett was watching him carefully, as if deliberating his next move, before ultimately making the decision to take a step forward and into the room.

Nobody moved. All eyes were on them.

Link took a step forward in response, allowing his feet to carry him across the floor. Rhett was limping, but it didn't stop him from dragging himself across the room and meeting Link halfway. They came to a halt in the middle of the room, the others having cleared them a distinct circle. It felt like a spectacle of some sort, but Link didn't care about that. He looked up at Rhett with wide eyes, hands shaking by his sides, uncertainty flashing across his features. Rhett swayed slightly, taking in Link's entire form with a relieved expression. The raw emotion in his eyes, Link could see it then, the care and devotion in them was maddening. And overwhelming. And welcome.

“Link,” Rhett spoke first, voice quiet and breathy as if he'd been holding his breath. Maybe he had. Link knew he had been holding his. “You're here.”

“You're here,” Link replied, looking up at Rhett with wide eyes. They didn't water, much to his surprise, but his arms were shaking in restraint. He felt his fingers twitch when the taller man shifted slightly, leaning forward slightly closer to Link.

“I am,” Rhett breathed, looking down at Link with uncertainty. Link's fingers curled and his hand twitched at his side, his mind running in circles. “Link, I'm sorry —”

Abruptly, Link raised his right hand and slapped Rhett hard in the face.

_tbc_

Chapter End Notes

Hello! It's been a while. A whole month, to be exact. I just want to apologize for the lack of updates for this story. I've recently spent some time in hospital, but now that I am out I will be able to update this story once more. The updates may not be as frequent as weekly, however. I'll play it by ear whilst I'm in recovery. This chapter is a whopping 23k+ words so I really hope that makes up for my absence. That's essentially four chapters in one, but it was necessary given this is the climax of the entire story.

So, who saw it coming? Let me know what you guys think. If anyone is confused about anything, I'll be more than happy to explain. Also, a big congratulations to those who emailed me about solving Rhett's cipher before Link did. You all deserve a pie to the face. This chapter does a lot of jumping around, and contains a lot of flashback segments which are all slightly altered to fit the structure of this chapter. I hope this acted as a nostalgia trip for those reading for the first time in a month, and I hope it refreshed all of your memory's.

Apologies to leave you in such a cliffhanger, yet again.
Some fun things about this chapter:
1) McLaughlin's words "It isn't very wise to piss off a guy..." is influenced by a quote from Will Graham in the television show, Hannibal.
2) Stevie and Link's heart to heart scene whilst sitting on the window ledge is based off of a personal experience of mine.
3) Alex and Chase are officially an item in this chapter. (That's for you, Mamaburnie!)

Finally, you can also note that I have updated the chapter number to be a total of 26. This is subject to change should readers want the trivia chapter to be included at the very end, after the epilogue. It will also be affected by my decision to either finalize this story as a one-shot, or expand it into a sequel or even a series. What's everyone's thoughts on that?

No beta, so as usual I'll get to errors momentarily. (There may be a lot of mistakes due to this chapter's length.) I don't know when the next update will be, but I'll try my best to get it up before the end of the year. If not, I hope everyone has an enjoyable festive period! Merci et prends soi de toi!
JULY 22ND 2007, present day

“Link,” Rhett spoke first, voice quiet as if he'd been holding his breath. Maybe he had. Link knew he had been holding his. “You're here.”

“You're here,” Link replied, looking up at Rhett with wide eyes. They didn't water, much to his surprise, but his arms were shaking in restraint. He felt his fingers twitch when the taller man shifted slightly, leaning forward slightly closer to Link.

“I am,” Rhett breathed, looking down at Link with uncertainty. Link's fingers curled and his hand twitched at his side, his mind running in circles. “Link, I'm sorry—”

Abruptly, Link raised his right hand and slapped Rhett hard in the face. The sound echoed throughout the room, eliciting a few gasps from the people watching. Rhett's neck cracked from the force of the blow as his head turned in response, his mouth dropping open in shock. Link's hand was burning, his fingers tingling from adrenaline. He was miffed. He was beyond miffed. He was downright pissed at Rhett.

But as Rhett turned his head back to face him, the offended cheek already displaying a pink blush, a shuddering gasp escaped Link's mouth. With a resigned grunt, Link raised both of his hands and took a hold of Rhett's face. The taller man tensed in response, stunned, right up until the moment Link crashed their lips together.

If someone were to ask Link years from now why he kissed Rhett, he would say it was a momentary lapse of judgment. But that wouldn't exactly be true.

Link kissed Rhett with desperation, with dread and guilt, but also for alleviation. Rhett was there; Rhett was standing in front of him, finally. Finally. Link's heart hammered inside his chest, his body tingling with electricity from his fingertips to his toes. Once he felt one of Rhett's long arms encircle his slender waist, the other bracing the back of his head, Link was sure his chest was about to burst. Rhett was there. Rhett was there with him. He'd actually shown up.

It took courage, that was for sure. Link would give him that. Rhett was showing his face to numerous agents who had been working on the assumption that he was the bad guy for the past weeks. It was a lot to take in, a lot to swallow, and Link felt like he was drowning. Maybe it wasn't a bad way to go, though, he thought as the two men broke apart for air. The space between them didn't last long, however, as Rhett was fast to get both of his arms around Link's small frame and pull him into his own body. Link melted into the embrace and gripped the back of Rhett's shirt with his shaking hands. His knuckles turned white from squeezing so tightly, but the taller man didn't appear to mind the new creases in his shirt.
A quiet clap was heard from behind Link, off somewhere towards the other people in the room, momentarily forgotten by him. It was followed by a couple more, until Link realized people were applauding. He felt his cheeks heat up, his entire body flaring to attention. They had an audience. No, they had an audience who were applauding their reunion. Why? What for?

And why did it make Link's knees feel unsteady?

Rhett did nothing but hold Link a little tighter, exhaling warm breath into his hair. It made Link squeeze his eyes closed and savor the moment.

“I'm sorry,” Rhett whispered into Link's hair, quiet enough that only he could hear it. Link felt his heart miss a couple of beats before resuming its hammering. His stomach churned, but he ignored it and settled for exhaling heavily against Rhett's chest and shaking his head.

“I know.”

“That's probably not what you wanna hear right now, is it?”

“Not exactly.” Link replied, but what did he want to hear? If anything?

“Rhett,” A new voice interrupted them, but Link welcomed it, feeling incredibly overwhelmed by the situation. Rhett smelled like he always did; a mixture of spice and salt, with a twinge of something sweet. A sickening aroma that made Link's head swim. He couldn't think straight around Rhett. The taller man's eyes flickered over to the offending voice, to the person who'd interrupted the two's embrace.

“I'm glad you're back.” Stevie told Rhett sincerely, prompting Link to wiggle out of his ex-handler's embrace in favor of turning to face the woman in question. He didn't get to move far, however, as Rhett was quick to wrap his strong arm around Link's waist, holding him in place. “We all are.”

Link's eyes flickered up to Rhett's face and watching him smile through his battered flesh, his lips cracking. The taller man moved forwards, taking Link with him by the waist, and wrapped an arm around Stevie's shoulders once he was close enough. Stevie let out a shuddering gasp, similar to the one Link had released after embracing Rhett, so he understood the impulse.

“It's really over.” Stevie whispered.

“IT IS.” Rhett replied, sounding sincere and a little overwhelmed. Maybe he didn't truly believe it was over, because, was it ever? There was always something. There were no happy endings, and Link was beginning to understand that. Rhett's arm around his waist started to tingle.

“You gave us a real scare, boss man.”

Link looked over at Morgan, who was the next to speak. He managed to free himself from Rhett's grasp long enough for Morgan to place a firm hand on Rhett's shoulder, despite being a good couple of inches shorter than him. Rhett shook Morgan's free hand firmly, and the two exchanged a nod of pure respect. Link looked on in awe, hands and fingers tingling from the lack of contact. Part of him wanted to move back to his ex-handler and take a hold of him, ensuring that they wouldn't lose each other again, but another part of Link wanted to run far away where no one could find him again. That part of him, becoming louder and louder, growing larger with every minute, ached to go back home to North Carolina and pretend nothing ever happened.

Because this wasn't about heartfelt reunions and embraces. Nothing had changed between he and Rhett, had it? The man standing before Link, now surrounded by his agents, was still the man who murdered his family. Link couldn't overlook that.
“You think he's back for good?” Alex asked Link, moving to stand next to him and watch the scene before them as others in the room began to crowd Rhett. He was a celebrity, after all. Chase was standing by Alex's side with his arms folded over his chest. The fact that neither of them rushed to greet Rhett was enough for Link to guess how the two of them felt.

“I don't know.” Link told them honestly. Chase shook his head and sucked his teeth.

“I wouldn't hold my breath,” He said, then looked to the side at Link, “He's known to be flaky.”

“Yeah.” Alex nodded in agreement. Link sighed heavily in response and tried to rid himself of any debilitating thoughts that arose from the topic of conversation. There would be time for that kind of talk, but the time wasn't now. Now was all about getting the needed information out of Rhett before he was able to talk his way out of it. His ex-handler was notoriously talented at avoiding important subjects and deflecting all kinds of blame, even when it came to murder. Miraculously, however, Rhett hadn't denied killing Link's wife, which left a bitter taste on the tip of Link's tongue. He wanted to know why.

Link's eyes never left Rhett after that, keeping them glued to the tall man in fear of losing him again. It didn't seem like his ex-handler was about to make a run for it, though, so there was that. Link figured he was better safe than sorry. Rhett's jaw was tight, as was his expression, and his shoulders looked tense and rigid like he didn't want to be there. He probably didn't. But it became clear why once Rhett managed to worm his way out of the group of people surrounding him and make his way over to Link.

The second he was close enough, Rhett pulled Link back into an embrace, though a loose one. He wrapped his arms around Link's hips and pulled the smaller man forward. Their hips pressed together and Rhett's lips brushed against Link's forehead. The tensing in his ex-handler's shoulders appeared to dissipate, and his expression softened, and Link realized the anxiety Rhett must have felt from being apart from Link for that short period of time. He wasn't alone, given that Link's arms and legs twitched every time the taller man embraced someone that wasn't him. His foolishness wasn't in vain, it seemed, since Rhett appeared to feel the same.

Link squeezed Rhett's biceps, then kept his hands draped gently over the taller man's arms for support. He shook his head, unable to believe the fact that Rhett was standing in front of him, holding him tighter than he ever had. His ex-handler was no longer a dream created to torture Link and leave him with too many sleepless nights. Rhett was no longer the nightmare that haunted Link's thoughts.

Now Rhett was the nightmare standing before him.

“Wanna get out of here?” Rhett asked him lowly, as if he didn't want anyone else to hear. As if all eyes on the room weren't on them.

Link rested his forehead on the other man's chest and inhaled deeply. After a moment, he said, “Okay.”

“Despite the recent apprehension of my uncle...” Rhett began, gaining Link's attention, who had been fidgeting with the sleeve of his shirt. It was far too big for him, having originally belonged to Morgan. The other man had loaned it to him indefinitely so Link didn't have to walk around in a blood-stained t-shirt anymore. Rhett inhaled slowly, standing facing the window where Link and
Stevie had sat hours prior, looking out at the city beyond, “the sky still seems gray.”

Link understood what Rhett meant. The fact that McLaughlin was done for—arrested and headed to prison—didn't change anything. They were no longer in danger, and the city was no longer in danger, but what else had changed in their lives? Things were still fifty shades of messed up.

There were dark clouds looming over the city below them, so much so that Link could barely make out Mythical HQ through the fog. There was a storm coming.

“Link,” Rhett continued, eyes flashing over to the smaller man who now stood next to him, “I just wanna say...well, thank you. If you hadn't been wearing that wire, I wouldn't be here.”

“Neither of us would be,” Link reminded him, not bothering to look Rhett in the eye as he spoke, “It wasn't intentional. I forgot I had it in my pocket. Stevie's the real heroine here.”

“She's a heroine for sure. More capable than I thought.”

“She's a lot more like you than I thought, too.”

Rhett shook his head instantly and fidgeted with the base of his shirt. It was a faded white color, and crumpled as if it hadn't been ironed, like the taller man had grabbed it in haste and thrown it on before speeding out the door of his apartment. “I'm no hero.”

“To everyone else you are.”

“But I'm not to you, am I?”

The question was rhetorical and Link knew it, but he replied anyway. Maybe to twist the knife even deeper into them both. “No.”

Rhett looked away from him and exhaled heavily. Time stood still for a while and Link lost track of how long they stood in silence whilst simply gazing out of the ajar window before them. Once Link's legs began to ache from standing, Rhett took a seat on the windowsill similar to how Stevie had the night before. Well, technically it had been that morning, but Link's body clock was all sorts of messed up so he wouldn't exactly call it that.

The bearded man gestured to the space beside him. Link sunk down onto the window sill and angled his body towards Rhett. The sill seemed a lot smaller now compared to when he'd shared the tight space with Stevie. Rhett was a lot larger and Link had to squeeze his legs close to his chest to allow them both adequate space. With his back pressed firmly against the concrete at the side of the window, his calves brushed the side of Rhett's arm a couple of times whilst squirming into position. Eventually Link gave up and settled for resting his knees against Rhett's arm. The taller man didn't seem to mind. In fact, it looked like he appreciated the contact.

Rhett's legs were hanging over the edge of the window, his feet dangling in mid air, shoes threatening to fall off and into the darkness below. It was humid outside and Link felt sweat form on his forehead, only worsened by Rhett's presence next to him. The heat from the taller man's arm radiating through him. Link's heart was thumping inside his chest for what was to come.

“Link.”

“Rhett.”

Rhett smiled a little, but there was a sadness behind it that Link tried his best to understand. “You must have questions, right?”
“I do.”

Rhett was quiet for a long moment as if he were readying himself for Link to go on. When he didn't, Rhett asked, “Having trouble?”

“Having trouble believing that you're here in front of me.” Link told him, his voice shaking. In all honesty, Link was relieved to see his ex-handler; of course he was. This was the man he loved. This was the man who meant everything to him. Someone he'd gotten so close to within such a short amount of time. Of course he was relieved to see him. But that changed nothing. “I spent so much time staring at after-images of you, and spending time in places you hadn't been in weeks.”

“It was you who tried to break into my bunker.” Rhett said suddenly, as if talking to himself. Link nodded in confirmation and watched as the taller man's lips quirked into a smirk. “I thought it might have been you, but then, why would you?”

“Honestly, I don't know,” Link told him, resting his chin on his knees and looking out at the clouds above, “I guess I thought you might've been there. That I might've been able to...I don't know.”

“Apprehend me?” Rhett asked quietly.

“No,” Link replied, surprising not only Rhett but also himself, “I don't think I was ever going to catch you.”

“But, you said—”

“I know what I said.” Link replied instantly, interrupting Rhett. You are going to be caught. Link's own words echoed inside his head, taking him back to that frightful night where everything had fallen apart.

“You are going to be caught.”

“Maybe,” Rhett replied, then straightened his back with pride, “Are you going to take me in?”

That was a question and a half, Link thought. The answer was ultimately no; no, he wasn't taking Rhett in. Not just because he simply didn't have the evidence to do it—a fact that Rhett was probably aware of—but because that wasn't what Link came here to do. The second Link had destroyed the wire he was wearing, Rhett could have run. He could have made a break for it and high tailed it out of there before Link one-upped him and arrested him. But Rhett was still standing there in front of Link, staring at him like Link was his entire world. A corrupted world, Link would add.

“You are going to be caught.”

“No,” Link admitted, voice hard and steady. Rhett didn't move. “You deserve to be punished for what you've done; for what you've put me through.”

