201X

by mclavghlin

Summary

When the nation is stricken by catastrophe, two internetainers somehow manage to make it out alive.
JULY 07, 201X

The most petrifying day America had ever experienced was a calm, collected evening when the Los Angeles sky glittered with stars.

Link had perched himself on the couch adjacent to a lounging chair occupied by his best friend when, out of seemingly nowhere, the lights flickered. He scrunched his brow in nothing more than curiosity, turning quickly to evaluate Rhett’s expression as if to validate his own. The man was relaxed, eyes glued to his laptop with a pensive stare – so Link returned to his phone with a similar perspective and nestled his socked feet beneath the cushions.

Through the window, Link could see the first inklings of nightfall – shadows began to meld into the darkness between buildings, but they soon reappeared under the illumination of streetlights. Appropriately, exhaustion started to get the best of him, and a minute headache throbbed within his skull – curse his dependency on caffeine. With coffee on his mind, Link rose to his feet. He then stumbled out of the room and paced to the kitchenette, where he glanced at the clock on the wall – it was 9:14, a long workday indeed. Steadying himself on his tiptoes, Link scavenged the cabinet overhead for a mug, and plopped back down to his heels. His eyes stung.

A few minutes later, the electricity flickered again, but the room was quick to regain light. Perplexed, Link ambled hastily back to the office. He pointed his toes just behind the coffee table to meet Rhett’s gaze – but he received only a second’s glance from him before his eyes wandered back down to the screen. “Don’t worry about it, Link,” he mumbled assuredly. With that, Link flashed a nervous smile; Rhett was always right.

The two proceeded in their respective research, each basking in one another’s company. In the pit of Link’s stomach was a festering anxiety that would not relinquish – but Rhett remained unfazed, and so he was essentially forced into a charade of stoicism. Link bit his lip and drummed the tips of his fingers along the arm of the couch. “When did you wanna head out?” he pressed.

Rhett jutted his tongue into his cheek and sighed with finality. “Any time, I guess. You act like you’re tired,” he remarked.

“Yeah,” Link laughed through his teeth. “It’s been a long day.”

Rhett closed his laptop and placed it on the table, then hoisted himself to his feet. Link followed suit, grabbing the mug and rinsing it in the sink before making his way to the foyer. There, he adorned a thin jacket and zipped it up to his neck – despite the dry California heat, the nights were chilly, which Rhett attributed to the succeeding combat of global warming… perhaps, Link thought, some of his theories were far-fetched after all.

The larger man, who stood in the far corner of the room, glanced irritably at his phone. “No service,” he said with curiosity.

Link reached into his back pocket and checked his own phone – he too had no service. “There’s usually at least three bars...” he announced, his tone disconcerted.

When Rhett’s eyes shot up, Link noticed he was concealing a degree of anxiety, but just how much he couldn’t tell. Instead of dwelling on the fact, Link twirled on his toe and headed for the door – but quickly, his feet stopped in their tracks, as they were not followed by the stride of his companion.
He didn’t know why at the time, but the next image Link saw branded into his memory and sent a jolt of goosebumps down his spine. He looked over his shoulder, eyes locked on Rhett, whose unmoving posture resembled that of stone. The man’s gaze had fixed directly on the light above his head, which shone a fluorescent white. It beamed into his eyes and from them reflected a thin, glossy sheen.

And all at once, the bulb burned out.

Link felt his heart tighten. Following the solitary light was the sound of a hundred whirring appliances fizzling into silence and an infinite darkness to accompany. For a few long seconds, he could have heard a pin drop – but the quietness was interrupted by a rustling on the other side of the room, which he deduced to be Rhett. A clamoring of footsteps drew closer to Link, and a chilly set of fingers encircled his wrist. He was comforted by the touch.

“Let’s go,” Rhett insisted, his voice raspy enough that it indicated fear. Link’s stomach was in knots – but he swiftly complied and wrapped a trembling hand around the doorknob. Having lived in North Carolina for the majority of their lives, they’d experienced power outages, and they both knew the proper ways to deal with them. In Los Angeles, it was rare – almost unheard of – for one to last longer than a few minutes. A sense of foreboding pounded through Link’s chest. He opened the door.

Link kept his eyes down as he walked onto a plane of dark concrete, his shoes scratching the pavement – but he stopped suddenly upon hearing Rhett’s voice:

“Oh, my goodness…” the blond pushed past his lips. Link tilted his head upwards to view his surroundings and was taken aback by both how little and how much he could see.

From the ground to the roads to the roofs of the tallest buildings stretched the darkest hue he’d ever lain eyes on. Silhouettes traveled far and wide, not a single object lit for miles. As his gaze wandered up, it finally met the horizon…

And there before him was displayed a sky that he and Rhett had long forgotten.

Stars upon stars dotted Link’s vision, adorning a violet universe and its blaring moon. They were like pearl beads strung across the skyline – and there were infinitely many, big and small. The beauty and vastness of it all took Link’s breath away. It was alluring.

“Rhett,” his voice faltered.

“Light pollution’s something else, huh…” the taller man declared. He still held Link’s arm.

For a couple seconds, they stood together in the night’s eeriness – but just when Link had been entirely transfixed by the astral sky, he felt Rhett’s stiff grip tighten around his arm with urgency. His calloused fingers dug to the bone…

Though he couldn’t see, Link veered his gaze in Rhett’s direction. He was then surprised by the embrace of an arm wrapping protectively around his shoulders, which steadily coaxed him against his friend’s body. Rhett’s behavior struck him as horrifically peculiar.

And when he found out why, Link felt his knees lock beneath him.

Across the studio’s parking lot was a suburban road, and by the faintest bits of moonlight, Link could see the slow-moving reflection of a large vehicle. It miraculously made no noise whatsoever – the sheer number of possibilities filled his veins with adrenaline. The only thing that kept him from crying out was the intensity of Rhett’s hold, which harbored a gravity that made it
impossible for him to speak.

As the machine inched onwards, Link began to notice a ‘clunk’. Every twenty or so seconds, the noise would sound in contrast to the empty ringing of his ears. Rhett evidently heard it, too, judging by the soft and gentle strokes he massaged into Link’s shoulder. Neither dared to speak.

Around ten minutes passed before the vehicle was completely out of sight, leaving Rhett to loosen his hold. As if by instinct, he grabbed Link by the shoulders and forced him to face in his direction. He sighed – half with discontent, but half in relief. Link, however, was still ridden with anxiety.

“What was that, Rhett?” he choked out in the lowest voice he could muster; in total silence, even a whisper was deafening.

Rhett exhaled. “I’m not sure, buddy,” he whispered back, “but whatever just happened… it’s not good. It’s not good at all.”

Link’s nerves forced his ankles to wobble and his hands to shake. “What were those noises?” he pried.

“I don’t know, Link.”

“I’m scared…”

“Me too.”

At that moment, Link realized Rhett had no answers and was just as clueless as himself. It was scary – having relied on the words of his friend throughout their entire lives, Link was stunned to petrification. He could only feel Rhett’s body as he all but collapsed against him.

“Shh,” Rhett hushed the sound of the smaller man’s shoes scratching the blacktop. He clasped his arms around Link.

Just when he thought the tension in his limbs had reached its limit, Link became startled by a cacophony that pierced the silence. It was a constant hiss, like the slow and steady exhalation of gas from a balloon. He couldn’t quite explain it, but a new and faint pungency hung in the air…

Before he could process another thought, Rhett’s hand locked onto his forearm, and he was forcefully yanked through the office door.

“Rhett, what the hell –”

“Don’t you let go of me, you understand?!?”

There in the man’s words was an element of danger and a degree of sincerity Link had never heard in his life. His legs sprinted through the halls, heart plummeting to his stomach. Rhett’s fingers bruised his wrist to the bone.

Before much longer, Link realized where his friend was leading him – and luckily, Rhett had thought to use his phone’s flashlight to guide the way. The two of them bolted down the steps to the studio’s basement, and under a stark illumination, Link could see it – the bomb shelter, in its authenticity.

It was Rhett’s idea to incorporate the room into the studio, just for safety – and Link only agreed on behalf of its doubling as a ‘testing’ room. From the outside, it was simply a silver door – but the inside was entirely decorated by impervious metals that sealed every crevice from the outside.
Link was pulled gracelessly into the shelter and thrown against the opposite wall. On the other side of the room sounded a pair of rusty hinges and the immediate slamming and barring of the door. His heart pounded so hard he was sure he’d throw it up – Rhett knew more than he was letting on.

A stifled series of gasps thundered from across the floor; Rhett was, no doubt, crying – and the concept alone forced nausea to rise in Link’s stomach. If he didn’t speak now, he reasoned, his lips would be sealed forever. At last, he sputtered:

“My God, Rhett, what the hell’s going on…”

The second his words sliced the air, the muffled sobbing ceased – however, no response was uttered from the other man. Link’s patience waned, and his anxiety skyrocketed. Consequently, his voice rose. “Rhett – ”

“Sh-shh…” the other man interrupted with a dense fragility; it was all he could manage to push past his lips.

Each second all but halted to a complete stop. A plethora of vague and horrifying premonitions settled in Link’s mind, and it took every ounce of his being not to collapse onto the floor. In the darkness, he recalled the setup of the room in which he stood – there was a whiteboard and an Expo marker to his left that sat upon a granite counter. There was a sink. There was liquid soap. There were scissors and knives. There were Dixie cups and jugs of water…

There was a kerosene lamp and a bottle of fuel.

Link ambled hastily towards the counter and ran his hands across the surface in search of the lamp. He found it with ease as its ice-cold bottom grazed his fingers, and so he carried it towards the door. As Rhett’s erratic breathing came closer, Link realized he was hunkered on the floor, and his heart ached with sympathy. He crouched to the ground, placing the lamp in front of his knees, and twisted the switch on.

At first, the light was blinding, and Link winced at its intensity – but his eyes shortly adjusted to make out the face of his best friend, which was streaked in tears. He donned an expression of absolute terror.

Link shimmied closer to him and placed a hand on his knee. The lighting was just enough to capture the brilliance of Rhett’s eyes, despite how tattered and bloodshot they may have been. His stare was euphoric, stunning – Link’s own eyes welled up.

“What’s wrong, brother…” he whispered, his voice severe.

Rhett broke eye contact and swatted Link’s hand away.

Though it was an offensive gesture, Link held nothing but heaviness in his heart. In the back of his mind, he pieced the situation together best he could – the blackout, the vehicle, the ‘clunk’s, the hissing… the unrelenting force of Rhett’s grip as he charged down the hall…

Then, a switch flipped in Link’s mind.

As if to confirm his worst predictions, a thick and whirring noise sounded from miles away. Its timbre quickly increased, and almost instantly it became deafening. The sound was unmistakable – it was a helicopter.

Link’s mouth fell agape as he desperately looked to Rhett, who cowered in front of the door.
Never had he seen the man in such a condition, his irregular breaths jolting his body into a full spasmodic episode. Tears essentially flooded from his eyes, and he clutched his chest in ceaseless panic – but he stayed in the same position, fairly upright, body pressed against the door.

Rhett’s silence had gone far beyond simply irritating – it was dangerous. In the same moment he watched his friend’s body shake uncontrollably, Link became aware of his strategy. Rhett was blocking the exit.

Suddenly, every thought that had lit up his mind was immediately shadowed. Outside of this room was the end.

Outside of this room…

The helicopter had only come closer to the ground, its incomprehensibly loud blades chopping the air. Link’s gaze clung to Rhett, and he was finally able to share his pain. He thought of Christy. He thought of Lily. He thought of Lincoln. He thought of Lando…

Adrenaline surged through Link’s body and channeled into a magnitude of strength he’d never known. Fear became hostility. He rose up at once, abandoning the lamp at his feet, and flung himself at the door.

“Link,” Rhett choked, rising to his feet between the wall and his companion.

With might, Link thrust his fist into Rhett’s side so as to push him out of the way – but the man didn’t budge.

“LET ME OUT OF HERE!” he yelled.

Desperation and empathy flushed Rhett’s face. Promptly, he clawed into Link’s arms and trapped them against his sides. Link fought back with all his ability – but despite the burning anger that caught his soul afire, he was no match for Rhett.

Knowing it was useless, he continued to fight. His fingernails ripped into Rhett’s skin, and relentlessly he watched the cinnabar ribbons trickle from his wounds. “GET AWAY FROM THE DOOR!” Link cried. He punched and kicked and kneed and pushed for minutes, ending up nowhere – but eventually, he gave in, and fell defeated onto the floor. Rhett dropped alongside him and hugged him tight with open arms.

By then, the whirring blades had far ascended into the atmosphere and were inaudible. Just as before, everything was mysteriously silent. Feelings of imminence crawled under Link’s skin, and they were suppressed only by the firmness of Rhett’s hold. He could no longer conceal his emotions, though, and began bawling within the confines of the man’s embrace – but still, he contended.

“Why can’t you let me go…” Link stammered. His heart, he felt, had shattered beyond repair.

Rhett rubbed circles into the smaller man’s back. “There’s no sense in it, Link,” he declared in a whisper. “You’d just be another casualty. I can’t let that happen. You mean too damn much.”

Link gasped. “My family –”

“I know…”

Of course, Link thought. Of course Rhett knows.

And, of course, he was experiencing the same emotional turmoil. Rhett was just as broken, just as
weak, just as devastated… and Link knew for a fact he loved his family very much. The only thing that kept him from breaking down the door and running away, just as Link tried so hard to do, was the sheer instinct of survival… and God only knew how long it would take for disaster to strike.

What scared Link most was the fact that his friend’s arms held him with fear. Rhett was never afraid. Rhett always had all the answers…

Link was suddenly engulfed by the man’s embrace.

In seconds, the men’s bodies were smacked onto the ground by the sheer force of an explosion, paired with a noise so loud they were temporarily deafened. The floor vibrated and the walls trembled – and Link was certain the shelter would tumble upon them.