“But?” Rhett prompted, shifting on his feet as if he was getting ready to flee. Link could no longer spot any form of affection in the taller man's cold eyes, Rhett having built a wall between them that Link had no intention of attempting to climb over. It wasn't his job to do that anymore. Link stared him down, breathing heavily as he felt the weight of what he was about to do on his shoulders.

“You are going to be caught,” Link repeated quietly, “But not tonight, because I didn't see you tonight.” From the way Rhett's brow furrowed, it was evident he hadn't been expecting Link's response. It only prompted Link to continue, “Consider this...a head start. You are going to be caught, and I'm going to be the one to catch you.”

Link shook his head at the memory. It certainly hadn't turned out that way, had it? But did anything ever go to plan?
“Why?” Rhett asked, and immediately Link knew what he meant. The bearded man might have been better asking why not? Why hadn't Link caught him?

“You know why.” Link repeated himself, knowing fine well it was exactly what he'd said that night. Link was in love with Rhett, and no matter how much the guy deserved it, Link couldn't take him down. Not in a million years. He was weak. Rhett made him weak.

“I guess I do.” Rhett replied quietly, then swallowed audibly and cleared his throat. He shifted slightly and placed a hand on Link's calf, rubbing his thumb over the aching flesh under his jeans. Link fought a shiver. “I have a lot of explaining to do.”

“Putting it lightly, yeah.”

“Link, I—”

“You killed my family.”

Rhett's gentle caress of Link's calf halted immediately. The air was tense. There was no sugar coating it.

“You killed four people.” Link continued, not backing down because the time for reticence about the situation was over, “And you got away with it. And then, years later, I am assigned to you. Or was I? Did you request to become my handler?”

“I didn't request to get you specifically.” Rhett told him instantly—a little too instantly—and became visibly tense, gritting his teeth as he spoke. “I was made aware of your transfer, and...McLaughlin took care of the rest.”

“He assigned you as my handler?” Link asked, cursing the man now on his way to prison. Rhett nodded solemnly, as if the idea of being Link's handler bothered him. “Why would he do that?”

“My best guess is he was testing me. Or thought he was testing me.”

“Why?”

Rhett hesitated, before removing his hand from Link's leg after a moment of silence. Link's skin was on fire under the fabric which Rhett's palm had graced. “He'd been suspicious of me for a long time. I guess he wanted to torture me or something. To assess where my loyalties lay.”

Link didn't respond for a long moment, studying Rhett intensely for even so much as a hint of falsehood. When he couldn't find any in the other man's eyes, he asked, “He had no idea you were part of the Resistance until we did?”

“Correct.”

“How did you keep that a secret for so long?” Link asked, then backtracked, “Actually, how long have you been a double agent?”

“Five years,” Rhett told him, “Been working at Mythical Intelligence for eleven.” He paused to think, then corrected himself, “Well, officially, it's been nine. I left for a while.”

“You left?” Link blinked in response, wondering why Rhett would leave such a high paying job when he clearly had nothing against the notoriously dangerous and illegal work practices. “Why?”

“Because I—” Rhett stopped himself, as if preventing himself from saying something. In the end, he
simply said, “Just needed a break for a while.”

“Rhett, really? After everything.” Link furrowed his eyebrows in anger, “you're going to sit there and lie to me?”

“It's not a lie.”

“Then what is it?”

“A vague answer.” Rhett revealed, then sighed, “I took two years off back in ’98. Happy?”

1998: the year Link's life went to hell. Link didn't speak, and after a long minute of tense and uncomfortable silence, Rhett broke it, “I initiated demolition of the hotel building. Then I took some time off. I left.”

“How?”

Rhett's eyes flashed over to Link, who noticed the pain in them, “Why did you join the North Carolina Intelligence unit?”

Link blinked in response, stunned that Rhett hadn't answered him. Instead, he'd asked a question of Link that was both personal and struck a nerve, and he couldn't help the unpleasant shiver than ran down his spine. Why did he join the agency in North Carolina? It felt like decades ago. Jen scolded him for thinking of joining, claiming he'd made the choice for the wrong reasons—out of some kind of personal vendetta, or on a mission for vengeance, which wasn't exactly wrong—but Link knew it was what he had to do. Being a sheriff's deputy just didn't cut it for him back then, and especially after the loss of his wife. He needed a new profession. The jump from cop to secret agent wasn't that big, and Link made it just fine, hitting the ground running. Problem was, he'd ran straight into Rhett.

Figures.

“It was the right thing to do.” Link responded. Rhett looked pained by the response, and looked away towards the scheming clouds above them.

“Do you regret your decision?”

Link shook his head instantly. “No, I don't.” After a tense moment of silence, Link asked, “Do you?”

“Do I regret becoming a Mythical agent?” Rhett asked, and once Link nodded in response, he shook his head, “No, I don't. There's a lot of evil in the world, Link. As corrupt as the agency had become, I think now, with a little help from all of us, it'll get back on track. There's a lot of talented people here. Some more capable than myself, though they'd never consider themselves so, like you. You're strong, Link, stronger than I am. I'm weak compared to you.” Rhett's eyes seemed glazed over when Link tried to attract the other man's gaze. Stronger than Rhett? It seemed unlikely.

“Bullshit.” Link voiced his thoughts, gaining a surprised eyebrow raise from Rhett, “You're a lot of things, Rhett, but you're not weak. Far from it.”

“You make me weak.”

Link's breath caught in his throat upon hearing the words spoken aloud. Too many times had he thought the same about his ex-handler, too many times had he felt not good enough, or a lesser person when it came to Rhett. To hear that the bearded man felt the same, well, it was something. Really something. Like an itch Link couldn't get rid of.
Absently, he rubbed his elbow and grunted, “Oh.”

“I’m sorry,” Rhett said sincerely, meeting Link's eyes with his own, “Really, I am. I know that's not what you want to hear.”

“You're right, it isn't.”

“But I am. For everything.” Rhett continued as if Link hadn't spoken, which really began to make the smaller man's stomach bubble in anger. “I should have involved you sooner, and I shouldn't have let my personal feelings interfere with business.”

“Do you regret it?” Link asked quietly. Did Rhett regret falling for him?

“No,” Rhett responded in the same gentle tone, “I don't. Even if it would have been better for you if we hadn't happened. I'm selfish that way, Link.”

Link didn't respond to that. He didn't want to. He didn't want to think about how Rhett felt about him. Not anymore. The time for that was over, wasn't it?

He doesn't love you, Neal. Chase's voice was as clear as day in Link's mind, clattering against the bone arena of his skull. His head began to hurt, behind his eyes aching with a sharp throbbing. It was all too much. Rhett was too much.

“You still love him, don't you?” Stevie asked quietly after a while, once the evening chill had finally caused Link to shiver and wish he had been wearing a t-shirt. Stevie wasn't looking at him, which Link appreciated, since he wasn't sure he could have handled that sort of intensity. He thought for a moment about his answer, the silence stretching between them until he was able to respond.

“I do.” He told her, looking down at the street beneath them and inhaling deeply. He loved Rhett, of course he did. Not that it meant anything. Rhett wasn't there, and Link couldn't do anything but wait.

“He loves you too, you know,” Stevie told him, “Don't let him tell you otherwise.”

“Why would he do that?”

Stevie turned her head towards Link and looked at him strangely, before moving and linking their arms together. Link tensed slightly in response before relaxing into the contact. “Because he knows he isn't good for you — at least, that's what he believes. He thinks you deserve better than him. But don't let him tell you he doesn't love you, because I've never seen him like this before, Neal.”

“Like what?” Link asked, looking at Stevie curiously, feeling something warm bubble in his chest.

“Crazy like this. After he met you he's been caring and generous, more so than he ever was. There's an intimacy between the two of you that I can't even understand, and I've known him almost my entire life. You do something to him, Neal, something good.” Stevie told him, taking a deep breath and returning her gaze to the city ahead, “But also something frightening. I think it scares him a little, too.”

Did Link really make Rhett crazy? Reckless? Foolish? Criminals who'd accidentally and irrevocably fallen in love...it all seemed a little cliché. Even if it did manage to tug at Link's heart, just a little bit. The man sitting before him, doing his best not to touch Link, was in love with him. Wasn't he? Would he deny it if Link asked? Did Link want to ask?

No, the rational part of his mind screamed. That part of his brain, growing larger with every word leaving Rhett's mouth, screamed at Link to let go. Not only for himself, but for the good of the
agency. He and Rhett were a liability; they were a notorious couple who were framed and made out to be the bad guys. That would reflect negatively on the agency. It would reflect poorly on Link's future too.

He had to let go, no matter how difficult it seemed.

“Out of questions?” Rhett asked, breaking the prolonged silence.

“Hardly,” Link replied, struggling to keep his voice even, “If Morgan was with you all this time, why kidnap him?” He'd already heard the answer, but he had to hear it from Rhett himself.

“I needed Morgan back with me, and that was the only way to do it.” Rhett explained factually, his voice taking a businesslike tone. “Stevie couldn't get me just Morgan, so Candace had to be 'kidnapped' too. Her reaction made it more real for all of you.”

“What did she do when she found out you were the good guys?” Link asked, using that term loosely.

“She slapped me in the face.”

Link snorted in response. “Atta girl.”

“Good to know myself being assaulted brings you joy, Link.” Rhett was smirking a tiny bit, prompting Link's own smile to fall considerably. Now wasn't the time for jokes. There was no time for jokes anymore. “Regardless, I needed Morgan back for his own safety. I got an inkling that McLaughlin knew he was a double agent, so immediate extraction was necessary.”

“Then why did you talk to me on the surveillance cameras?” Link asked, recalling the scene.

“They're better with us, trust me,” Rhett told the camera, but Link felt like his ex-handler was talking to him and only him. Rhett glanced down at his watch once more and grimaced, then returned his gaze back to the camera, making a move as if he was about to take off running. “I'm out of time. Just trust me, Link.”

Link paled and watched as Rhett took off, sprinting down the corridor and around a corner, out of view and out of surveillance range. He disappeared again, this time taking Morgan and Candace along with him.

Rhett hesitated visibly, obviously searching for the answer in himself before answering Link. It made Link wonder if he even wanted to hear what the bearded man was going to say, but he didn't have a chance to change the subject before Rhett spoke. The other man's voice was quiet, his shoulders rigid, “I don't know. I couldn't stop myself. I didn't want you to see me like that. I had to give you some sort of inkling that I wasn't entirely the bad guy.”

“So you did it to mess with me?” Link asked, miffed, “To make yourself feel better?”

“Essentially,” Rhett confirmed, leaving Link speechless that he'd actually told the truth, “But after the video Morgan and I recorded and sent to every local news station in town, I had to do something.”

“You didn't expect McLaughlin to rat you out to the press?” Link asked in response, recalling how shaken up the woman was to watch the video with him, “Stevie was a mess during it. She all but barged into my apartment to watch it on the news.”

“There'll be—there'll be—” Stevie tried, her voice quiet and shaking, and Link hated it, “There'll be a price on Rhett's head. McLaughlin has signed the death certificate himself.”
“What—what do we do? Stevie, what do we do?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” Stevie managed, evidently as panicked as Link was. Hearing her speaking Rhett's real name aloud hadn't even surprised Link—he had suspected she knew it from the beginning. Her hand shook at her side, shaking Link's too by accident. Link attempted to stop her but only ended up making it worse. He was in no condition to help, not when he couldn't even prevent his legs from shaking.

“This was deliberate. It was deliberate, right?” Link asked, as if Stevie knew all the answers, “McLaughlin knows about us. About Rhett and I. Is this him getting back at me?”

“I don’t know, Neal,” Stevie managed.

“I didn’t,” Rhett replied, though he seemed distracted, “Stevie watched it at your apartment?”

“She said she was ‘in the area’,” Link told him, then added sarcastically, “Taking notes out of your book, clearly.”

“I don’t have a book, Link.”

“It's a figure of speech, Rhett.”

“I know,” Rhett snapped, prompting Link to huff in response. Both men looked away from one another in an instant, unsure of how to proceed. Outside it had began to rain, droplets of water trickling down the glass of the ajar window and threatening to seep onto the windowsill. The sound of raindrops gently colliding with the glass calmed Link down slightly, and he lost himself to the harmony of the weather. That was until Rhett spoke again, in a much gentler tone.

“You still haven't asked me the most important question.”

“Didn’t I?” Link responded, gathering himself and swinging his legs back over the windowsill. He stood up and rolled his shoulders a few times, now sore from behind squeezed up against the concrete in order to accommodate Rhett.

“No.” Rhett replied, then swiveled his body around to face Link, feet now firmly planted on the floor. “Why I killed your family.”

Anger and grief tore through Link in an instant. It was rapid and it was intense, coursing through his veins like poison, traveling from his head to his feet, from his fingers to his toes. He felt like he was on fire, his skin burning, his extremities tingling. His fingers twitched in response and he refused to turn around to face Rhett, who still sat on the windowsill, presumably looking up at Link who now towered over him. For once.

“Would you tell me if I asked?” Link managed, speaking through gritted teeth and bitterness. His shoulders were shaking.

“Another good question.” Rhett replied, nonchalant. Like the topic of murder was nothing to him. Been there, done that, was that it? “Are you going to ask?”

Link snapped. He spun around and glared at Rhett, whose eyes widened remarkably. “Is everything a freaking game to you? Everything has to be a challenge. Everything. Even when it comes to my family. My wife...my wife that you murdered. You killed her. And yet you sit here and act like it's nothing.”

Rhett was quiet for a total of five seconds, Link having counted. But then the bearded man rose to
his feet and towered over Link, perhaps intentionally, to assert dominance or whatever. “This isn't a
game, Neal.”

“You dropping the 'Link' already?” Link asked, “Done with the charade?”

“What charade?”

Link didn't respond, which didn't seem to sit well with Rhett.

“I don't know what you think you know,” Rhett began, “but what I feel for you is no charade.”

Link didn't know what to say to that. What could he say? Rhett loved him, even if he hadn't
explicitly stated it, that much was obvious. But that changed nothing. Love wasn't everything. Love
was just another painful part of life. Love helped nobody, and it certainly didn't help Link. His
feelings for Rhett were just inconvenient.

“Louise Gilley.” Rhett said suddenly, prompting Link to raise an eyebrow at him.

“What?”

“Louise Gilley, nineteen years old, smoke inhalation,” Rhett repeated, causing Link to furrow his
brow, “Wendy White, eighty-two years old, cardiac arrest.”

“Rhett, what—?” Link tried to ask for answers, but the taller man interrupted him.

“Ryan Pruitt, thirty-three years old, viral infection of the skin.” Rhett continued, as if rhyming names
off from memory. He hesitated after that, and Link searched his eyes for something, anything that
could explain his sudden outburst.

When he realized what Rhett was doing, Link felt like he'd been hit by a truck.

“Kimberly Neal,” Rhett spoke quietly, and in a respectful tone, “age twenty-two, smoke inhalation.”

That was...that was all of the victims from the bombing, wasn't it? Link remembered them now. Link
remembered all of their names and faces. His wife's face was permanently etched into his mind.

“That's everyone who died as a result of my decision to demolish that hotel.” Rhett stated, and Link
wished he hadn't confirmed it. “Your wife among them. Their faces are permanently etched into my
mind.”

Link shivered as Rhett echoed his own thoughts.

“I don't know what you think you know,” Rhett continued, repeating himself, “or what your idea of
me is, but my actions aren't something I'm ever going to be able to forget. I killed those people, I
know I did. I won't deny it and I never have. It's something I'm living with and have lived with for
many years now. Think what you want of me, but don't stand there and look at me like I'm a piece of
crap. I know what I did.”