When Link regained the ability to hear, there was an overwhelming pandemonium of crumbling bricks and shattering glass. Rhett lay on top of him, using his weight to pin the smaller man to the floor. Vibrations surged through the tile and made Link’s heart flutter – short, panicked gasps wheezed in and out of his lungs, to which Rhett responded by cupping the back of his head and trapping him against his chest. Inconceivable sounds boomed from all around them, and their power rattled the items within the shelter. The lamp beside the door had been projected across the room – but by what seemed to be an act of God, it remained entirely intact and shone a brassy light. Link’s muscles were infinitely tense. Finally, he mustered the strength to clasp his hands around Rhett’s waist – the many points of contact he shared with the man’s body connected him to reality just enough that he came to terms with the fact the world around them was collapsing.

After so long, the demolition became constant enough that it moved to the back of Link’s mind. Still, he held onto Rhett with full force, his palms digging into his lower back. Tears poured from his eyes as he spared thoughts of his family. Link prayed that somehow they would make it, but given the circumstances, it was essentially hopeless. Suddenly, Rhett’s obsession with the apocalypse didn’t seem quite so laughable...

It took quite some time for the world to return to silence, but even so, it was eerie. When Rhett concluded it was over, he removed himself from Link and leaned back upon his knees. He then reached behind the other man, who was still pressed against the floor, and peeled him up into a hug. Link took full advantage of the protection and proceeded to reciprocate the embrace as he bawled against Rhett’s shoulder. In his veins throbbed an anxiety of a degree he’d never known, and alongside the emotional heft was his speeding heart, which he reasoned would surely give out at the rate it pounded…

Link felt himself being pulled into the room’s corner, still hunkered in Rhett’s lap. Rhett’s breaths were choppy and deep, and his arms strong. Finally, he rested his back against the wall and tilted his chin to the ceiling. He was purely drained in every sense of the word. Link’s head fit perfectly into the crevice between Rhett’s neck and shoulder, and there he felt a stream of salty tears creep down his nose and drop onto the man’s shirt. Eventually, Link realized the feeling would never slacken. With that, he allowed a whimper to escape his lips – and just moments later, he felt Rhett’s nose bury into his hair.
Chapter 2

SEPTEMBER 25, 201X

The year was wrapping up, but its most beautiful season never came.

When Link turned his eyes upon the dry dirt and wilting vegetation, he could only imagine the stark autumn hues that once danced in nature’s sway and littered the ground. Yellows, oranges, reds, browns… floating rhythmically in the breeze and layering a crisp coating upon the grass. A fleeting smile grazed his lips at the thought.

Link rested against a brick structure, dipping his toe in the hot sand – he longed for the chilly nights he so loathed only months prior. Callouses and blisters coated the soles of his feet, creating a barrier against the scalding earth. Regardless, his feet ached tremendously, almost as though they had been folded in on themselves and hammered against the heel. His knees received the brunt of it each time he walked, squatting slightly with every step as his light frame was simply too much to carry.

The months following the First Night – as he and Rhett dubbed it – hadn’t treated either of them with mercy. Apart from emotional hardships, they both had their share of various ailments, which impeded their ability to survive. Link mostly suffered from lingering lung issues and heat-induced migraines… but, as it sometimes seemed, he was the luckier of the two.

The nights were as cold as the days were searing, so Link never ditched his jacket entirely; in fact, Rhett managed to scour through what was left of the studio a few mornings following the First Night and salvage a couple he knew were Link’s favorites – the olive cargo and a blue hoodie, both wedged within towers of rock and dust. Eventually, they both became tattered and filthy, as did Rhett’s few changes of clothes…

And not too much time passed before shirts, jackets, and pants stopped fitting altogether.

They never talked about it because it was inevitable, but their bodies rapidly became thin. With each day that went by, Link was able to notice how exponentially weaker his body had become – simply walking proved to be a daunting task, forcing his bones to ache and his heart to pound. His muscle mass was deteriorating.

From the beginning, they opted to travel north on the interstate, despite the issues that could accompany. There was always the possibility of exhaustive collapse before reaching the next exit, especially for Link, whose body tended to give out on a rather consistent basis. Rhett never pushed him, though, and always insisted he take all the time he needed to recover.

Another reality was knowing that the interstate would be the most popular mode of transportation for other survivors – and in the state the country was in, God only knew what company would entail. So far, they were lucky to have only met others in passing who guarded their own while Rhett would do the same, lifting a frail arm to encircle Link’s shoulders in a protective stance. “Don’t worry, alright? We’ll be okay,” he’d say. Link could only nod in response as his weight fell onto Rhett; his nerves had long been shot.

It was morning on the west coast, and the air was heating up fast. There was one benefit to the eternal California drought – it made for a low humidity, so the weather never felt terribly hot. By the same token, though, that meant the temperature was not indicative of how dangerous the sun’s heat was. For Link, the fact was hardly worth batting an eye over; his skin merely darkened in complexion and his raven hair lifted to a tint of dark chocolate. Rhett, on the other hand, was not
so fortunate. Stretching his legs in the remaining shade, Link reflected on the previous day’s conversation:

“Please, Rhett, you’re already sunburned. Wear a jacket.”

“It’s a hundred and six damn degrees outside. I’m not gonna sweat any more than I have to.”

That was a good point. They had to think about these things now – each drop of sweat was a waste of water that their bodies could have used for something more important…

“Your skin is blood red – you’re lucky you haven’t been poisoned yet!”

“We haven’t had water in days. I can’t afford to sweat, Link, get it through your head!”

“If you get sun poisoning, it’s gonna take more water to nurse you back to health than we’ll ever have.”

“My God, I think I can look out for myself. Nothing’s gonna happen, Link.”

And that was the end of the argument.

When the heat finally proved to be too much, Link shimmied the olive jacket from his shoulders and allowed it to pile upon the ground behind him. Rhett would probably wake up soon – that night, they slept in what was essentially a pile of bricks, presumably leftovers from what was once a home. Despite the thick coats of ash that layered upon every item within the structure, there was a homelike atmosphere that hung in the air. Rhett had dusted off the intact mattress best he could, and they both piled into it with ease. Their bodies had no trouble resting, but sleeping was a different story – Link found it impossible on such an empty stomach.

That morning, he was simply too weak to rummage the house for food – his legs could barely carry him outside, but he managed to make it to the back wall away from the sun. Link’s head fell backwards and his palms jutted into the stale dirt. His entire body ached without remorse.

By the time Link heard the sound of his awakened friend rustling behind the wall, he’d lost track of time. His eyes darted towards the sky and found that the sun was equidistant from the east and west, and so he deduced it was around noon. With an exhausting bout of strength, Link pulled a knee to his chin and rose to his feet – instantly, he became dizzy, but thrust his hand against the wall in order to catch himself. He stumbled towards the side of the house, where a gaping hole interrupted the patterned brick, and stepped onto the discolored carpet. Just then, Rhett emerged from behind a jagged obelisk (possibly the remains of an inner wall) and entered the room. Beneath his eyes were sagging, violet bags. Nonetheless, his lips curled into a smile.

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swaying, Link. Are you alright?”

Link winced. “Swaying?” he repeated – but his voice failed him and faltered to a whisper. When he blinked again, he was surprised by a sudden onset of double vision. At the sight, he flinched and shut his eyes once more.

With that, Rhett’s grip stiffened and moved to his forearm. He coaxed Link to the ground and knelt beside him until, feebly, he glanced back.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Do you feel dizzy?” Rhett pried.

Speaking had become a chore, and so Link nodded.

Rhett’s hands rested on his friend’s knee. The expression in his glassy eyes was grave as they drilled into Link’s. “You’re dehydrated,” he declared. “Stay right where you are, and don’t you move. Can you do that for me?”

Again, Link nodded.

Rhett smiled. “There’s bound to be some things left here. This is one of the more kempt places we’ve found,” he trailed off assuredly. “We’ll get you fixed up.”

With a ginger slap to Link’s arm, Rhett arose and staggered slowly out of sight. He felt useless in that moment, piled in the ashen corner of what was once a living room – a broken couch sat lopsided on the opposite side of the floor, its plaid pattern desaturated to browns and greys. Link’s vision continued to blur. He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead into the adjacent wall.

His daze was interrupted when he heard a promising sound from a few rooms over – dull, heavy metals clanged together, and a cabinet door was shut with ease. Link’s eyes fluttered open when Rhett’s steps reentered the room.

A look of utmost elation had plastered itself on the larger man’s face. In his hands, he carried two bottles, each a distinct golden color. Rhett knelt again at Link’s feet.

“You won’t believe it,” he insisted, cracking the cap off one of the bottles, “but there’s… there’s so much here. Food and water – even soda and juice, Link.” The smaller man watched as Rhett thrust the bottle into his lips. Before it could even touch, the scent wafted into his nostrils – apple juice. When the taste landed on his tongue, Link savored it. It was like candy; he’d long forgotten the taste of sugar, but it now tainted his palate with an overwhelming sweetness.

His body’s need quickly got the best of him, and Link tipped the bottle up and swallowed nearly half of the drink in just a few gulps. When he stopped, he gasped for air – this house has food?

As if to reaffirm Link’s thoughts, the apples of Rhett’s cheeks poked out above a smile. He shook his sleeve a bit, and out of it a spoon fell into his hand. Link was even further perplexed when Rhett turned and a cylindrical container bulged from the hoodie’s pocket. Curiosity flooded Link’s mind.

Finally, Rhett reached into the pocket and pulled out a labeled jar. Link peered expectantly over his knees – when his friend unscrewed the cap, an undisturbed paper seal covered the top. He peeled it back to reveal the tan and glossy surface of Jif peanut butter, in its authenticity.

It was all Link could do not to clamber to his feet in his dazed state. Rhett bared his teeth in a smile and handed the jar and spoon over. “Don’t eat too much, now,” he advised. “You don’t want to get sick.”
Link complied with a nod and proceeded to pile spoonfuls of the viscous substance into his mouth. Rhett only watched as Link raked his teeth along the spoon and licked the residual oil from his lips. A foreign feeling of satisfaction began to creep into his system…

He was still hungry when Rhett plucked the jar from his hands, but Link knew it was for his own good. Already, he felt the urge to vomit, but kept the food down in fear of facing the disorientation that led him to the floor in the first place. He finally met Rhett’s gaze, and upon evaluating his thin torso was presented with a question:

“Are you gonna eat?” the brunet asked. Using the balls of his hands, he hoisted himself into an upright position.

Rhett braced a wary hand around Link’s shoulder as if to catch him, then swiped it down the length of his arm. “I will in a few minutes. I’m just… not all that…” his voice tapered to a whisper, abandoning his excuse; Rhett stared intently at his hands.

Instead of admonishing him, Link allowed a tender smile to breach his lips. He felt as though he’d regained a bit of his strength, at least enough to pull himself out of the floor – but the previous days had certainly been a struggle, so it wasn’t saying much. Neither himself nor Rhett had slept well for days, and it was evident as he stared into the other man’s face and observed the indigo bruises that hung beneath his eyes. Exhaustion probably had ten definitions by that point, and Link was certain he’d felt them all simultaneously. His head swam.

Despite the curling beard that covered most of his mouth, Rhett’s cheeks could never hide a smile. His eyes, which bugged out even more than usual, turned upon Link. “You oughtta get some rest,” he said firmly.

Link hardly realized he was in a daze until his head whipped in Rhett’s direction. “Rest?” he repeated indignantly. “Rhett, there’s no time –”

“We’ll make time!” the blond cut in, his tone adamant. “Look at you, man. You’re about as beat up as beat up can get. You can’t walk ten feet without gettin’ dizzy. I’m worried about you.”

Link lifted a hand to rub his eyes. “It’s already September, Rhett! We can’t afford to slack off. Not a single day,” he pressed – and it was true; the nights were quickly increasing in length, and subsequently they became cooler. Eventually, their shared warmth beneath a thin, makeshift blanket would no longer do. The fact was clear as the back of his hand, but along with Rhett’s plea came a festering contention. He was suddenly plagued by a vivid flashback, and with it came a violent trail of goosebumps that shot down his spine:

Nearly four days passed before hunger drove them out of the shelter, their empty stomachs aching alongside a hope just as vacant. They were lucky enough to have had gas masks within the confines of the small room, which they adorned before exiting in fear of inhaling the noxious fumes of the new world. Despite this, Rhett advised his companion to hold his breath and inhale only when necessary. “You never know – there might be something in the air that can penetrate these things,” he’d said.

The tactic proved to be worthwhile – Link ended up developing what he assumed to be fluid in his lungs, as it was paired with a chronic cough. Had he not listened to the advice of his friend, it may have turned out to be a death sentence. Still, while Rhett’s lungs remained crystal clear, Link suffered with a ceaseless infection; he could not hold his breath quite as long as the larger man.

The demolition was incomprehensible. Evidently, the local bomb was dropped far from the studio, as Rhett determined upon examining the adjacent buildings – or lack thereof – and shattered asphalt. What remained of the office was merely piles of ash and discolored drywall, decimated
appliances, beaten up projects, and a decade of irrevocable history.

“The shelter was lucky to have survived,” Rhett mumbled in amazement as he spared a final glance at the mess before setting off. “We’re pretty blessed, Link.”

They left prepared with two backpacks, each carrying essential items. They took as much water as they could carry, surviving cans of food, changes of clothes, knives, lighters, aspirin, a compass...

Without Rhett’s intuition, Link knew he would have never survived alone. When the sun roasted their skin, Rhett was the one who found shade. When the nights were too cold to fare, Rhett lit the fire and huddled Link against his chest. When the conditions were just right, Rhett pushed them to move on with gusto.

Only a few scorching days and freezing nights had to pass before Link discovered the trend. Though the daytime weather was bearable, the sun burned him – and as soon as it went down, he longed for its abrasive warmth as he shivered in Rhett’s embrace before a rising fire.