Link was silent for a long moment as he struggled with the weight of Rhett's words. There it was; the
ultimate confession of guilt. Rhett was a murderer and he knew he was, but if he was as cold-
blooded and ferocious as he made himself out to be, why did he have the names of those he'd killed
memorized? Not only their names, no, but their ages and how they died. It seemed like Rhett had
plucked them out of thin air, perfectly reciting them as if reading them from a list in his hands. Did he
feel guilty? Did he feel regret? Link didn't know, he couldn't be sure and he didn't have the patience
to try and work it out. Rhett was too difficult to read. The task was near impossible.
And yet, still, after the confession, nothing had changed. They were still Rhett and Link, and they were still trapped in their own mess.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better, Rhett?” Link asked, voice raised until he was sure the others on the floor below may hear, “Make me forget about everything you’ve done?”

“No—"

“Did you think that just because you emerged as the hero that it would fix everything? That you feel guilt or remorse and that it’d make everything better? That I’d forgive you and we’d hold hands and ride off into the sunset?”

Rhett appeared to hesitate, making it seem like he really had been thinking it'd be that easy. Link felt like emptying the contents of his stomach onto the floor beneath his feet, but he had to stay strong. This had to be done. Link had to make this decision for himself and no one else. No matter what anyone else said or thought, no matter what Stevie said or what Morgan claimed, this was a decision Link had to make on his own. And he was making it now. Now or never, yeah. That was it.

But Rhett spoke before Link got the chance to.

“We were always going to say goodbye, weren't we?”

Link didn't respond for a long moment, too stunned into silence, his fists shaking at his side. Rhett was looking at him with eyes as large as saucers, such pain in them that made Link crack at the seams. Quietly, he confirmed, “I think so.”

Because they were going to see goodbye eventually. They were doomed from the start. From the very beginning. Their relationship was built upon lie after lie that Rhett fed to Link, who now had to deal with a bad case of indigestion, so to speak. Link exhaled a much needed breath of air from his lungs and felt the world crumble around him.

Rhett's knees began to wobble and he looked paler than Link had ever seen him. The redness around his eyes and the blood stained hairs of his beard looked much more prominent. He was blinking more than usual, too. “I love you, though.”

Link felt a shiver shake his entire body to its core. He felt it creep its way up and along his spine, spreading its way across his scalp until it was all he could feel. He felt like he was being torn apart from the inside out. Rhett's eyes were locked on Link's, brighter than ever. The smaller man didn't bother fighting his gaze. “I know—"

“I love you so much.”

Link had to close his eyes and gently repeat, “I know.”

Rhett swallowed audibly and clenched his fists at his sides, looking away and back towards the ajar window. After a long moment of silence between the two men, Rhett nodded softly. Acceptance. Link saw it in the taller man's eyes when he turned back around. He'd accepted that they were done. They were over.

Over before they ever began, really.

Link didn't bother saying anything else. He simply took one last look at Rhett before turning his back on him and walking away. There was nothing left to say.
JULY 25TH 2007, present day

Link didn't hear from Rhett after that and he didn't expect to. Not a word. His infamous bearded partner in crime had dropped off of the grid indefinitely. At least, that's what Link could assume. He hadn't gone looking for Rhett and Rhett hadn't sought him out either. Things were better that way.

Or at least that's what Link would keep reminding himself. In reality he wasn't happy with the way things had turned out between the both of them, but what else could he have done? He couldn't be with Rhett, not after what he had done. He had to let go, and if that meant hurting Rhett in the process then Link would damn well do it. It was about him this time. It was finally time for Link to be selfish and put the pain and heartbreak of Los Angeles behind him and go home. Back to North Carolina.

“Passengers situated in rows E through H, you are now boarding.” A female announcer interrupted Link's thoughts, indicating that it was time for him to kiss the humidity of California goodbye and board the plane home to Buies Creek. Time to kiss Rhett goodbye—no, Link didn't even do that. Shaking his head and stretching out his legs in front of him, he sat up from slouching in an uncomfortable airport chair and rose to his feet. His back was aching, but it was nothing compared to the ache inside his ribs, dead in the center of his chest. Or was it a little to the left? Link never really liked biology anyways, but his entire chest was aching in ways Link didn't know it could. He felt like the wind had been knocked out of him permanently and he was doomed to heave shallow breaths for the rest of his life. He hoped it wasn't permanent. Pain subsided and problems sorted themselves out if you waited long enough. Link knew that. All he needed was time.

Maybe that was all Rhett needed, too. Time and space. Now there was states between them, which was a hell of a lot of space. They could both move on.

Link handed his boarding ticket to the air hostess; a small, surly woman with the face of a mole rat. She smiled at him through crooked teeth as she returned his ticket and waved him through the gate. Link didn't bother smiling back.

He had a window seat. It was the small pleasures, really.

At least, it was a pleasure until a large older man took his assigned seat next to Link and took a whole lot more room than was necessary. For once, Link was thankful for being so slender. He leaned his head against the side of the aircraft and watched a group of men in luminous jackets load suitcase after suitcase onto the plane. It was going to be a long flight.

Link hadn't left without saying goodbye to anyone, no. So that made him feel slightly better about the entire situation. He had arranged with Stevie to be transferred back to North Carolina the day after he and Rhett had their stand off, and she allowed it, understanding what Link had been through. There was no paperwork to fill out, nothing. A simple goodbye would suffice, Stevie had said. Though there was a look in her eye that conveyed her sadness about the situation. Or perhaps her disappointment that he and Rhett hadn't worked out after all. But she didn't voice any of it, of course she didn't. She was a lot like Rhett in that way.

They vowed to maintain in contact, via texting and emails, maybe the occasional phone call, but Lin was positive it was only formality. He didn't think he'd hear from Stevie much.
Chase and the others were another story, though. Morgan was adamant that Link remain in Los Angeles, that he would be missed, and he was a vital member of the team. All true, perhaps, but Link had to decline. He had to leave for his own health, which Morgan understood, but was still mildly pissed at him for leaving. Or at least it felt that way.

Chase and Alex had hugged Link goodbye and exchanged heartfelt moments, none of which Link remembered very well. It was all a blur. It was all pushed aside in his brain to make room for the reality of the situation.

He was going to see Jen again. After everything on the news that had implicated him as the bad guy. As Rhett's accomplice.

He would have a lot of explaining to do.

**JULY 26TH 2007, present day**

Link landed back in North Carolina in the early hours of Thursday morning. He felt groggy from the few naps he'd been able to take on the plane, having to squeeze himself between the window and the guy sitting next to him. Midway through the flight he was rudely awoken by a packet of peanuts exploding all over him, belonging to the man sitting in the seat next to him. Just Link's luck, he guessed. He could never catch a break.

His hair was disheveled and matted to his forehead with sweat. He wiped it away from his face with his hand and pushed his glasses further up his nose. He had to keep a clear head and wake up so he could stay wake on the journey home from the airport. Although he didn't exactly know if it was his home anymore. Did he even belong anywhere? It didn't feel like it.

The taxi Link took on the way to the airport all those months ago was much more cheerful compared to the one he got to Jen's apartment. He was completely silent during the journey, even ignoring the driver's pathetic attempt at small talk. What was the point? He'd probably never meet the guy again anyway. Link had too much to think about, gazing out of the window and recognizing his childhood state pass by him in a blur.

It was nearing four in the morning when the taxi pulled up outside Jen's apartment building. Link tipped the driver generously, his conscience finally catching up to him and he felt bad for his earlier ignorance. He had had the good mind to text Jen before his arrival as not to wake her, and he'd actually received a response. Maybe she would welcome him home. Or maybe not. Maybe she'd killed his plants in an act of defiance. Time would tell.

Link climbeded two sets of stairs and made it to Jen's apartment, knocking twice on the door. It took Jen a couple of seconds to recognize Link through the eye hole and unlock the door, before swinging it open and revealing him. The two of them looked at one another for an immeasurable moment, both stunned to silence. Jen's hair had changed and was now a lot shorter, cropped just before her shoulders. She looked larger, more built, and could certainly take on Link in a fist fight and win. But maybe she could always do that.

Link must have been a sight to see; thinner than he'd ever been, broken and bruised and unsteady on his feet. Maybe that explained the pained expression on Jen's face, or the moisture forming at the edges of her eyes.
Link heard the sound of his duffel bag hitting the ground next to him before he'd even registered he'd dropped it. Then Jen's strong arms were around his shoulders, pulling him into her body and protecting him from everything. From Mythical Intelligence, from secret agents, from sadistic corrupt men of power, and most of all, protecting Link from Rhett. Link clutched to Jen's checkered shirt and didn't bother fighting the tears in his eyes, letting them spill over as he let out a choked sob.

He was home.

Chapter End Notes

Long time no see! I must apologize for the lack of updates, however my university work has been taking up most of my spare time. But the good news is there is only two more chapters left of this work (one being the epilogue). What did everyone think of Link's decision? What'd you think will happen next?

A few important things to note:
1) "I spent so much time staring at after-images of you, and spending time in places you hadn't been in weeks." - Link's words here are a direct nod to Hannibal (TV), as a similar line is spoken in the show.
2) "His feelings for Rhett were inconvenient." - another nod to Hannibal (TV), a similar line is spoken in the show

Also, I have created a poll for the readers to vote on what they would like to see next (if anything!) regarding this story. If anyone would like to cast a vote, feel free to do so here. I will keep the poll open until this story is concluded. You can vote more than once if you want to see more than one of the options!

Thank you! No beta, so as usual I'll get to errors momentarily. I don't know when the next update will be, but I'll try my best to get it up before the end March. Merci et prends soi de toi!
6 MONTHS LATER

JANUARY 15TH 2008, present day

"That's it." Jen's angered voice sounded throughout the room, gaining the attention of her fellow colleagues as she slammed a cryptography text book down onto the desk before her. "I've had it, Neal. What are you even doing here?"

Link, having just been violently interrupted from a day dream, managed to withdraw his hands from the desk before the text book flattened them. Bewildered, he looked up at Jen with wide but tired eyes. "I'm working."

"That's all you ever do." Jen hit back, giving Link one hell of a stink eye. Beyond her, Eddie had poked his head out of his office to see what all the commotion was about, and was now leaning against the doorway with his arms crossed. Much to Link's dismay, the bearded man didn't step in and put a stop to Jen's outburst. Betrayed by his own team, it seemed. Abruptly, Jen sighed and ran a hand through her hair, and Link watched as the veins in her arms bulged under her skin. She gave him a tired look and told him, "Go home. That's an order."

"But—"

"That's an order, Neal." Eddie chirped in, finally, but against Link. His voice sounded stern. Link felt like he'd been scolded by his parents. "Don't make the lady tell you twice. Get outta here."

Link opened his mouth to protest once more, but did he really want to face the argument that would surely follow? No. With a brief look around the room, noting the raised eyebrows and concerned looks on the faces of the rest of his team, Link slowly rose out of his chair and shrugged into his jacket. Without another word, he pushed his chair under his desk and walked out of the building.

The North Carolina air sent shivers down the back of Link's neck, radiating along his shoulder blades and settling at the base of his elbows. It was calm. Peaceful.

For all of two seconds.

"Charles!" A lanky man dressed in a beige three-piece suit pushed a microphone into Link's personal
bubble, causing him to grunt in surprise. "How does it feel after being back home for six months?"

"Look into the camera, Mr. Lincoln." Another man behind the camera ordered, and Link was forced to squint into a small lens before realizing what was happening. This kind of thing was normal now, at least for him. Cameras, photographers, and general paparazzi stalked Link wherever he went. Even to work. Although it had calmed down considerably compared to when he first moved back to Buies Creek. Our first home grown celebrity, the news would say. Link was famous in all senses of the word. Positively and negatively. People loved him, people hated him, and Link had simply grown to accept that. He couldn't please everyone; maybe he couldn't please anyone, really. Not today, at least.

"No comment." Link responded and pushed the microphone away from his mouth so he could pass by the reporters without further questioning. They got footage of him jogging down the street at least, which would just have to do. Unluckily for Link, Jen had been his ride to work that morning. They car pooled—it was something they always did. Every morning like clockwork, Jen would arrive at Link's house, sound the horn, and Link would exit his apartment to join her. The same thing happened this morning. Nothing out of the ordinary. Or so he thought. Evidently, Jen had a short fuse today.

In all honesty, Link couldn't blame her. It wasn't as if her complaints hadn't been justified. All he did do was work. Working forced him to focus on something else, anything else, something that wasn't the memories of Los Angeles that plagued his fragile mind. He went through a dark period after he got back, feeling like he didn't really belong anywhere. Was North Carolina even his home anymore? Did he belong in Los Angeles, where drama shadowed him everywhere he went like a foul-smelling cologne? Maybe. But not according to Jen. She had supported him unconditionally through thick and thin over the past six months, soon to be seven. He had only just moved back into his own apartment one month prior, having been crashing in Jen's guest bedroom prior to that. She was even adamant he simply move in with her, but he couldn't do that. He'd bothered her enough. Besides, he was a grown man, soon to be thirty years old. He was getting older and it was pretty intimidating to Link. But he tried not to think about it.

The key to his apartment got jammed in the lock of the door when he tried to open it—something it had been doing as of late. Just another headache Link would have to deal with sooner or later. He'd put it off until the last minute, and avoid it until he could no longer get into his apartment. Then he'd try to fix it. Shouldering the door open, he almost lost his balance as the door swung and dragged Link with it. Grunting, he forced the key out of the lock and closed the door behind him.

His apartment still had its Christmas decorations up. He hadn't bothered to take them down yet. Flicking the switch on the wall illuminated the room, turning on multiple lamps and the Christmas tree lights, and making the room seem a lot less dull. Link had spent Christmas with Eddie and his family in Lillington, having been encouraged to tag along after he'd revealed he'd probably be spending the holidays alone. Jen had travelled back to Canada to spend time with her family during the holiday season, and Link felt like he'd done enough travelling to last him a lifetime. Thankfully, Jen understood that. Eddie's family were kind and loving; just what you'd expect from a southern bunch. They did nothing but welcome Link and make him feel like he was home, but on the inside, he still felt like an outsider. He didn't belong with them, and it wasn't really his scene anyway. He didn't point it out, of course, as not to be a Scrooge. But truthfully he was relieved to come home after that weekend, and simply sit on the sofa in his apartment and read.

Over the past six months, Link has had little to no contact with those he left behind in Los Angeles. Chase and Alex emailed him regularly, simply to catch up and whatnot, but otherwise, Link had been basically left alone. Which is what he wanted. Right? Stevie certainly hadn't contacted him, but Link had seen her plenty of times on television. The press had been all over the “Mythical
Intelligence Corruption Scandal”, or so they called it. Thankfully, as Link had noted in multiple interviews and newspaper columns, Stevie had kept the story straight and reiterated that McLaughlin had been the bad guy—is the bad guy—and not Rhett. The media appeared to buy it, lapping up the whole 'forbidden love' angle of the story between Rhett and Link. Two people from other sides of the United States, brought together in the midst of corruption and danger, forbidden to fall in love as the agency strictly prohibits relationships between assets and handlers, must sneak around undetected whilst fighting an even bigger threat. Or something like that. Link had read hundreds of variations of the issue, but that was the general drift.

Rhett was a hero. Link agreed with that. The taller, bearded man had played his part as much as Stevie had played hers. He appeared on national television, talk show and radio shows, and posed for magazine covers and news articles, answering things perfectly and marginally honestly, keeping himself out of blame. Rhett did, however, much to Link's surprise and anger, reiterate the fact that he wasn't the good guy regardless of what Stevie claimed. That, yes, he'd still murdered innocents under direct orders. That it still kept him awake at night and that he never expected the country to forgive him. A heart filled speech, no question about it, and the country fell head over heels. Much like Link had months before. Now he was floating adrift, between minds, not really sure where he was heading or where he came from. Briefly, he wondered if Rhett felt the same.