One day, the burning sensation became so poignant upon his broiling skin that Link’s frustration overpowered his disposition. Stopping mid-stride, Link turned away from the sun and covered his face.

Rhett, of course, was quick to respond and followed just behind him. “Are you okay?” he asked, cupping a hand around his ribcage.

Violently, Link shook his head from side to side. His bare calves tingled in the heat.

“Link, what’s wrong?”

The small man thrust a hand into his hair and wiped the sweat from his scalp. “What the hell is going on?!?” he asked rhetorically. “I can feel the blisters forming under my skin, Rhett, it’s like we’re being microwaved by the sun – and it doesn’t even feel that hot! But right when the sun goes down, it’s like Scandinavian winter out here. It just doesn’t add up…”

Rhett frowned and pulled the brunet’s body closer to his own. A discontented sigh puffed through his lips, followed by a meek answer:

“Ozone depletion,” he said. “They’re spraying all kinds of junk in the sky, Link. God knows what. Evidently CFCs constitute some portion of it.”

“How do you know?” Link’s brow furrowed.

Rhett lifted a finger to his friend’s chin and led his sight to the sky. He then extended a hand in the same direction. “See those?”

“What?”

“Those uniform white clouds.”

Link winced, questioning the blond’s motives. “Yes, Rhett. That’s where a plane’s been,” he stated matter-of-factly.

Rhett flashed a desolate smile in an attempt to conceal his anxiety. “You’re half right, buddy,” his voice lowered. “Those are chemtrails. You can tell ‘cause they stick around a lot longer than plane exhaust.”

With this information, the sun beat down twice as hard. “So what you’re telling me is that they’re
on a mission to get rid of the atmosphere…”

“And quickly, too,” Rhett added.

Link brushed a sweaty palm through his hair and closed his stinging eyes. “Well who’s that benefiting?!?” he snapped.

At the question, Rhett could only shrug. “Guess it depends on how widespread this mess is. Could just be the city, you never know. Could be the country. Hell, it could be the world,” the man conspired. “But the bottom line is this – they’re out there trying to kill the populace. They’ve done got the majority, but they know there’s more out there. People like me and you, brother. We gotta lay low.”

A pause followed Rhett’s words where Link allowed a couple of pent up tears to breach his waterline. The blond evidently noticed and pulled the smaller man into a full hug. “You know we’ll be okay, right?” his self-assured breaths mingled in with Link’s scalp. “We’re a team. Between the two of us, there’s a sea of knowledge. When the weather’s rough, we can find shade and make fire. If we get hurt, we’ll take care of each other. We’re okay, Link. I promise.”

A sense of relief pulled the heft from Link’s lungs, but his vice-like embrace lingered around his friend’s waist. More tears dropped from his eyes and sank quietly into Rhett’s shirt. “I could not do this without you,” he said with grave insistence.

For just a moment, a cool and crisp breeze came from behind and ruffled Link’s hair. Rhett’s hand followed behind it and grabbed a fistful of his trimmed, midnight locks.

“Right back at you, brother.”
SEPTEMBER 26, 201X

Link awoke the following midnight in the same ashen bed he’d lain in the day before.

Rhett’s limbs were tangled into his, the night’s only source of warmth. Beginning to shiver, Link cautiously grabbed the larger man’s wrist and coaxed his limp arm towards himself so that it lay upon his own. The skin was hot.

Quickly, however, the blond was jarred awake and swept his hand into Link’s so their fingers interlocked. The maneuver was swift – Rhett dragged their hands down to hover over the man’s abdomen and, at once, pressed their bodies together. Finally, his head inched innocently closer to Link’s ear.

“Are you cold?”

It was a simple question, but it took the brunet a moment to respond. “Yeah…” he finally stammered into the darkness. “W-Where’s my hoodie?”

Rhett effortlessly retrieved his arm from Link’s grasp and leaned over his side of the bed. There, the sound of rustling cloth cut into the air and traveled closer to his ear. Rhett’s hand cupped his friend’s shoulder. “Raise up,” he whispered, assisting Link into an upright position. A large, cotton cloak was draped over his shoulders – the blue hoodie, bigger than it ever should have been on Link – and subsequently zipped up over his arms. When the deed was done, Rhett hugged him from behind and planted his bearded chin against the man’s neck. “You’re so skinny,” he remarked.

So are you, Link thought at first – but he opted to save the argument for another day. “Starvation does that to a person,” the small man quipped, his humor dry. What a silly thing to say.

Rhett only huffed at the attempted joke. “There’s still a lot of food left. We’ll take some with us, but make sure you eat before we leave tomorrow. I don’t want you to be hungry.” At last, he loosed Link from the embrace and placed him gingerly back onto the mattress. “As for now, just lay back down. You haven’t slept enough lately.”

Link winced. The man who sat to his left had been uncharacteristically sweet that day – and additionally, he’d rarely spoken of himself. Every word he uttered revolved around Link…

He could barely see Rhett, but by a dim cascade of moonlight his nebulous outline could be made out. A greyish illumination dipped in zigzags down the folds of his jacket – and the contour appeared to vibrate, front to back, as though the earth beneath him were shaking. Link watched the reflection for a moment as it danced in his vision and caused his heart to ache. Rhett was shivering. The concept of the man’s discomfort eventually got to him, and Link finally parted his lips.

“You feeling okay?”

Rhett turned his head to the exposed sky, his moist eyes shining. “Cold,” he replied.

“Lay back down, man. If I recall, you haven’t been sleeping enough either.”

The large man shrugged, the wrinkles of his jacket bunching up at the shoulders. “Stressed,” he spoke with brevity. Rhett then thrust his hands into the bed and leaned down to his side, facing
away from Link. An orchestra of pops and cracks sounded from within his back. He was curled up against the end of the mattress about a foot away from the other man’s body.

With an air of sympathy coursing through his veins, Link shimmied forward so his chest was against Rhett’s back. He then tossed an arm around him, sweeping his bare hand in careful circles on the thick, purple cloth that stretched over his skin. Link’s movements finally slowed as he wrapped his arm tightly around Rhett’s flat stomach. Before much longer, Rhett’s arms met in the same position – fallen neatly across his friend’s wrist. They were both huddled in the fetal position, Link mimicking the body shape of the other man. Soon, their fabric-clad legs folded together into the warmest configuration they could muster. The night was unbearably cold; the only reason they were able to fare it without a fire was because the walls surrounding them buffered the incoming winds. Beneath his arms, Link could feel his companion convulsing despite their shared warmth. With that, the brunet pressed his forehead into the top of Rhett’s back and expelled a dejected sigh.

“You’re shaking, brother…” he whispered. “Bad.”

Rhett inhaled a long and choppy gasp, matching the rhythm with which his body jerked. “I’m – I’m so c-cold…”

“Oh, gosh, Rhett,” Link breathed, worry in his tone. Even through the thickness of his jacket, Link could feel the bone-like rigidity of his muscles. The stars shone on Rhett’s many layers of clothing, from his shaking socked feet to his heavily enveloped shoulders. The sight of it all was pitiful.

A vast suddenness overtook Rhett’s body, and with no warning he flipped over so that he faced Link. He looked infinitely smaller – his body was scrunched into a compact ball, which couldn’t have been good for his back – and his arms crossed just below his stomach. Rhett’s knees were positioned in such a way that they approached his chin, but because of his height they were merely hovering against his friend’s thighs. “Sorry,” he muttered in an effort to remain nonchalant.

Link frowned. Something was wrong – Link was typically the more cold-blooded of the two while Rhett harbored a nearly boundless endurance. The brunet lifted a ginger hand to his companion’s forehead and found that it scorched the pads of his fingers. “My God,” he mumbled. “Rhett, you’re burning up…”

Wind whipped through the home’s towering drywall edifices and floated into the bedroom. Rhett flinched as a subtle breeze swept across his exposed skin. “I’ll be alright,” he hissed, “It’s just – I’m okay. Please, g-go to sleep —”

Of course, Link refused to buy it.

“Rhett,” he pressed, a sincere gravity to his voice. “There’s something wrong with you, man. You’re shaking like a leaf…” Link hooked a hand around his friend’s upper arm and squeezed. So much hoodie, so little Rhett…

A steady sigh exited the large man’s lips.

A long and expectant pause followed the distress. When he realized Rhett wasn’t going to respond, Link ducked his head closer to his face and inhaled a sharp gasp. “I’m sorry, but this is all we’ve got, brother. We can’t build a fire in this wind,” he announced, “and I don’t think we can huddle any closer. Oh, God, I wish we could – poor thing, you’re absolutely freezing…” Out of sympathy, Link extended his arm to envelop Rhett’s back, ultimately pulling the two of them together like magnets. Rhett responded with rigid reciprocation as his stiff arms clasped around Link’s ribcage.
That was the moment Link’s anxiety grew stronger than it had since the First Night. Finally, it felt as though the men were not invincible – it seemed that Rhett had expended himself of any and all energy, his head heavy as it lay upon Link’s sternum. The brunet used his free hand to sift through his companion’s hair, dry like the sand they trudged through daily.

It was the first night that an unwavering fear consumed Link, yet his heart remained at a calm and steady pace.

It was the first night he lay awake with his face pressed just above Rhett’s – and he smothered beneath the sheer heat that radiated from his skin.

It was the first night Link initiated an exchange of “I love you”s with Rhett.

And despite the nervous energy that kept the man awake, there was an overarching realization that shrouded it all to black. For the rest of his life, it would ring like a gong inside his mind:

He came to terms with knowing their time was limited.

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**JULY 30, 201X**

“I just don’t understand how we’re still alive.”

Even to Rhett, it seemed, the fact was phenomenal. There was no question in Link’s mind that the city’s residual radiation should have long wiped them out, yet they had surpassed the three week mark with no signs of poisoning. They were both perplexed, Rhett rattling off his strings of possible theories, but he was never positive as to why they were so lucky. Instead, he’d remained relatively quiet throughout the day’s trek, responding to Link only when the man admonished him.

“I don’t get why we ever left the shelter, if I’m being quite honest with you. We knew we wouldn’t have stood a chance out here – but somehow by the skin of our teeth, we’re making it. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Rhett bit his lip, a rush of frustration showing in his eyes. “Come on, Link – there wasn’t even any food in the shelter. It was either take the risk of going outside or huddle up in the corner of a bunker waiting to die,” he contended. “Honestly though, as much as I’d wished it was over right then… I couldn’t have lain there and watched you die. You just… Link, you mean too bloody much to me.”

It was at that comment Link pinched the bridge of his nose and allowed a couple tears to drop to his cheeks. They sizzled against his burning skin, the salt entering his pores with a hot pain. He looked up to Rhett, who had stopped walking – their shadows stretched for what seemed like miles as the sun set before them. Brilliant, white pinpoints shone in the sky to signify the beginnings of nightfall, and they reflected in Rhett’s eye like shining marble. As luck would have it, they were three miles from the next exit with only a soot-stained blanket and a half bottle of water to get them through the night. Link shivered at the thought, as he knew they would have to stop here – his knees throbbed and his thighs had gone numb.

As if by telepathy, the men arrived at a mutual consensus and together squatted to the ground. Rhett’s knees popped, followed by an expression of tearful discomfort. Finally, he plopped down to the asphalt and leaned cautiously against the guardrail. Link had begun to develop a tremendous headache and followed suit, burying himself fully into Rhett’s side. The large man wrapped a feeble arm around him.
“I’m starving,” Link complained, arms crossed over his roaring stomach.

Rhett’s calloused fingers ran up and down Link’s arm. “Me too, brother,” he quietly said, a hollow grit to his voice. “We better set up camp for the night. You need to rest.”

“Yeah,” Link agreed. “I’m exhausted.”

Pain of all kinds throbbed throughout the small man’s body as he arose from his friend’s side and reached in his backpack for the blanket. It was folded neatly into eighths, but stained with dirt and ash. Scooting back towards the road’s shoulder, Link grabbed the blanket by the corner and at once it waved in the acrid winds. The breeze whistled coldly across his skin and triggered an onset of goosebumps and hand tremors – but by that point, Rhett had snatched the fabric from him and spread it across their bodies. He then encircled Link’s wrist with his fingers and stroked the man’s palm.

“You’re shaking. Are you okay?”

Without making eye contact, Link bared his teeth in a smile. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You sure?” the taller pressed.

“Rhett, I’m okay. Honest.”

When the blond finally bought it, he snatched a jacket from Link’s bag to serve as a makeshift pillow for the two of them and lay down upon the asphalt. Still, he had an arm slung around the brunet’s shoulders. As Link’s head rested on his friend’s arm, he realized it had lost its familiar softness. A wistful sigh blew through his lips.

That night, Link lay awake beneath the stars and mused upon how lucky he and Rhett were simply to be alive. He thought of how lucky they were to have survived the force of a bomb and withstood its radioactivity...

And how lucky they were to be together.

The fate that placed them in their tragedy in the first place was the same fate that had them cuddling for warmth under the vast display of the universe. With Rhett’s arm wrapped around him, Link was invincible. Impenetrable.

A sudden wave of assurance swaddled Link like velvet as he nestled his cheek into Rhett’s broad chest. For the first time in weeks, he was doubtless – convinced not a thing could stand in their way. Rhett could move mountains. Rhett could set fire to the ocean. Rhett could steal the sun from the sky and toss it back into the depths of space with a single swift and valiant maneuver.

And through the power of his own determination, Link knew he could do those things, too.
Chapter 4

Link awoke in the same filthy bed that morning, and he was alone.

Through gaping holes in the ceiling, the blazing sun sifted down and tingled upon his skin. It appeared to be around nine o’clock, give or take an hour, and having slept for so long he felt revitalized. Quicker than he had in months, Link arose and placed his bare, sweaty feet on the carpet beside him, then pulled himself up and made his way to the hall. The day was eerily quiet.