The bearded man had since disappeared from the spotlight, having not been on television or magazines for at least three months now. Not that Link had counted, because he hadn't. The only time he saw Rhett was the occasional paparazzi spotting in a magazine when he’d simply been walking to the convenience store with his hood up, doing his best not to be bombarded. It was funny, really, since Link had been doing the same. Granted, North Carolina was a lot less populated with paparazzi, so it was a lot easier for him than it would have been for Rhett living in L.A.. Though the other man seemed to be doing a pretty good job of staying out of the limelight for the time being.

Maybe Link had been on the cover of some Los Angeles magazine somewhere too, and maybe Stevie or Rhett had seen it. Maybe Morgan, too, whom Link also hadn't heard from. Morgan had been pissed at Link for leaving the agency and going home, and Link understood that entirely. Such a response had been expected from Morgan, who was already a little hot-headed before exposed to bad news. Link had prepared for that type of reaction when he had revealed he was leaving to the team. The others, at least, were a little more understanding.

“There's always a place for you here, Neal.” Chase had told him, shaking Link's hand firmly and holding onto it whilst he spoke. Beside him, Alex nodded in agreement.

“He's right. Just say the word, and we'll print you another name tag.” Alex joked, a grin on his face as he also shook Link's hand. Link had nodded and smiled, but his heart wasn't in it. His heart was somewhere else, with somebody else.

Link hadn't spoken to Rhett since the day he walked out on him. It was better that way, Link told himself. Rhett didn't have the chance to talk himself out of trouble like he always did, and Link finally, finally, got the upper hand. Link came out on top and won, leaving Rhett behind and going home. Or something like that. Instead of feeling triumphant or like a winner, like he should have felt, Link was left feeling empty and hollow, like he'd actually lost. Which, he supposed, he had. He'd lost so much. He'd lost his wife, and now he'd lost the man responsible. It sounded twisted. It sounded vulgar. But it was the truth of the situation. Link had walked away from the man who loved him unconditionally.

Shaking his head, Link slumped down onto the sofa and put on the television. Immediately, he was greeted with Stevie's feminine face, in a picture in the background of a news report. The headline read “Heroic Mythical Agent To Be Promoted to President of the Company?” So Stevie was going
to take McLaughlin's place, huh. Link liked the sound of that. She deserved it, that was for sure. He
couldn't think of a better candidate. He imagined Rhett hadn't been considered given the fact that he
had committed multiple acts of murder and admitted it on live television.

Link put his feet up on the other end of the sofa and sunk further into the cushions, watching the
news and wishing he was somewhere else.

A sharp knocking at his apartment door frightened Link into consciousness, jumping out of his skin
and almost falling onto the floor as his body jolted. He must have dozed off, given that the television
was now on some bizarre talk show that Link would never sit through. Stretching, he swung his legs
around and got up to answer the front door. Mildly dizzy, he placed a hand to his forehead and
struggled to unlock the door, eventually swinging it open and revealing both Jen and Eddie standing
there. Eddie had an amused look on his face, but Jen just looked disappointed.

“We wake you?” Eddie asked. Link grunted, then nodded, and gestured for them to come inside.

“It's only seven, Neal,” Jen complained, closing the door behind Eddie once he entered Link’s
apartment like he owned the place, “What're you doing sleeping?”

“I didn't mean to,” Link defended himself, following Eddie into the kitchenette and scowling as the
other man helped himself to some coffee, “I turned on the television, put my feet up, now you're
here.”

Jen joined them, peering at her watch with a frown, “We sent you home at two. That's five hours
you've been out.”

“I guess I was tired.”

“No kidding.” Eddie agreed, sounding amused. More amused than Jen, thankfully. The bearded man
poured two cups of coffee, then handed one to Link. “You look like you need this.”

“Thanks.” Link accepted the cup of coffee and took a sip, ignoring the way it burned his tongue,
“What brings you two to my humble abode?”

“Come on into the living room, Neal,” Jen said, gestured for Link to follow her into the main room,
“We have something we want to talk to you about.”

Abruptly, Link asked, “Am I fired?”

Eddie barked a laugh. “No, Neal. Don't worry about that. I don't think the agency would cope
without you.”

That was relieving, Link thought, but it didn't slow his quickening heart rate. He placed his coffee
mug down onto the small table beside the sofa and took a seat. Jen parked down next to him, whilst
Eddie hovered for a few moments before sitting down on the adjacent armchair just tot he right of
Link. It felt like he was at the principal's office or something. Maybe he was.

“What's this all about?” Link asked.

Jen appeared to hesitant, and Eddie took a long sip of his coffee before placing it onto the table and
clearing his throat. “Listen, Neal, we know you've been through a lot. But Jen and I need to
straighten some things out with you.”

“What kind of things?”

“Like you maxing out on overtiming each month,” Jen chirped in, gaining Link's attention, “or always filling out the maximum amount of paperwork, leaving work late, sleeping away your free time, never—”

“Jen.” Eddie stopped the woman before she went off on one. Jen cleared her throat then sighed.

“Neal,” Jen started again, gentler this time, taking both of Link's hands in her own and looking him in the eye, “I think you should go back to Los Angeles.”

Link blinked. “What?”

“I don't want you to, don't get me wrong,” Jen back-pedaled, but Link could see the determination in her eyes, “But we both think it's the best thing for you.”

“No.” Link responded instantly, withdrawing his hands and folding them over his lap. Go back to Los Angeles? Had Jen lost her mind? “No. Just because I've been working a lot doesn't mean I should go back there. If anything, I've probably been more of a help to the North Carolina agency than I was there.”

“Well, that's a load of horse shit.” Eddie snorted, surprising Link. “Your work is great, Neal, and I'm happy to have you on my team. But you know you don't really think that.”

“I—”

“Neal, look at me.” Jen ordered, prompting Link to turn and face her. Jen could be scary when she wanted to be, and Link didn't want to risk it. Not if he could help it. Jen's eyes looked a little wet, as if she'd been crying prior to coming over. Maybe she had. Link should have noticed that sooner.

“Jen, what's wrong?” Link's brow furrowed. She couldn't mean—

“Rhett; you miss him. More than you want to admit.” Jen clarified, judging Link's stunned silence as permission to continue. She squeezed his hands. “Stop torturing yourself here. I've seen you do it before, back when...well, you know. I can't watch you do it again.”

“Jen...” Link began, but honestly, he had no idea what he was going to say after that.

“Go where you need to be. Go do what you have to do.” Eddie told him, then firmly, “But for the love of God, Neal, stop sulking around here when we both know he is who you want.”

Link was as transparent as glass. He always had been. But the recent developments had caused him to momentarily forget that trait of his and forget that he couldn't hide anything from Jen, and certainly not his feelings towards Rhett. Rhett had murdered his family, and in a way he had murdered Link too. But that didn't stop Link from loving him. Link took time away from Rhett, time away from Los
Angeles, and time away from everything, and still his feelings for that stupidly tall, bearded handler were stronger and fiercer than ever. He had spent so much time denying it. But now that Jen had laid it all out in front of him, he felt his resolve crumbling.

“But, I...I wouldn't know what to do.” Link stammered, shaking his head. “They've probably replaced me already. They won't need another specialist.”

“Are you crazy, Neal?” Eddie asked him, putting a reassuring hand on Link's shoulder. “With your skills? They couldn't replace you ever if they searched the country for the best of the best.”

“You are the best decryptor in the business, man.” Jen encouraged with a grin, though there was still sadness behind it. She'd be sad to let him go again.

“Well, I mean, I'd need to save up my paycheques—”

“Taken care of.” Jen told him, causing Link to eye her suspiciously. “We took care of it once you left the office. I know it seemed like we gave you a choice, but really, we're sending to back to Los Angeles.”

“You're being transferred.” Eddie joked. “Been a long time since you heard that one, huh, Neal?”

“Right.” Link agreed. Though he was extremely nervous. What would happen once he got back to Los Angeles? What would he do?

“Neal,” Jen warned, “I can see you panicking. What is it?”

“What am I supposed to do when I get there? I don't know where Rhett is, and even if I did, what the hell do I say to him?” Link questioned, beginning to talk himself out of the whole idea. “'Hey, I know you killed my family and all but, hey, whatever, it's cool'?”

Eddie snorted into his coffee, and Jen shot him a look.

“I don't know, I really don't. But you'll figure it out. You always do.” Jen reassured him, nodding. “You love him. I'm sure he loves you right back. Start with that. The rest will just fall into place.”

Link raised an eyebrow.

“At least, that's what happens in the movies.” Jen finished, laughing awkwardly, prompting Link to laugh too. “Seriously, Neal, take a few days, get used to your old place again. Then once you're ready, contact your old colleagues, most importantly, contact Stevie. I'm sure she'll know where Rhett is.”

“I hear she's the big wig now.” Eddie noted.

“The what?” Link asked, peering over his shoulder at the bearded man.

“The president of Mythical Intelligence, right? She took McLaughlin's old job?”

“She did? I thought they were just talking about it.”

“Nope.” Jen interrupted. “She got the job this afternoon. While you were asleep. I texted you about it.”

Huh. Stevie got the job. That would be a weird sight to see.

“She deserves it.” Link said honestly. Because she really did.
“She does, and it's also a weight off the country's shoulders.” Jen commented, withdrawing her hands from Link's in favour of drinking some of his coffee. “Do you know how long it'd have taken to find a new president?”

“Years.” Eddie whistled afterwards, then placed his now empty cup down onto the coffee table and clasped his hands over his lap. “So...need help packing?”

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JANUARY 30TH 2008, present day

It took Link two weeks to book a flight and mentally prepare himself for the journey back to Los Angeles. In a way, it felt like he was going home, even if he wasn't. Not really. Los Angeles was just another tidal wave in Link's life, although this time he had survived and was back for another round. He contacted Chase beforehand and told him the situation, to which he was delighted with. Chase wanted Link to come back, whatever it took, and was incredibly welcoming about everything. He also offered to contact Stevie on behalf of Link to organize something with her, which was a huge weight off of Link's shoulders. He did, however, warn Link that Morgan was entirely likely to punch him in the face when he returned, which was fair enough in Link's mind.

Flying back to Los Angeles felt different this time. He was more nervous than before, but also terrified. What if he got there and Rhett had moved on? What if he and Rhett didn't belong together, and everything they'd been through was for nothing? Or worse.

What if Rhett didn't want Link anymore?

Shaking his head, Link tried to expel such thoughts from his mind and focus on the positives. Like the way the hot Los Angeles sun shone down on him the second he left LAX. Or the way the cab driver cheerily chatted away to him during the long drive to his old apartment. Or the fact that Chase and Alex were waiting on him when he got there, holding the key to his place in their hands.

Maybe Link really was home.

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“Don't worry too much about it, Neal.” Chase told Link as they walked side by side out of the elevator inside Mythical Headquarters. The building had looked just as menacing that day as it had in the past, despite its newly uncorrupted status. The sun was high in the sky and Link was grateful the air conditioning on his old office floor was working. “Stevie hasn't changed. She just occasionally wears a suit to work now.”

Link loosened the tie around his neck and unbuttoned his the collar of his shirt. “I'll take your word for it. I wouldn't have thought Stevie would let this new title go to her head.”

“Definitely not, no.” Chase agreed as they came to a halt outside of Link's old team's office door. The smaller man next to him gave Link a sympathetic look. “Remember what I told you about Morgan?”

Link thought for a second. “Expect a punch in the face?”
“Yeah.”

“I’m ready for it.” Link assured Chase, because truthfully he was prepared for any repercussions for leaving the agency. He'd even removed his glasses for safety, in fear of Morgan breaking them, and worn his contact lenses.

“You should keep that stubble, man,” Chase said suddenly, his hand on the doorknob as he pushed the door open and began to enter the room, “It suits you.”

Link had allowed his facial hair to grow over the past two weeks simply out of laziness, but also because he wanted to try something new. To push himself out of his comfort zone. God knows he'd need that extra boost of confidence for what he was about to do. There was a dark shadow decorating the skin of his mouth, a reasonably thick layer of hair on his chin and cheeks, and stretching down his neck. He’d have to shave sooner or later, but if what Chase said was true, maybe he’d wait a little while longer. Maybe.

Most of Link’s team were pleased to see him. Particularly Candace, who looked up to Link a considerable amount ever since he’d saved her life when McLaughlin had her gagged and bound, back on that terrible day. Morgan, however, was less than grateful.

“You know you can't just waltz in here and pretend like everything's cool, right?” The larger man asked, arms folded across his chest, a stern look on his face. Link thought he looked tired, but otherwise hadn't changed a bit. Maybe he kept in contact with Rhett.

Link had turned his full attention to Morgan once the others had gotten back to work. “I know that. I don't expect things to be how they were.”

“Good, 'cause they ain't gonna be.” Morgan told him, and Link had the urge to roll his eyes but suppressed it so he didn't upset the other man further.

“Look, man,” Link began, taking a hold of Morgan's arm and dragging him to the more secluded area next to the coffee machine, “I know I shouldn't have left the way I did. I know that wasn't exactly mature of me.”

“No kidding.” Morgan replied, eyeing Link's hand on his arm with distaste before Link was forced to withdraw his hold sheepishly.

“But I'm back now, okay?” Link promised. “And whatever happens, I'm here for good. No strings attached. This is where I belong now.”

Morgan studied Link for a long moment. It was almost excruciating, because Link wasn't sure he'd be able to cope well at Mythical Intelligence without Morgan by his side. If he and the bulkier man were at odds, it would create a tension in the team that would benefit no one. Link grit his teeth and fought the urge to fidget.

“Really?” Morgan asked suddenly, eyes on Link. “You're really staying this time? In Los Angeles?”

“Yeah.” Link confirmed with a half smile. “I'm here for good.”

Morgan didn't react for a moment, making Link wonder if he'd even heard what he'd said. But then the bigger man unfolded his arms and a grin broke out on his face. He extended one arm and prompted Link to take it. “Well then, Neal. It's good to have you back.”

Link took a hold of Morgan's arm with his own and they exchanged a weird sort of handshake, typical of something basketball players would do. A sign of mutual respect. Link couldn't be happier.
“It's been hell without you.”

“Really?” Link laughed. “Stevie been giving you trouble?”

“You got no idea.” Morgan told him, but it seemed to be in good taste. Stevie wasn't one to hold a grudge. “Speakin' of the boss lady, you been in to see her yet?”

Link withdrew his arm and shook his head, taking his glasses out of the safety of his shirt pocket and putting them on. “Not yet. I thought I'd come clear the air in here first.”

“Smart move.” Morgan hummed, folding his arms across his chest once more and looking towards his other colleagues. “You lose your razor or something?”

Link laughed. “No, I'm trying something new.”

“It suits ya’.” Morgan grunted, then made a move to return to his desk. He slapped Link on the shoulder in a brotherly gesture. “And he'll like it.”

“Thanks.” Link replied, because they both knew who he was talking about, but Morgan had already returned to his desk by then. Link figured the larger man had kept in contact with Rhett, then. Did that mean Rhett still thought of Link? Was he still interested? Link had half a mind to call Morgan back and ask about his ex-handler, but thought against it. One thing at a time.

Breathing in air he didn't know he'd been holding, Link made his way out the door of the office. He nodded to Chase as he left, who in turn gave Link a much needed thumbs up.

Stevie's office was in the same location. It was evident she had rejected McLaughlin's old office for the time being, or maybe she was simply getting it renovated in order to wipe out all traces of the guy's presence. Link wouldn't blame her if that was the case. A few agents gave Link a passing wave or a 'welcome back, agent Neal', to which he simply smiled and nodded and tried to forget they ever happened. He didn't deserve the praise he received.

He knocked once on Stevie's office door, hoping she'd be in there and be able to make out his outline through the frosted glass.

“Yeah, come on in.” Link heard Stevie's voice, and it immediately sent a wave of calm through his system, beginning in his chest and radiating to his toes.

He opened the door slowly, incredibly nervous, but the second he caught sight of Stevie he knew he didn't have to be. The woman looked just the same as Link remembered her, save for the way she was dressed—as Chase pointed out. She wore a slim fitting and obviously tailored pin-striped navy blue suit jacket, on top of a pale pink shirt and navy tie. But her jacket sleeves were pushed up to her elbows, and the top button of her shirt was undone, making it look a lot more casual than what it was. Stevie smiled when she saw Link, who closed the door behind himself as she rose to her feet to greet him.

“Neal,” Stevie welcomed him with a gentle embrace, “How are you?”

“Getting there,” Link replied, holding onto the slim woman for a moment longer, “how are you?”

“Getting there.” Stevie parroted, then pulled away and smiled. She gestured for Link to take a seat across from hers so that the desk was separating them. Once they were both seated, she asked, “How was North Carolina?”

Link hesitated before admitting; “Different.”
Stevie hummed in acknowledgement, having seemingly understood what Link was feeling. That's why he enjoyed Stevie's company so much. They seemed to be so in sync even where there was silence. She reminded him a lot of Jen in that respect.

“You kept your office.” Link noted. Stevie nodded in response, eyes on the computer before her.

“I'm having McLaughlin's old office renovated.” She explained, clicking around a couple of times on the computer before clasping her hands on the desk and directing her full attention to Link. “I didn't want to work in a place that had so much as a hint that he'd once occupied it.”

“I don't blame you. I'm sure anyone in your position would have done the same.”

“I don't doubt it.” Stevie agreed, then her tone softened. “So, Chase tells me you're back to work with us.”

“I am. I was transferred, ironically.”

“Not so much against your will this time, I presume?”

“Not exactly.” Link admitted sheepishly, knowing Stevie may see right through his reasoning to return.

“I thought as much. Honestly, it's great to have you back.” Stevie assured Link, smiling at him. How he'd missed her smile. “I'm sure the others will be just as pleased as I am. Well, most of them. I can't speak for Morgan.”

“He's fine. I cleared the air before I came in here.” Link explained, thankful that he wasn't sprouting a newly blackened eye. Stevie seemed surprised, eyes scanning Link up and down for injury. Eventually, she just shook her head, laughed, and then returned to her computer.

“I can easily put you back on the system. If I'm honest, though, I hoped you'd be back. So I didn't exactly remove your files entirely.” Stevie explained, causing Link to raise an eyebrow. “Don't give me that look. You are well liked in this agency, Neal. Some more so than others, mind you.”

There it was; his doorway into the subject.

“About that.” Link began, and Stevie slowly stopped typing and looked over at him, as if she knew what he was about to ask. “I don't suppose you know anything about, well...”

“About Rhett McLaughlin?” Stevie asked, straight to the point. Link nodded. The woman in front of him sighed a little and turned her full attention to Link, a sad look on her face. “Listen, Neal, there's something you should know.”

Oh. Oh, no. Had something happened? Was Link too late? “What's wrong?”

“Rhett is alive, Neal. Don't worry.” Stevie quickly slowed Link's racing heart, then shook her head. “But he doesn't exactly show his face too often. I haven't seen him in about two months. We talk, though, occasionally.”

“Why haven't you seen him?”

“Ever since you left, and the whole commotion with the news, paparazzi following our every move, that kind of thing, he just...” Stevie shook her head, “stopped coming to the office. Not that he was here regularly to begin with.”
“Is he okay?” Link asked, not entirely meaning physically. More emotionally. Was Rhett handling everything okay?

“I wish I knew, Neal, I really do.” Stevie replied honestly, then faltered, as if she had thought of something. “You came back for him, didn't you?”

Link hesitated, but he knew he couldn't lie to her. “I did.”

Stevie's smile was worth it, but she quickly hid it behind her hair and looked towards her computer screen. “I'm glad to hear that.”

“Do you know where I can find him?” Link asked, because anywhere would be a good start.

“Certainly not here.” Stevie told him, then typed something up on her computer until suddenly the printer on the far side of the room roared to life and spat out a sheet of paper, startling Link. The woman rose from her chair and leisurely made her way to the printer, taking the piece of paper and studying it. “But I can give you the address to his apartment. It's close by. I'd start there.”

Rising from his chair, Link took the piece of paper from Stevie's slim fingers. “You think he'll be there?”

“Only one way to find out.”

Rhett's apartment was only a couple of blocks away from Mythical HQ. Link had half a mind to take a cab there, but thought against it, given that walking would give him more time to prepare what the heck he was going to say when he got there. The sun was high in the sky, beating down on Link's head and shoulders and making him sweat. Or maybe he was sweating from nerves. Both, he figured.

It was nearing twelve o'clock in the afternoon and Link wondered if Rhett would even be out of bed yet. Did he even work anymore? Stevie hadn't specified, and Link hadn't thought to ask until he was already out the door. Figures. If Rhett hadn't been to HQ in months, it didn't exactly mean he'd quit his job. He could be working from home; giving orders to his agents as a handler. Right?

The agency would sure suffer without the tall, bearded man. And with Stevie now in control, there was no way Rhett would be fired. Not that the public would stand for that either. Rhett was a hero. A flawed hero with a frightening past, however, but that only made for a juicier news story, didn't it?

Link looked down at the piece of paper with a squint. He gripped it tightly with both hands to help ground himself, although it wasn't exactly working. He must have looked like a lost and confused tourist, he thought; or he would have had numerous people not recognized him on the walk there. Two people stopped him and asked for a photograph, to which he gloomily obliged, others simply pointed and whispered to their peers. Link didn't appreciate the attention. It made him incredibly uncomfortable to be the centre of attention, even for a few moments. Especially when he didn't desire not deserve such attention. He was no celebrity. Not in his eyes, anyway.

He thought back to the picture of Rhett he'd spotted in a magazine a while back, whilst still in North Carolina. The taller man was hidden in an oversized blue hoodie, with the hood up in an attempt to conceal his identity. Link was reminded of the image when he passed the small convenience store Rhett had been spotted walking to. That meant Link had to be close. His stomach began to churn
more than it had been, his heart beating frantically inside his chest.

What was he going to say? What if Rhett wasn't interested? Link had been nothing but firm and harsh with Rhett before he'd left, regardless if the taller man had deserved it or not. What if Rhett didn't forgive him?

“I love you, though.”

Link felt a shiver shake his entire body to its core. He felt it creep its way up and along his spine, spreading its way across his scalp until it was all he could feel. He felt like he was being torn apart from the inside out. Rhett's eyes were locked on Link's, brighter than ever. The smaller man didn't bother fighting his gaze. “I know—”

“I love you so much.”

Link had to close his eyes and gently repeated, “I know.”

Rhett swallowed audibly and clenched his fists at his sides, looking away and back towards the ajar window. After a long moment of silence between the two men, Rhett nodded softly. Acceptance. Link saw it in the taller man's eyes when he turned back around. He'd accepted that they were done. They were over.

Over before they ever began, really.

Could someone fall out of love in six months? Link wasn't sure. He knew he couldn't; he knew he hadn't. Link was as fiercely in love with Rhett as he was six months ago, and he could only hope Rhett felt the same.

Naturally, as Link expected, Rhett's apartment building was incredibly high class and expensive looking. It even had a doorman. Link guessed it must have stretched at least twenty floors high, the top of the building reflecting the sun in its windows. It was a pleasant difference from the looming, grey appearance of Mythical HQ. Maybe that was the point. Maybe Rhett chose the building because of that.

There were paparazzi camped outside of Rhett's apartment building. Naturally, they spotted Link as soon as he came close, and instantly cameras began flashing. He could see the headlines now; Heroic Couple Reunited? Charles Neal Returns to Los Angeles for Love Lost?

Link smiled awkwardly at the doorman who welcomed him inside. "Welcome, special agent Neal."

"You know who I am?"

"Hard not to nowadays, sir." The doorman replied, and Link sighed. That was for sure. "Although I'm surprised to see you here."

"Believe me, I'm just as surprised as you are."

The doorman gave Link a funny look, then closed the door behind him and directed him to the reception.

Rhett's apartment was on the nineteenth floor. The receptionist boasted about its luxury to Link, who couldn't really care less, but listened out of politeness. He'd have figured Rhett owned the penthouse, but evidently not. Maybe that was too rich for Rhett's blood. Or maybe he just didn't want to seem too spoiled. Shaking his head, Link made his way to the elevators and waited for them to open. Thankfully, it was empty when it arrived and Link was free to freak out inside once the doors slid
Elevators weren't exactly his favourite thing after his experience with McLaughlin inside Mythical HQ. He did his best to avoid them now, but he wasn't about to climb nineteen flights of stairs and be sweating like an ape by the time he reached Rhett's apartment. He could do that on his own without the aid of unnecessary exercise.

The nerves were killing him. What was he going to say? Was Rhett even home? Why hadn't he thought to ask reception? No, Link shook his head; no, Rhett had to be home considering the receptionist had allowed him to enter. She would have noticed Rhett leave the building if he had, right? Either that or the doorman would have. And the paparazzi would have noticed too. Link was being ridiculous.

So he decided to wing it. What was the worst that could happen?

Besides Rhett rejecting him.

A high pitched ding notified Link when the elevator had ascended to the desired floor and the doors slid open before him. He didn't move for a long moment, and the doors automatically slid closed again.

He could do this. He was going to do this.

Inhaling deeply, then exhaling a much needed breath, Link pushed the button to make the doors open once more and then stepped into the corridor.

It was brightly lit. Too bright for Link's eyes. He squinted momentarily behind his glasses, finding the glare disorientating. The corridor itself was narrow and long, but the doors lining the walls of it were massive. They towered at least a head or two over Link—a welcome change from having to duck under some doorways. Maybe that was also why Rhett chose this building. Maybe the doors were purposely built for giants.

Rhett's apartment was number one-nine-three. The numbers were on the door in gold lettering, protruding from the dark maroon wood. There was even one of those posh-looking handles under the door number for knocking with. Link couldn't remember their name. He wasn't sure he even ever knew it in the first place. He was way out of his element here.

To his relief, there was no peep hole in the door, so Rhett couldn't peer at Link and identify him before he opened the door. He'd have no idea who he was answering to. Link would have the upper hand this time; the element of surprise.

He went to use the knocker, but then hesitated and settled for just knocking on the wood with his knuckles. He knocked three times then withdrew his hand. He smoothed down his checkered shirt and flicked his hair up and away from his forehead, then straightened his glasses.

This was it. This was the moment that decided everything. This is what Link's entire year had been building to. This was the deciding factor.

_tbc_
It's time to blow off the dust gathering on top of this story and update it. I hope this acts as a small pick me up to those who have contacted me about the lack of updates. Apologies for the cliffhanger.

Writing is a hobby for me. It's a passion and it's something I often think about. I would one day love to publish this work or a work like this and make a name for myself. I truly adore the power of words and creative writing. I have loved watching my boys (R&L) evolve into something bigger and newer every time I write with them. However, I began feeling obligated to post chapters as often as I could, so much so that it was affecting my writing. It felt like work and I wasn't enjoying it anymore. That's why the updates stopped, and that is the reason for my absence in the past months.

But I am slowly coming out of this, and have already half-written the next part, but unfortunately I can't give an estimated release date for it. I ask my kind readers to be patient with me whilst I conclude this story and say goodbye to it.

Trivia: This story is over one year old now! Thank you to those who have been with me since the beginning! Also, there are now 27 chapters instead of 26 to accommodate the extra part of this chapter.

What does everyone think of the update? I'd love to hear from everyone.

Also, as a reminder there is a poll to vote on the future of this story: to be concluded, have a sequel, be rewritten in Rhett's POV, or to be made into a series.
This was it. This was the moment that decided everything. This is what Link's entire year had been building to. This was the deciding factor.

It felt like minutes before Link heard the door unlocking from the other side. His heart was in his throat. Slowly, almost deliberately, the door opened from the other side. It only opened a couple of inches as the person behind it peered around to see who had disturbed them. Abruptly, the door was yanked open.

Rhett stood up straight, one hand still attached to the doorknob on the other side, perhaps for balance. Link's mouth opened but nothing came out. His heart hammered inside his chest and fluttered around his rib cage. Rhett's beard was long—longer than Link had ever seen it—but it was styled and had been neatly trimmed. The taller man's dirty blonde hair was gelled upwards, long at the top and short at the sides. His expression was shocked, his eyes wide, eyebrows raised and mouth hanging slightly open. He wore a deep red t-shirt with short sleeves that allowed Link to admire his biceps and forearms. Rhett had been working out.

Link must have paled in comparison. He began feeling self-conscious. But as he and Rhett stared at one another, Link began noticing things he wished he couldn't. Like the dark circles around the taller man's eyes, or the newly prominent jowls in his cheeks, or how the t-shirt seemed to sag around his torso.

"You're here." Rhett spoke first, sounding like he'd seen a ghost. It wasn't so much a statement as it was a question, as if Rhett couldn't believe his own eyes. His eyebrows furrowed in confusion, or perhaps hurt; Link couldn't tell. He's forgotten how to read Rhett. He'd forgotten a lot of things.

But not how much he loved the man standing before him.

"You're here." Rhett repeated.

"I'm here." Link confirmed. He was there. It was a shock to them both, and saying it out loud didn't exactly get rid of that shock. At least, not for Link.

There was a tense moment of silence where both men simply locked eyes and barely breathed. Then everything changed.

Suddenly there were a pair of very large and very warm arms around Link. Rhett hugged Link like
he hadn't hugged him in years. Like he hadn't seen Link in years. Maybe that's how Rhett felt, but
Link couldn't get over the initial shock of it. His mind was struggling to keep up with the sudden
change in events. Rhett smelled differently than he previously had. There was no distinct hint of
spice assaulting Link's nose, and instead it was replaced with a much softer scent, like a delicate
flower. But Rhett's body didn't match his scent. Rhett's body was solid, rigid, and undeniably
powerful as he gripped onto Link like his life depended on it.

Link managed to put his arms around Rhett's torso in response and melt into the embrace. Rhett felt
different, too. His ribcage was now prominent along his back, his spine poking through the thin
fabric of his shirt. Link frowned into the air, worry gnawing at his insides. Had Rhett not been taking
care of himself properly? Was the sudden toning of his arms the product of him losing a significant
amount of weight, as opposed to excessive exercise and weight-lifting? Maybe it was a bit of both.
Link figured he'd find out eventually.

“Did you change your hair?” Rhett asked suddenly, and for whatever reason Link found the question
hilarious. He chuckled loudly in response, overcome with what he was feeling. There was a bubble
inside his chest, and it threatened to burst.

“Yes, Rhett, I changed my hair.” He replied, though truthfully, he'd only gotten it trimmed.

“What's so funny?” The taller man leaned back from Link, but let his arms slide down to the smaller
man's hips to keep their bodies close together. His brow was furrowed at first, but when he saw Link
smiling, he smiled too.

“Nothing, it's just...” Link cleared his throat, then shook his head, “the first time I see you in, like, six
months, and the first thing you do is ask about my hair.”