Link’s first mission was to find Rhett – Oh… his heart dropped as he recalled the night’s episode. Oh, God, please be okay…

The scrawny man’s knees grew wobbly as he ambled the decimated corridor and peeked in and out of its shattered doorways. Not a sign of his friend anywhere, Link found – and so he exited through the back wall, stumbling through shards of brick, and planted his heels in the dirt.

He used a hand to guide him along the wall in the case of spontaneous dizziness, but found that he made it to the corner just fine. Link then pulled his hand away and walked out of the shadows to the side wall. The sunshine hit his limbs like a train, forcing him to stop for a moment – and in his pause, he heard a familiar sound: Rhett’s sickly cough, coming from the front of the house. Both relief and horror struck his legs, and with haste he bolted for his best friend.

Upon reaching the next corner, Link peered around the edge – and what he saw made his stomach plummet to the dust.

Rhett was sat against the wall facing straight for the sun, his torso clad in Link’s blue jacket and wrapped in a thick, red and white comforter. Only his head and socked feet poked out from the mess of fabric which had him curled into a compact and hefty ball. In addition, his hair was soaking wet, as if he’d poured buckets of water on himself – but he knew better than to waste the little water they’d found, didn’t he? Was that sweat?

Fast as his legs could carry him, Link made a beeline for the man who had hunkered so lowly on the ground. Upon further examination, he found that Rhett was shivering – convulsing – beneath the layers of stored up heat. When Link gripped his cushioned shoulders, Rhett’s clenched eyes finally fluttered open, bloodshot and pink. They pierced his own with a gravity he’d never known.

“Oh, Rhett… Oh my God…”

For a few, infinitely long seconds, all Link could do was stare. Rhett shuffled mindlessly among his blankets, almost shamefully – he broke eye contact and sucked in a sharp breath, which he then exhaled through a set of chattering teeth. A flood of tears dripped down Link’s face.

“Rhett, you’re not cold – there’s no way in hell you’re cold…”

As though he were being chastised, Rhett pursed his lips and thrust his head down. Then, Link could see it – his neck was infested with red blisters, as were his cheeks and the base of his nose. Out of pure terror, the brunet outstretched his hand and touched his fingers to the affected area of his neck, to which Rhett responded with a miserable shriek. It was all Link could do to not weep at the sight.

The small man swore beneath his breath and instinctively began peeling the layers away from Rhett’s body. “This is bad, this is so bad…” he whispered as he frantically tugged at the comforter – however, a force was keeping it attached to Rhett.
Link looked up to see two balled fists at the other man’s chest, each shaking and filled with fabric. There was a fearful expression on Rhett’s face, his eyes brimming with tears, that punched Link in the gut and caused his mouth to fall agape. He loosed his grip.

“I’m s-sorry,” Rhett finally managed, his voice small.

As the stress continued to accumulate, Link’s heart began to weigh down, and eventually he couldn’t take it anymore. A surge of pain struck him in the chest, and at once he doubled over at Rhett’s feet in tears.

“Link, d-don’t –”

“Don’t what?!” he shouted, rising up from the dirt. “Rhett, look at you! It’s probably ninety-some degrees, and you’re out here in the sun covered up in blankets, shaking like you’re in a damn ice bath! And God, Rhett, your skin – it’s blistered like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

Rhett exhaled a choppy sigh. “I j-just don’t know what to do,” he admitted.

In response, Link lightly shook his head, followed by a brief pause. He then reestablished eye contact with Rhett and placed a firm hand where he assumed his thigh to be. “Listen brother,” his voice cracked, “I’m gonna get you through whatever this is, but you’re gonna have to cooperate with me, you understand? You’ve got to let me have this,” he gestured to the comforter, “and you’ve got to go inside. I’m afraid you’re gonna have a heat stroke, Rhett…”

“Link, I’m cold –”

“I know you are…” he replied with sympathy. Link lifted a hand to Rhett’s forehead, having to push the soaking hair away in order to touch it. It was so hot he flinched away – no person should ever have a fever of such a level… but for some reason, Rhett did. Link swallowed the lump in his throat with difficulty, but managed to keep his tone stable. “Can you stand up for me?” he requested.

With some assistance, the blond made it to his feet with the comforter slung around his trim shoulders. Link grabbed him by the arm and led him slowly to the side of the house, where the large hole in the wall was. Before Rhett stepped over the mess of bricks, the smaller man took his hands and squeezed. Together, they walked through the dining room, then across the hallway, and finally into the bedroom. At last, Link guided him to the bed, and in unison they sat down in the shadows.

Rhett groaned in subtle agony as the sun’s comfort was no longer present – but, Link reasoned, his body would thank him for it later. “You okay?” Link raised his brow and rubbed his friend’s back in circles.

“Ehh,” the tall man stuttered. “I’ve – I’ve seen b-better days…”

Link frowned, glancing at Rhett’s exposed thighs. Their thinness sparked a theory in Link’s mind – but oh, how he hoped he wasn’t right. Nonetheless, he broke the seal and asked a seemingly random question: “Have you eaten today?”


“Have you eaten today, Rhett?” Link repeated, this time more stern. Please say yes.

Despite his wishes, Rhett shuffled his feet and looked to the ground. “No,” he replied simply.

Link’s throat tightened, and his eyes, too, fell to the floor. “Why not?” he pried, monotonous.
“I felt sick.”

The earth stopped spinning. The response was enough for Link to conclude precisely what was wrong with his friend, and the reality of it all mortified him. *He could die… He could die…*

Link carried on rubbing his back and didn’t say a word. He counted his blessings in silence, his face nuzzled into Rhett’s shoulder. There was a foreign sound that blared in the back of his mind… something he hadn’t heard in months. *Music.*

Through the days and nights of never-ending stress, Link rarely thought of the things that once made him happy – when survival is the only thing on your mind, it’s rare to experience contentment. The choice of song seemed random at first, but upon further induction Link realized its relevance, and thus was sent into a fit of tears.

*We’ve got to hold on to what we’ve got*

*It doesn’t make a difference if we make it or not*

*We’ve got each other, and that’s a lot for love*

*We’ll give it a shot*

*Woah, we’re halfway there*

*Woah, livin’ on a prayer*

*Take my hand, we’ll make it I swear*

*Woah, livin’ on a prayer*

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**SEPTEMBER 27, 201X**

Things only appeared to be getting worse.

The previous day, Link attempted to condition Rhett in such a way that he didn’t need the extra warmth, but his tactics failed each time his friend yelped in discomfort when the layers were stripped from him. The majority of the day, Rhett spent sleeping – it was the only time he could sleep, as the night’s inevitably frigid weather would not allow it.

Since they’d reached the house, Rhett had refused to eat. Although Link knew it was the nausea, he couldn’t help but feel a pang of sorrow for the man – it’d been at least a week since he’d last eaten, but of course, he couldn’t afford the risk of throwing anything up. At least, Link took for granted, he could hold down liquids.

That was, until the following day.