“Seven months.”

“What?” Link blinked.

“It's been seven months.” The taller man corrected. “Seven months since I've saw you.”

It had been seven months; Rhett was right. “Oh.”

Rhett seemed to hesitate, realizing what he was doing. He removed his arms from their hold on Link
and took a step back, awkward suddenly. “Uh, do you want to come inside?”

Link hesitated. Did he want to see inside of Rhett's apartment?

“No, I—” Link cleared his throat, his mouth becoming dry, “No—I mean yes. Yes, I want to come
inside, Rhett.”

Rhett's eyes widened for a short moment, before his expression returned to normal, like hearing Link
speak his name had caused some sort of internal reaction. Link yearned to know what the other man
was feeling, but that could wait. For now, they had a lot of other things to talk about.

If Rhett's apartment building was impressive from the outside, it was downright magnificent inside.
Link felt ridiculously out of his element. Should he have removed his shoes at the door? Should he
be wearing a tie? Was that mahogany? Did he hear Debussy playing?
Okay, so maybe it wasn't *that* extravagant, but it certainly kicked Link's apartment out of the water.

The walls of Rhett's apartment were a dark maroon color and were decorated with pieces of artwork which looked like his ex-handler had collected throughout his travels with the agency. Link recognized some of them, but not many, and made the mental note to question Rhett about them later. The living area was large and spacious; two beige couches were positioned in the middle of the room adjacent to one another, creating a corner sofa that was decorated with copious amounts of pillows that matched the red and beige rug on the floor at Link's feet. The rest of the flooring was wooden panelling, which made Link's own floorboards look like they belonged in an old farmhouse or something.

“Before you say anything, I didn't choose the color scheme in here.” Rhett said, breaking Link out of his reverie. The taller man was rubbing the back of his neck, seeming uncomfortable. He was wiggling his bare toes against the wooden floor. “Stevie did.”

Link hummed a little in response, not knowing why Rhett felt the need to defend himself. He continued to admire the apartment, eyes scanning the room and purposely ignoring the fact that Rhett had a frickin' flat screen television hanging on the wall above his coffee table. Vaguely, Link wondered if the bearded man had watched McLaughlin's press conference on there. Not that it mattered. That was over now.

The living room was separated into three sections; there was a dining area where there was a six-seater table with a small and empty vase in the middle, leaving Link to wonder if Rhett seldom had guests over; there was also a kitchen separated by a large archway to Link's right. He could sort of see inside, and wondered how much food Rhett had in his fridge and if he filled it to its full capacity, because *damn*. It was huge.

Ahead of Link there were a set of wooden sliding doors, to which he assumed led into the master bedroom and bathroom. They were closed, however, so Link couldn't be sure.

There was a noise coming from somewhere in the bedroom, to which Rhett's head snapped towards. The doors slid open and a very tall, and very topless man walked through them. He was also shining, like he'd just gotten out of the shower. His short, wet hair dripped water onto the floor as he emerged, to which Link viewed as some form of vandalism in such a nice apartment.

“Rhett, have you seen my—?” The man began in a thick southern accent, but cut himself off when he caught sight of Link standing a couple of metres from Rhett, shocked. Seemingly surprised, the guy looked to Rhett for an explanation. “He's not who I think he is, is he?”

Link's face fell. Was...was Rhett seeing someone else? Was he too late? Was this shirtless guy now Rhett's partner? Link began to feel sick. He couldn't compete with this guy. He had abs for days and Link didn't stand a chance. He felt his heart rate speed up, his brow beginning to furrow and his breathing become unsteady.

“Link, this isn't what it looks like.” Rhett pleaded, taking a step forward and raising his hands in a defensive manner. Link's expression must have conveyed his thoughts. He was as readable as an open book, even if the text was a little muddled up and smudged sometimes.

“It looks like I came at a bad time.” Link suggested, taking a step backwards towards the door. If this really was how it looked, then it was over. Link would go back to Mythical Intelligence and that would be the end of it.

“No.” Rhett pleaded, taking another step towards Link. “It *really* isn't what you think.”
“Whoa.” The guy spoke again, seemingly uncomfortable. Link couldn't bare to look at him. “Listen to him, man. He's telling the truth.”

“Who is he?” Link asked Rhett.

Rhett took a deep breath, looking between Shirtless Ab Man and Below Average Link. “Link, this is Cole. Cole, this is Link.”

“Hi.” Cole greeted Link quietly, a bit embarrassed. Link gaped at Rhett.

“He's my brother.”

Brother? Link's brow furrowed further, eyes flashing towards the man in question. “Your brother?”

“That's me.” Cole confirmed. After getting a better look at him, Link could actually see some similarities between the two men. The height, for one, was a dead giveaway, as Cole almost matched Rhett's ridiculous six foot seven. Unfortunately, he came short about an inch and a half, so Rhett would still be able to boast that he was the tallest person Link had ever met. Cole's glasses had thrown Link off, though, because he couldn't picture Rhett with glasses. He couldn't picture any of Rhett's relatives wearing glasses. Certainly, not McLaughlin.

“And you're Neal, right?” Shirtless Ab Man—now Cole—asked.

“You know me?” Link asked dumbly, then shook his head in a defeated manner. “Of course you do. All you gotta do is watch the news.”

Cole made a face that Link didn't understand, and then suddenly Rhett seemed uncomfortable. Was he missing something here?

“Well, actually,” Rhett began, looking towards Cole, “that isn't how he knows you.”

Oh, brother. Literally.

“I work for Mythical Intelligence.” Cole explained, whilst Rhett momentarily disappeared into what Link assumed was his own bedroom and re-emerged with a shirt for his brother. Cole was shrugging into it when he spoke again, so Link took a few steps back into the room to hear him properly. “My base of operations is usually in Salt Lake, Utah, but I've been here for the past nine months.”

Suddenly, something clicked into place.

“RMC and CMC'. From the transmissions. That was you two, wasn't it?”

“A transmission just came in.” Morgan sounded nervous, then quoted; “‘Attention, preparations commence now. RMC and CMC in position. Begin assault at 1300 hours.’”

Link recognized the message instantly. “It's virtually the same as last time. Any idea what RMC and CMC are?”

“Not a clue.” Morgan admitted.

“Maybe not what, but who.” Noah spoke up. It was the first Link had heard from him since their brief greeting. “They said that last time, right? 'RMC and CMC in position' sounds like the placement of agents.”

“That's us.” Cole confirmed.
“Rhett and Cole McLaughlin.” Link said it aloud, but it still didn't ease his sudden distress. RMC and CMC. Rhett McLaughlin and Cole McLaughlin. “So obvious. Why didn't I think of that before?”

“In your defense, you were a little preoccupied with my brother and his stupidity.”

Rhett looked appalled. “Dude, what?”

“I'm not wrong, am I?” Cole shot back, raising an eyebrow in a *I'm your big brother, I know better than you and I'm also always right* kind of way. “I told you to leave Neal be. Stevie told you. Even Morgan told you.”

“But he didn't.” Link interjected. Because it was the truth.

“But I didn't.” Rhett parroted, eyes on Link, his expression unreadable. Cole rolled his eyes to himself. If everybody was against Rhett and his infatuation with Link, it begged the question, why did the taller man even bother going through the trouble? There had to be some guilt coming into play there, didn't there? Rhett had to feel guilty about killing Link's family years ago, intentionally or unintentionally. That was the only explanation.

“Wait a second.” Link paused, thinking back to his previous encounters in Utah. Salt Lake City had sure as hell been a stressful job with a lot of loose ends which had yet to be tied up, but by the looks of things, most of Link's questions were about to be answered. “You're the agent that went missing, right? He was called Cole too.”

"Agent Neal," She repeated it until Link responded, then said, "Have you located the other agents?"

"Five, including you."

"Five?" Stevie repeated in question, and once Link confirmed the number, her response became suspicious, "I issued a total of six agents. Check again."

Link checked the cameras once more. The two agents walking together had moved to camera five; the singular agent was still in camera four, remaining stationary; H was nowhere to be found, but Link was aware he was in the building; and Stevie was standing in camera three, looking up at Link.

"Make that four. H is gone."

"That's fine," Stevie said quickly, then shook her head and contacted the agents present on her earpiece. An agent named Cole was unaccounted for. "Neal, we may have a hostage situation. Keep an eye out for Cole."

“That's him.” Rhett confirmed, though he didn't exactly look happy about it. “Almost blew the entire plan, too.”

“Everything worked out fine.” Cole defended himself, shrugging it off like Rhett's comment didn't even affect him. Naturally, Link was confused.

“What did you do?”

“I'm the one who assaulted Rhett that night on camera.” Cole told him, prompting Link's memory as he looked over at Rhett. The taller man was rubbing the back of his neck and closing his eyes.

*There was a movement in camera three, a man jogging through the cameras, moving into camera four. His face was obscured from view and he made a point of keeping it that way. Dressed in black, he was able to maneuver through areas absent of agents to stop him. The memory of the man who*
snapped the agent's neck months ago flashed across Link's vision; the man who kick started everything. And he was heading straight for H.

"H," Link said frantically. H appeared to notice the fright in Link's voice as his face turned into a grimace in the camera. "H. Someone's coming."

H didn't get a chance to respond as the intruder crashed into him, visibly knocking the wind out of the taller man as he was thrown into the hard, marble floor. The intruder pinned the dazed H down with his knees and pulled out an automatic weapon—equipped with a silencer, seemingly home made—from his pants and raised it to aim at the surveillance camera. Link got one last fleeting look at H maneuvering under the intruder as the man shot at the camera and Link's surveillance link went dead.

“It was for your own good, little brother.” Cole explained to Rhett, who didn't dignify him with a response, instead concentrating on Link. Link was having trouble piecing everything together, but he was getting there.

“Why did you have to shoot out the surveillance?” He asked, miffed, recalling how it made him feel. “Almost gave me a damn heart attack.”

For once, Cole actually looked apologetic. “I had to make the situation look real. I had to get him out of there, and I couldn't let you or the agency see it. Shooting out the cameras was the only way.”

Link did nothing but grunt in response. A thin layer of sweat was forming on his forehead, which he wiped at with the back of his hand unconsciously.

“I've been crashing at my brother's place since I got here. I was part of it all. The Resistance, everything.” Cole told Link, and suddenly Link began to appreciate Rhett's brother a lot more. At least he was upfront and honest during their first encounter, which was a hell of a lot more than could be said for Rhett. “And I am unbelievably grateful for your heroics when taking McLaughlin down. You saved my little brother's life.”

“I didn't. It was dumb luck.”

“You told that to the papers too.” Cole nodded, but he didn't look convinced. “But that's not how Rhett tells it.”

“How does Rhett tell it?” Link asked.

Rhett made a face. “You know, I'm standing right here. I can talk for myself.”

“The adults are talking, Rhett.” Cole responded, then huffed at the look Rhett shot him. “Fine, I'll let you tell the story. I gotta go call Lynn anyway.” Cole made his way over to Link and shook his hand. Link was still blown away by how strong the taller man's hand was as he was walking out the door. “Nice to finally meet you, Neal. Never thought I'd get to meet the guy who makes my brother stupid happy, so thank you.”

“I don't—” Link started, but Cole place a firm hand on the wood of the apartment door and gave Link a look that screamed accept the compliment and don’t be an asshole. Link hesitated, before giving in and saying; “Don't mention it.”

Cole smiled, and then closed the door behind himself, leaving both Rhett and Link a little dazed.

“Who's Lynn?” Link asked, distracted.
“His wife.” Rhett told him, prompting Link to spin around and face his ex-handler. Or just his ex. That would be applicable, right? “I was his best man. I'll show you pictures sometime.”

“I'd like that.”

“I'm sure you would.” Rhett grumbled, seeming like a kid who just got one-upped by his older sibling. It was kind of...adorable, in a weird way. Link didn't even know anymore.

The taller man scratched the back of his head, seeming pretty unsure of himself. Link understood the feeling. It felt like the temperature of the room had sudden risen with the absence of Rhett's older brother, and suddenly everything seemed a lot more real than it had before. Before, when Cole had been with them, Link had been too overwhelmed to take everything in and actually digest the fact that Rhett was standing in front of him. Infamous Rhett McLaughlin. Or maybe just famous at this point. His ex-lover (could he really call it that?). Link felt his cheeks turn red.

“We should talk.” Link managed to blurt out, breaking the extended silence with the only thing he could think of; demanding answers. Rhett appeared to accept that, straightening his back and pulling down his t-shirt. It looked redder now than it did before.

The taller man gestured for Link to sit on any sofa of his choosing; both were clearly made from designer beige leather, with numerous pillows at the corner where both sofas met. Link took a seat close to the corner, dodging the coffee table as he manoeuvred his way through the pillows and perched himself lightly onto the leather. It was a miracle he hadn't bumped his shins against the corner of the table, that was for sure. Rhett took a seat on the other sofa, adjacent to Link, leaning back casually. He perched one arm up against the back of the sofa he occupied and looked away from Link, as if trying to compose himself.

Miraculously, Rhett was the one to break the silence. “After envisioning seeing you again, thinking of all the things I would do and the things I would say, I can't think of anything right now that you're actually here in front of me.”

Link was a bit stunned by Rhett's sudden admission of honesty. But it was a pleasant change from the norm, and he wasn't about to throw it away. “What kind of things did you envision?”

Rhett closed his eyes and a pained expression flashed over his features, his brow furrowing and his lips pursing. Link suddenly felt like he shouldn't have asked anything at all. “A lot of things. In all of the scenarios I conjured up in my head, you always ended up punching me in the face.”

Link snorted, which prompted Rhett to open his eyes and look over at Link. The bearded man smiled at Link's laughter. “I see that image amuses you.”

Link simply shook his head, knowing fine well that he'd slapped Rhett in the face in the past but he'd never actually punched him before. He didn't exactly want to either. Link wasn't sure he'd win that fight. “I can't picture it.”

“I can.” Rhett told him, but there wasn't any humour in his voice, which caused Link's face to fall. “But here you are, and my face is still intact.”

“For now.” Link added with a playful quirk of his lips.

“For now.”

“Rhett...” Link began, but honestly he wasn't sure where he was going with it. He was here. He'd taken that first step, the biggest step. But now that he was sitting there in Rhett's apartment with him, he'd no idea where to go next. What was his plan? He should have thought this through.
“Do you have more questions for me?” Rhett asked suddenly. Link blinked a couple of times, recalling the last proper conversation the two men had. It hadn't ended well. Nothing with them ever did.

Rhett smiled a little, but there was a sadness behind it that Link tried his best to understand. “You must have questions, right?”

“I do.”

Rhett was quiet for a long moment as if he were readying himself for Link to go on. When he didn't, Rhett asked, “Having trouble?”

“Having trouble believing that you're here in front of me.” Link told him, his voice shaking. In all honesty, Link was relieved to see his ex-handler; of course he was. This was the man he loved. This was the man who meant everything to him. Someone he'd gotten so close to within such a short amount of time. Of course he was relieved to see him. But that changed nothing.

“I do.” Link answered honestly. “But I don't know where to begin.”

Rhett appeared to hesitate, then bit his lip before saying, “I do.”

Link blinked. “Oh?”

“Do you remember the last thing we discussed?”

Link thought back to that dreadful day seven months ago, digging deep into a dark corner of his mind and uncovering some memories he didn't think he'd have to relive. But here he was, with Rhett again, back in the middle of it all. He never knew when to quit. But he did remember. He remembered it well.

“You still haven't asked me the most important question.”

“Didn't I?” Link responded, gathering himself and swinging his legs back over the windowsill. He stood up and rolled his shoulders a few times, now sore from behind squeezed up against the concrete in order to accommodate Rhett.

“No.” Rhett replied, then swiveled his body around to face Link, feet now firmly planted on the floor. “Why I killed your family.”

Anger and grief tore through Link in an instant. It was rapid and it was intense, coursing through his veins like poison, traveling from his head to his feet, from his fingers to his toes. He felt like he was on fire, his skin burning, his extremities tingling. His fingers twitched in response and he refused to turn around to face Rhett, who still sat on the windowsill, presumably looking up at Link who now towered over him. For once.

“Would you tell me if I asked?” Link managed, speaking through gritted teeth and bitterness. His shoulders were shaking.

“Another good question.” Rhett replied, nonchalant.

“The only question you wouldn't answer.” Link commented, feeling anger bubble within him. But he was going to do his best to keep it at bay. If he could keep it at a low simmer, then it wouldn't boil over and he wouldn't punch Rhett in the face. Or so he hoped.

“Well, technically, you never asked.” Rhett corrected him, causing Link's nostrils to flare.
“Because you were being so damn suave about the entire thing.” Link snapped back, looking away towards the blank screen of the television. “Like none of it mattered, or like my family meant nothing to you. I couldn't hear any more of it.”

“That wasn't my intention.” Rhett began, which only caused Link's pulse to increase in speed. Enough of this.

“You know, Rhett, you can be so damn self-absorbed sometimes. You never think of anybody but yourself.” Link snapped once more, turning to face Rhett to find that the taller man was looking at him through guarded eyes. His ex-handler's arm was no longer perched on the back of the sofa and was instead resting on his thigh, both of his hands gripping at his knees. He watched Link with such an intensity that Link felt breathless sunder his gaze, but he pushed through it without struggle. He was used to the affect Rhett had on him. “She was my wife, Rhett. Those were people in there. Yet you act like this is a game or something—”

“That's exactly what you told me last time.” Rhett interrupted Link, voice tight and low, like he was becoming irritated. “That I thought this was a game. That I think human lives are nothing but something to be played with.”

“Prove me wrong, Rhett.” Link challenged, knowing full well this was not how he wanted this meeting to go, but it was happening and he couldn't stop it. This had to be said, and if Rhett didn't like it then Link was ready for the war to follow.

“So, what?” Rhett sat forward on the sofa, startling Link who flinched slightly in surprise. Rhett appeared to ignore Link's fright and shook his head. He looked angry. “You came here to make me feel like crap again? To tell me I'm a horrible person? What, Link? What else do you want to say to me?”

“That's not—” Link was in the middle of claiming that putting Rhett down wasn't the reason he came here, because it really, really wasn't, but the older man spoke again before he got the chance.

“I didn't know.”

There was a beat of silence. Confused and tense silence on Link's part.

After a moment, Link prompted, “You didn't know what?”

“I didn't know they were in there.” Rhett said quietly, looking down at his hands which were now clasped in front of him, resting on his knees. He was fidgeting. “I didn't know the building was occupied.”

Link couldn't be hearing this right. “Rhett, what do you mean?”

Rhett inhaled deeply and looked briefly at the smaller man next to him, before looking away, off towards the now open doors of his bedroom, seemingly lost in thought. When he spoke, the anger from his voice was gone and replaced with a cold sense of sorrow that chilled Link to the bone.

“Two years after I join Mythical Intelligence, my uncle comes to me with this idea from the board of directors. They want to install security cameras across America in specific business buildings to ensure full coverage and protection of said businesses. It was dirty, taking money from people in exchange for protection, like some kind of gang, but that was what the plan was and I followed it. I followed my uncle's orders. I understood the need for surveillance, of course. The security of our country is the priority. Wasn't as adamant as my uncle, but I went along with it. It turned into the agency destroying buildings of those who didn't agree to take part, as a screw you to them, or whatever. I ain't proud of it, but I took part in the demolition of a lot of places. It'd always scare
larger corporations into joining us.”

Link sat quietly and listened, not daring to interrupt. He hadn't heard Rhett speak so much in a short period of time before. He was typically a man of few words and it was a real surprise to hear him go on about something, especially something related to himself. He wasn't sure where the bearded man was going with it, but he sure as hell was ready to listen for more. But did he really want to hear it? What was all this building to?

“One day, we're scheduled to demolish some hotel in North Carolina. Standard procedure; evacuate the building, get clearance, pull the plug.” Rhett continued, and Link felt his stomach drop. His expression fell and his legs began to shake. He felt the color drain from his face. The taller man must have noticed the sudden change in Link's body language because he paused and glanced over, as if to make sure the other man was well enough to continue listening. “I'm in North Carolina and I'm the one in charge. My uncle is watching it happen from a live feed in Los Angeles. Like every other time, he gives me the order. I hit the button and demolish the building. But that's when I hear screaming over the intercom and in my earpiece. My phone starts ringing. They were meant to evacuate the building, Link. I thought—it was always empty. Every time.”

Link was frozen in place, unable to move and struggling to breathe. Rhett didn't seem to be faring much better than him.

“I confront my uncle, of course.” Rhett continues, struggling. “He's the one who gave me the order.”

**AUGUST 19TH 1998, 10 years ago**

“Casualties are necessary to motivate potential clients, junior.”

Rhett shook his head, disgusted. But with what? Or who? Himself? His uncle? The agency? A mixture of everything. He felt like he had to take thirteen showers, and maybe if he was lucky, he'd slip in one of them and hit his head and get what he deserved. People lost their lives because of his actions. He was a murderer. He'd killed innocent people. He was going to lose his mind.

What was one more, though? Was his uncle innocent? Rhett could so easily stretch over that bastard's desk and strangle him; wrap his long fingers and strong hands around that scrawny neck and choke the undeserving breath right out of his lungs. But his uncle had assured him full clearance. Someone else would take the fall for what he did, and Rhett would have no say in the matter. Only another addition to the guilt. Murder a few lives and ruin one more. Things only got worse.

“You're a piece of shit. You don't deserve this title. You're going to do nothing but destroy Mythical Intelligence and everything it stands for.” Rhett lectured his uncle, furious. He was pacing around the man's office, sweating through his dress shirt, even with the sleeves rolled up. His hair had fallen out of place and his beard was bushy, but that didn't matter. Appearances were nothing. “How can you sit there like you've done nothing? You're the reason those people are dead. You're the reason their families are now in mourning. You sit there like you don't care.”

“I don't care. Those people are of no relation to me. This was a business transaction, my boy, nothing more.” McLaughlin explained through that pig mouth of his, and if Rhett squinted real hard he could see the beginnings of a snout forming on his uncle's face. “I chose you to be the one because I thought you could handle it. I appear to have misjudged your abilities, so that won't happen again. You're not ready.”
“Not ready to be a murderer!” Rhett yelled, not giving a damn who heard him. Abruptly, so abruptly that Rhett didn’t see him coming, his uncle was in his face, having somehow managed to get up from his chair and tower over Rhett in a split second.

“I advise you to keep your voice down, junior,” He threatened, one hand firmly gripping the collar of Rhett's shirt and choking him, “or I can so easily get rid of you like I did that building.”

Rhett brought both hands up to his throat and gripped onto his uncle's offending hand, struggling for breath. This man was going to kill him. Who was he? This wasn't his uncle. This wasn't where Rhett wanted to be anymore. He couldn't be part of this. This wasn't a life. This wasn't living.

“Or should I say,” McLaughlin continued, a glint in his eye, the beginnings of a smirk on his lips, “like you got rid of that building.”

“Don't dare pin this on me, you warped piece of—”

“Poor little up-and-coming Rhett McLaughlin.” His uncle interrupted Rhett's outburst, choking him further into silence and digging his fingers into his windpipe. “I can see the headlines now; agent gone rogue, murders countless innocents in what appears to be a psychotic outburst.”

“You can’t do that—” Rhett tried to object, but even before his uncle interrupted him again he knew it was in vain. McLaughlin had the power to frame Rhett for this. He was guilty after all. Put him in front of a judge and jury and he’d be guilty. He killed those people. Maybe it was his fault; he should have known better. This deal was toxic from the start.

“I can, and you know I can.” McLaughlin threatened. There was a large vein bulging in his forehead, trailing down to his brow and disappearing behind his eyelid. Rhett tried to focus on it without losing his head. “Now, act like the obedient nephew you are and stop acting like an entitled little brat.”

Rhett couldn’t breathe, whether it be from anger or from his uncle's choking hand. Still, he managed to croak out; “Let go of me.”

Surprisingly, McLaughlin let him go. After clearing his throat multiple times and rubbing at the assaulted flesh of his throat, Rhett spent no time hesitating and ripped off his work ID badge from where it was clipped to his belt loop and threw it onto his uncle's desk. His uncle raised a brow at him, stunned.

“I quit.”

There was a beat of silence before his uncle simply put his hands into his suit pants pockets and looked disappointed. “So be it.”

Tears forming at the corners of his eyes, either from anger, or from guilt or sadness, Rhett didn't know, but he had to get out of there and do something. Something to atone for his actions. Anything.

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JANUARY 30TH 2008, present day

Link sat and he listened, picturing the scene as Rhett described it. Thousands of thoughts were racing through his mind, some quicker than the rest, some foggy and confusing and some as clear as day.
The fine hair on the back of his neck began to stand up, as did the thicker hair on his arms. His skin felt like it was on fire. Rhett had never looked paler. If he hadn't already been sitting down, Link would have asked him to in fear that he might collapse at any given moment.

“You quit?” Link prompted to break the stretching silence. Rhett nodded once. “But you still work at Mythical Intelligence.”

“I quit for a long time, just under two years. Didn't contact my uncle in that period, took it for myself to atone for what I'd done. Or what I'd been tricked into doing.” Rhett explained with a pained expression, the corners of his eyes wrinkling as if he couldn't bear to open them any further. Maybe he was afraid of the reality before him, or afraid of whatever reality he was reliving. Link could relate. “Stevie was the reason I re-assigned myself to the agency. I heard from Cole that she'd been hired by McLaughlin. I couldn't bear to see him do to her what he did to me, so I made sure to protect her, and if re-joining Mythical Intelligence and making my uncle think that I'd turned over a new leaf, then that's what I had to do.”

“He believed you? Just like that?”

“There was a trial period. My uncle is many things, Link, but he isn't stupid.” Rhett told him, clenching and unclenching his fists in front of him like he was trying to stop them from cramping up. “He gave me some cases to work on, pretty trivial ones. Nothing notable. Guess he wanted to see how I'd cope out on my own. My reputation helped me excel, I hate to admit.”

“Reputation?” Link asked.

“Killing four people just to make a point will do that.”

“Oh.”

Rhett frowned over at Link, who was having a hard time keeping his eyes focused on anything but the coffee table in front of him. “People were afraid of me, and I used that fear to gain respect. It didn't take long until I'd made a name for myself. Well,” Rhett paused, smiling a little, “a letter.”

Link felt his lips twitch. “H?”

“Weird hearin' you say that out loud again.”

“Weird callin' you it.”

Both men exchanged small, half smiles at each other. After a moment, Rhett shook his head and sat back a little. “Sorry, didn't intend to talk your ear off.”

“No,” Link responded immediately, slightly panicked, and leaned forward to put his hand on Rhett's knee and stop him from retreating. “Keep going.”

Rhett's leg tensed under Link's touch, and Link felt it through his palm. That's when he realized what he'd done. He'd initiated contact with Rhett for the first time in, well, seven months. And it felt like touching fire. Like he'd put his hand straight into a campfire and was watching the flames grow higher and brighter, heating him from the outside all the way into his core.

The taller man hesitated, eyes focused on Link's hand on his knee. It was as if he was having a hard time coming to terms with the fact that Link had touched him, or maybe he was in disbelief. Either way, Link felt the same. Things were all up in the air and he didn't even know which way was up anymore.
“The demolitions were only one of the mistakes I made whilst working under my uncle.” Rhett began, and immediately Link thought back to all the things his co-workers had said about his ex-handler.

Benjamin grunted in annoyance. "I swear, something always goes wrong when H is there. That guy brings trouble wherever he goes."

Link had the small urge to defend his handler, but it dawned on him that it would seem too obvious that he liked H. As a friend, or as more, it didn't matter because that was news he didn't need getting out. And besides, if the rumors were true, Ben was right. H was temperamental. "You think he had something to do with it?"

"Probably," Benjamin swirled saliva around his mouth before spitting onto the asphalt, much to Link's distaste, "That guy is bad news."

"Yeah," Link said, but there wasn't much emotion in it.

“I got two agents killed.” Rhett admitted to Link, with what seemed like minimal difficulty. Maybe he’d already come to terms with it. “I misjudged their abilities, and made the wrong call. It was my mistake, and they paid the price.”

Suddenly, Link knew exactly what Rhett was talking about. He'd read the case file what felt like years ago.

Incident #19051320:

Agents involved: K, R, H

Full names of agents involved: James, Kevin; Banner, Riley; H (information withheld)

Link shook his head with a smirk on his lips. Of course H had refused to reveal his identity on paperwork. Which begged the question; did anyone really know who this guy was?

Casualties: James, Kevin; Banner, Riley

Incident description: Agents K, R arrive at destination at 0900 hours; gunfire begins 0913 hours; backup request received 0910 hours; backup request granted 0919 hours; both agents deceased upon arrival.

Link's eyes widened upon reading; the backup request was granted with a nine-minute delay. Nine minutes which ended up costing two agents their lives. Was it a tactical action from H to rid himself of the two agents? Or was it something else? The sun seemed brighter than before and it caused Link's eyes to sting as he squinted away from the offending rays, unwilling to tear himself away from the laptop. Hesitantly, he read on.

Investigative notes: Argument overheard between H and agents K, R day prior to incident. Witnesses: #3. Agent H to be placed in front of view board; possible foul play. Hearing to determine the status of H required in coming months.

Result/Finalization: H cleared. Deceased agents laid to rest.

All of it seemed a little too...convenient for H. He was just cleared? Simple as that?

“I guess your uncle cleared your name?” Link asked gloomily, despite already knowing the answer.

“He did. And placed me under supervision. Stevie was my handler.”
“The other agents are afraid of you.” Link told Rhett, not really knowing what exactly he’d accomplish by saying it. But it seemed like Rhett already knew.

“I know, and I’d rather they were. I can't have them rely on me, and I don't need to protect them.” The bearded man sighed heavily to himself, then refocused his eyes on Link's hand which still rested gently on his knee. “I've always worked better alone.”

“If everyone is afraid of you, then you won't just work alone.” Link pointed out. “You'll always be alone.”

“And I am.” Rhett said quietly, but he didn't seem to be fishing for sympathy. “Or I was.”

There was a moment of silence shared between the two.

“Until me.” Link stated quietly.

“Until you.” Rhett confirmed, fingers twitching like he wanted to place his hand over Link’s, but he never did. “I hadn’t planned for this to happen. No matter what you think, I had no intention to fall – well, you know.”

“Neither did I.” Link admitted, but there was no hint of regret in his voice. “If that’s any consolation.”

“I’ve no need for consoling, Link.” Rhett said firmly. “I don’t regret a thing in that regard.”

Link shook his head, distracted. Some things didn’t add up. If Rhett was a handler, how could Stevie be his handler? Handlers didn’t need handlers. “Stevie is your handler?”

“You caught that.”

“I’m not deaf.” Link defended himself. “I’m a lot of things, but I’m not deaf.”

Rhett took a deep breath as if he was readying himself to break some bad news. Link wasn’t sure if he could handle any more of it, but he braced himself regardless. “I’m not a handler.”

Link blinked. “What?”

“I’m not a handler. I’m a Principal Agent, posing as a handler.” Rhett explained, but Link didn’t feel like he understood anything any clearer. “Stevie is a handler who manages principal agents, but she was posing as a field officer, hence why she was on the field with you and the others.”

“Why?”

“She wanted me to handle agents, see how I coped. Did quite well until you came along.”

Link removed his hand from Rhett’s knee, and he could tell by the way the other man’s eye twitched that he missed the contact, but Link had to get his head around this without the other man’s warmth as a distraction.

“So, where do the Resistance come into this? You’re their leader.”

Rhett flinched at Link’s changing of the subject. “I am, but I wasn’t always the leader. Like I said, I’m not a handler, I’m just an agent. Stevie assigned me a case like any other but it involved a group of ‘rebels’, he makes air quotations, “or whatever you wanna call ‘em. Former agents gone astray from the company—”
“Like you?” Rhett interjects.

“Like me.” Rhett confirms, then licks his dry lips which distracts Link for a short moment. “Long story short, I let them go. I don’t know why I did; still to this day, I don’t know. I just did. I met them again a few weeks later and saw what they really stood for—what their cause could mean for the company—and I agreed to help. I would act as an insider, a double-agent if you will, though they were wary of me in the beginning, rightfully so.”

“And Stevie didn’t catch onto any of this?” Link asked, because imagining the woman to be out of the loop on something so big just didn’t compute. Rhett shook his head.

“She found out about six or seven months later after following me to our warehouse meeting place—”

“You let yourself be tailed?”

“Look, is this my story or yours, Neal?” Rhett snapped, evidently agitated by Link’s constant interruptions. Link tries his best not to roll his eyes and motioned for the older man to continue. “I let myself get tailed. It was stupid, but looking back now I’m glad I was that reckless. And she agreed to help us. Still can’t thank her enough for that. Think she was more relieved I wasn’t as evil as she thought I was.”

Link shook his head. Of course Stevie took Rhett’s word as gospel; they were close after all. Link just wished he could follow in her footsteps.

“The next year—”

“2004?”

Rhett nodded. “In 2004 Stevie helped me ‘capture’,” there are the air quotations again, “my first agent from Mythical Intelligence. Jessie.”

“And she rolled over just like that?” Link gaped.

“No,” Rhett seemed embarrassed as he rubbed the side of his face like it was aching, and looked away from Link, “she kicked me down under and ran off.”

Link snorted in response, to which he saw the corner of Rhett’s mouth twitch like he was fighting a smirk. Link felt his heart skip a beat inside his chest, waiting for the perfect moment to enter his throat.

“But she came back weeks later and agreed to help. She double and triple checked my accusations and had other agents cross-evaluate them, and then she saw that I was telling the truth and that was it. The beginning of what the media labelled as The Resistance.”

Link was quiet whilst listening, afraid to interject this time. He hadn’t heard Rhett speak so much before and had it been a lighter topic Link would have been smiling the entire time. But none of what his ex-handler explained how he became the leader of The Resistance.

As if he had read Link’s mind, Rhett said, “They made me their leader a year later. I didn’t want the title, but they needed someone to look up to and I was it for them. As if being the boss’ nephew made me something special. It made me more of a villain.”

“Rhett…”
Rhett shook his head abruptly at Link. “The blood inside our bombs was Jessie’s idea. Transfusions from our agents. Made it look more real when the rats in the Mythical labs ran their tests. Made us look more dangerous than we actually were.”

Link watched as the male agent opened the container inside the bomb and furrowed his brow. That's when a small pocket inside the cylindrical container exploded. There was a flash of, not white, but red, and Link was blind to it for a short second. They’re both dead, he thought, he lost them both. He had failed them, and he had failed H who was surely dead now, too.

But the two agents came back into view, the male agent completely covered in red. Blood, Link assumed, but the other man didn’t appear hurt. Stevie was still sitting beside him, half of her body dyed a dark maroon as she blinked repeatedly.

"What the hell is this stuff?" The male said aloud as he raised his arms, drenched. He had a higher pitched voice than Link.

"It looks like paint." Link observed, hearing his own voice shake. Stevie seemed to notice it as she peered up at the camera, a little two faced; half pale and perfect, half dark red and tainted. A walking metaphor for disaster.

"It's not paint," Stevie's tone was grim as she swirled saliva around in her mouth and spat it out next to her. It was red, too. "It tastes metallic. It's blood."

"Blood?" The agent asked and at the same time Link asked, "Who's blood?"

“It worked.” Link commented absently, not really in the moment anymore. He was too busy reliving his old memories from a life that didn’t feel like his. Things were very different now for the better, at least…with some aspects. Looking at the conflict in Rhett’s eyes made Link wonder why he’d even bothered going through with all the Resistance drama in the first place. They made a difference, sure, but at what cost to its participants? A lifetime of turmoil and nightmares? Was it worth it?

“I went to North Carolina back then, you know.” Rhett says suddenly, breaking Link out of his thoughts with a sharp intake of air.

“You what?” Link demands.

“After I found out what I’d done, I boarded a plane and flew to the site—”

“Where my wife died?”

“Where everyone died, yeah.” Rhett looked away, and something tore inside of Link. Rhett clearly hated himself for what he’d done back then, and Link knew he shouldn’t feel sad about it…but he did. He couldn’t help it. If Rhett was telling the truth then he didn’t deserve to take the blame. He didn’t deserve to live with the guilt. He was simply a middle man used to take the fall for a greater evil. McLaughlin. “So when you were transferred, I recognised your name pretty much immediately. I don’t know why, but I…I placed Jessie undercover to keep an eye on you.”

Link looked down at his trembling hands, scratching at the thin layer of skin on the side of his thumb that had been the victim of numerous nervous breakdowns. “Why?”

Rhett shook his head as if he didn’t know how to answer that. Maybe he didn’t. “Guilt, obligation to your wife…all of the above. Take your pick. Didn’t know why but it’s what I wanted to do. Stevie agreed to handle it, and allowed me to pose as your handler so I could remain distant and not give away who I was or what I’d done.”
Rhett looked up at Link momentarily with sad eyes. “Didn’t work out that way.”

“Definitely not.” Link managed to scoff. It didn’t seem like Rhett managed to keep a lot of things to plan, as it were. There was sweat forming on the back of Link’s neck, the neatly shaved hairs at the back of his head standing up and sending a tingling sensation down his spine.

Rhett grunted in response. It seemed like his long-winded explanation was over much to Link’s dismay. He was enjoying hearing the older man talk even if it was just for a little while, because honestly, Link didn’t know if he was going to stay.

Or if he was going to leave. He didn’t know what he wanted.

That was a lie. Of course he knew. He knew damn well he was in love with Rhett having given up fighting it for the past six months. Did Rhett feel the same? Would it even matter anymore? They had spent time apart now. They could be different people; the might not even connect the same as they did before.

But the electricity in the air remained. The cold sweats Link experienced as soon as Rhett laid eyes on him. The trembling in his hands and shaking in his knees when Rhett looked away in anger. The way his heart skipped and pounded when Rhett bit his lip, looking down at his knees in a way that made Link just want to bite him.

Link rubbed a hand over his face with more force than was truly necessary. He gripped his temples with his shaking fingers, his blunt fingernails leaving crescent moon shapes on his forehead. He heard Rhett shift beside him but didn’t bother looking up from his lap.

“Do you hate me?” Rhett asked quietly. There was a beat of silence. It felt more like 6 months of silence and Link was drowning in it. Rhett was doing the devil’s tattoo on his left knee with his left hand, his right rubbing the back of his neck like it was a nervous habit. Maybe it was. Hatred was a strong word, and a weird concept. Link spent a long time hating Rhett; or H, as he knew him then. The man who ruined him, and the man who destroyed his life.

But also, the man who rejuvenated his life and made it better than it ever was.

Life wasn’t a fairy tale. People didn’t just kiss longingly and the camera didn’t just fade to black. Real life just didn’t work that way and Link didn’t want it to. Real life was a punch in the face or a kick in the balls, not a kiss. Not an embrace. Not a love letter. Sometimes people didn’t learn to see it that way, but Link did. Link knew life wasn’t a walk in the park all too well. Link knew things wouldn’t just fall into place naturally and that there’d be bumps in the road. Or pot holes. Manhole covers that he’d inevitably fall into.

And Rhett would be there to catch him.

Well, maybe.

Rhett would probably be the one falling in after him. But that’s exactly what Link wanted.

Slowly, as if he wasn’t as sure as he knew he was, Link shook his head.

Rhett didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t voice his apprehension. Instead, the older man simply looked away towards his bedroom doors. Link briefly wondered what he was thinking about. Cole, maybe. Link huffed out the breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. His lungs deflated and it felt like his heart did too, like a popped balloon at a birthday party no one turned up to.

But Link was learning. He learned to deflate the heart he had that was inflated with air, and fill it
with helium so he could finally float. That’s what love was like. That’s what loving Rhett was like.

That’s what loving a criminal was like.

“Why me?” Link asked, his voice quiet and vulnerable. He was naked in front of Rhett, both in soul and in mind. The deciding factor was here and now, stay or go, worth it or a waste of time. Talk some sense to me, Link pleaded inside, but his eyes didn’t give anything away. Rhett was watching him with intent, his body now entirely still but Link swore he could see the skin of the other man’s neck turn a dark shade of maroon. Nerves? Apprehension?

It wasn’t important. Talk some sense to me.

Rhett didn’t respond for a long time as both men simply stared one another down. When the time seemed right, with a soft and steady tone, like he’d never been so sure of something in his life, Rhett said, “You were a risk, a mystery, and the most certain thing I’ve ever known.”

Link felt his eyes begin to water. His skin felt like it was ready to burn, like he’d flown too close to the sun and was about to get burned. Rhett was the sun. He was dangerous and magnificent, harmful and beautiful, and as much a mystery as he was as clear as day. Link removed his hands from his face and held them out in front of him. Was he there? Was anything real anymore? Was this real?

If it was a dream, then it was a damn good one. And Link didn’t want to hold back. He’d done his time. He’d paid his dues. This was the deciding factor. This was it.

Link blinked slowly, once, twice, three times before quietly sighing.

“I love you.”

If someone were to ask Link years down the line what emotions crossed Rhett’s face at this moment, he’d be able to name at least twenty-three. Shock and awe being the most prominent. Maybe nauseous too.

“I—” Rhett began, but Link interrupted him.

“I love you.” He repeated, louder this time.

Rhett, once again silenced, appeared to rethink what he’d been about to say. After a long minute, it became clear he wasn’t going to say anything. The older man then shifted on the sofa, sliding closer to Link so that he was perched in the corner where the two leather cushions met. Two warm hands were suddenly on either side of Link’s face, Rhett’s pinkie fingers tickling the skin under his earlobes. Rhett exhaled a warm, deep breath of air onto Link’s mouth as he leant closer and severed the distance between them. Link’s eyes fluttered closed once the shock of the situation wore off, which admittedly only took a second or two. Rhett was as soft as Link had remembered, gentle lips and sensitive skin, with a smooth beard. A lot smoother than before given it was longer since they had last shared a kiss. But this time felt different. Like Link was kissing someone else.

Like he was kissing Rhett for the first time now that he knew who he truly was. No secrets. At least, none that mattered, as far as Link was concerned.

Link’s hands found the curve of Rhett’s biceps and gripped on tight. Rhett was strong and solid, and thin. If Link’s hands had been a bit bigger, his fingers a bit longer, he swore he could’ve stretched around the entire circumference of Rhett’s upper arm. His brow must have furrowed in response because Rhett pulled back and broke their lip lock, concern in his expression.

“What’s wrong?” Rhett asked.
“Nothing.” Link lied.

Rhett gave him a look.

“It’s nothing,” Link assured, then faltered, a bit dazed from having the other man so close, “It’s just your arms.”

Rhett seemed confused until Link squeezed the older man’s biceps gently, to which his expression changed to understanding. And a small touch of embarrassment, it looked like. Maybe self-consciousness too. “I lost a little weight.” Rhett said.

“How much is a little?”

“I don’t know, don’t own scales.” Rhett shrugged it off, pulling away slightly to which Link tightened his grip. “It’s better than what it was, believe me.”

“I do.” Link replied truthfully, and something about his instantaneous response caused the corners of Rhett’s mouth to curve into a smile. “Your hair is longer.”

“Your hair is shorter.”

“It is, yeah…” Link blinked, a bit distracted, “Was Jen’s idea. She said I needed a change.”

“A new start?” Rhett asked as if he’d had a similar speech from Stevie. He probably had. Link wouldn’t blame the girl for trying at least.

“Something like that, yeah.” Link shook his head, the smallest of smirks on his face. “Not that I really needed it.”

Rhett laughed breathlessly in response, and when Link could feel the warm air from it hit his lips he was reminded of how intimate the situation was, and how close Rhett was to him. The tips of his ears began to heat up, but he was determined not to let it spread to his cheeks. His trying must have been in vain however as Rhett snuck a glance or two at Link’s cheeks, making him turn red even more.

“It’s hot,” Link blurted out to defend himself. The small smirk on Rhett’s face worsened the situation.

“No,” Rhett replied, closing the distance between them, “You are.”

This asshole, Link thought as he closed his eyes and did his best to ignore what Rhett had said whilst his stomach performed somersaults. He felt like a teenager again. Like this was his first kiss under the bleachers when he was meant to be in detention. Sweet but dangerous. Something which described Rhett perfectly.

The bearded man’s lips were warm against Link’s own, massaging gently but with purpose. Butterflies fluttered their colourful wings around Link’s stomach, aching to burst free and surround the couple on the sofa. Maybe Link would fly away with them someplace else, because surely this had to be a dream. It was a dream and soon he’d wake up and be back in North Carolina in his lonely apartment. Double bed to himself, cold sheets and cold feet.

A firm yet gentle touch at the base of Link’s back brought him back into reality. He was thinking too much. Or maybe not thinking enough about what he should be thinking about – Rhett. Rhett’s body in his hands, finally. Finally. There was a sweetness to the older man’s touch, as if Link was something sacred and to be cherished. Calloused hands moved to the side of Link’s face and held him firmly in place as Rhett tilted his head and deepened their romantic kiss.
If Link’s ears weren’t red before, they were now. But maybe Rhett wouldn’t see, and Link wasn’t about to open his eyes and find out. Link dug his fingernails into Rhett’s biceps – or what was left of them. A soft hum sounded from the back of Rhett’s throat, sending a tingle down Link’s spine.

Yeah. If this was a dream, Link was quite content sleeping forever.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Ça fait longtemps depuis la dernière fois qu'on s'est vu! A year, maybe more, actually. My apologies would be mute at this point, but I have read and am reading the feedback left for me in this space of time. Thank you deeply from my heart and soul for those who are still here and waiting for me. This is the final "proper" chapter of this tale. Next will be a small epilogue summarising the story and its components.

There is still a live poll for the potential future of this story for those who have and are willing to continue waiting: [poll](#)

Some important things to note:
1) Link’s monologue: "He learned to deflate the heart he had that was inflated with air, and fill it with helium so he could finally float. That’s what love was like" is inspired by a beautiful piece of poetry by Karys PK (@karyspk).
2) Rhett's words: "You were a risk, a mystery, and the most certain thing I've ever known" is a direct quote from Beau Taplin from "A Certainty".

I hope this chapter was worth the waiting for. It has been a long time since I put fingertips to keys and produced something I could be proud of. Here it is.

Thank you to all of those who contributed to this piece. Honourable mentions being of course Mamaburnie (whose account is now orphaned), acatalepsy and MeganLouise. And of course all of those who provided support to me this past year. It's been one hell of a ride.

Merci et prends soi de toi!

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Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!