The morning of the 27th, Link once again awoke to an empty bed. At first it didn’t faze him, his limbs splayed every which direction on the tough mattress – but soon enough, his heart grew sick as it ached for the company of his best friend. He hadn’t noticed Rhett getting up, which was rather odd considering he hadn’t slept well that night; anxiety had kept him awake for the most part, but occasionally he dozed in and out of consciousness. Link finally collected himself and repeated the previous morning’s routine, peeling himself out of bed in a single maneuver and searching for Rhett.
It didn’t take quite as long this time for the brunet to find exactly what he was looking for. He crossed the hallway and peeked into the dining room to find the man sitting on a large piece of drywall, hunched over the remnants of what appeared to be a table. His face was buried in his forearms which were perched upon its dusty surface.

Link rushed to Rhett’s side and carefully lay a hand on his back, cloaked in a thin blanket. “You feeling okay?” he said quietly – there was a desperation to Link’s voice that only he was able to detect.

Slowly rising from his home in the ashes, Rhett expelled a thick cough. “Yeah. F-feel like a million bucks,” he spat.

Link leered at the man’s sardonic response, but maintained a calm tonality as he inched closer to Rhett. “Come on man, be serious,” he pleaded. “You’ve got the worst case of sun poisoning I’ve ever seen in my life, brother. I have to know what’s going on.”

At last, Rhett let out an apologetic sigh. “Y-yeah, I know… I’m s-sorry, L-Link –”

“It’s okay, Rhett, you’re okay,” Link assured him quickly, taking note of the blond’s increasing stutter. Before bludgeoning him with more questions, Link took a moment to rub up and down on his friend’s back – and to his discovery, he could feel Rhett’s ribs poking through the blanket. The rapidity with which his body was deteriorating startled Link.

“Hey,” he finally said, “you need to eat something. It doesn’t matter how much or what it is – I don’t care, you just need food.”

At the mere concept, Rhett’s face flushed to white. He mustered up the energy to raise his brow. “I c-can’t, I’ll t-throw up –” he insisted.

“But Rhett –”

“I can’t!” the large man hissed, a sob threatening to emerge from his throat. Tears beaded from his eyes and flowed in streams down his cheeks.

With a knot in his own stomach, Link found himself approaching closer to Rhett’s face and pressing his lips against his hot forehead. “Don’t cry, brother. You’re gonna be okay. Baby steps.”

Carefully, Rhett dabbed the saltwater from his face. “Don’t tell me t-things that neither of us know are t-true,” he sputtered. “F-face it, Link… I’m probably t-too far gone. I’m done for.”

The truth flew from his lips with the velocity of a train, nearly knocking Link off his feet and into the floor. At once, he enveloped his best friend in a relentless embrace – and through his tears peeked down to the floor only to be further stricken with horror. There on the tile was a puddle of what appeared to be bloodied gastric discharge, its viscous layers melding into the cracks. Link’s grip suddenly loosened and he was released back to his feet where he could once again meet Rhett’s face. The man opened his mouth to speak, but immediately shut it upon seeing his friend’s expression; and there, Link saw it – Rhett’s teeth and lips were stained in blood, and his breath was accompanied by the rancid and unmistakable odor of bile.
As the day inched by, the sun rose higher and higher into the sky, almost seeming to refuse descent.

In spite of their plans to head north without halt, both Link and Rhett were plagued by illness and exhaustion that prevented them from leaving the springy mattress they’d begun to call home. There was a point in Rhett’s slumber where nightmares contorted his grotesquely thin frame, his chill-ridden arms flailing across the bed and grabbing at the sides. The episode lasted for several minutes, but Link remained close and pinned him down with all his might – and still, Rhett’s adrenaline-fueled strength was able to overpower him. In the taller man’s state of unconscious brutality, he thrust his friend into the floor as though he were a bag of feathers.

Link hit the ground back-first, sending a shock of pain up his spine and into his limbs. He let out a yelp – his bones had become dangerously frail, which led him to fear the possibility of a fracture. As he lay upon the ground, he tried to convince himself it was unlikely – but nevertheless, his lower back continued to throb ruthlessly, confining him to the floor without a single remembrance of health.

Rhett hadn’t batted an eye, the small man noticed, he’d only carried on with his fit of self-destruction. He’d begun to claw at his blistered face, leaving behind trails of blood that seeped into his tangled beard. The mere sight of it was terrible, but when it was paired with the man’s blood-curdling screams it was all the more alarming. Despite his state of injury, Link flew up from the floor and encircled Rhett’s wrists, pulling them away from his face.

“RHETT!” he yelled, ignoring the sharp pains that battered his spine. Spindles of blood from his companion’s fingernails flung onto his arms.

Abrupt as a tidal wave, Rhett’s eyes shot open – and just as quickly, they filled with tears. His breathing quickened and transformed into tireless panic, his chest heaving under the weight of his own body. Link then coaxed the man to lean against his shoulder, and the two of them backed cautiously into the adjacent wall. Blood, sweat, and tears mingled together and flowed all at once into Link’s shirt.

“Hang in there, Rhett,” the brunet spoke in what was essentially a soliloquy. “I’ll get you through this if it kills me, you hear?” Rhett’s response was limited, his head merely rubbing against the other man’s chest.

Amidst the breakdown, Link reluctantly wrapped the blanket back around Rhett’s torso. “I love you, tough guy,” he whispered – a bit awkward, he later reasoned, but did not regret his choice of words.

Rhett shivered – but somehow, he managed to rally the strength to lift his head and speak for the first time since that morning. “I love you, too.”

***

By the time evening came, Link’s hope had entirely dissolved and mingled with the winds.

He dreaded to see the daylight dwindle, taking along with it the sun’s warmth – and consequently, Rhett’s shiver intensified. By then, he wore Link’s blue hoodie and was wrapped in two blankets. The small man kept him enveloped in a tight embrace so as to transfer any bit of heat he could; to see Rhett suffer, he reasoned, was far worse than forcing him to endure conditions that might have
cured him in the long run. Link rested his nose atop his friend’s sopping hair.

Every now and then, he would ask Rhett if he was doing any better – but the same, brief response always followed: “Not really.”

“I’m sorry, brother. You wanna try water again?”

“My stomach hurts…”

“I know, Rhett. You have to stay hydrated, though. Especially now. I’m worried about you.”

“W-Why? I’m g-gonna die…”

Link jerked from the reflection in a cold sweat. His bare arms harbored chills from beneath the descending sun, and they clasped tight around the fabric-clad man who lay in his lap. As the temperature fell, Rhett’s breathing became more and more erratic – but suddenly, the brunet was stricken by an idea. I’ll build him a fire.

Taking advantage of the other man’s slumber, Link carefully draped his body, blankets and all, onto the mattress. The breeze was luckily at a minimum – but regardless, the temperature was rapidly plummeting. Not before pressing a chaste kiss on Rhett’s cheek, Link exited the room and began scouring the home for flammable objects.

Even walking the few steps it took him to cross the hall, the pain in Link’s back was absolutely unbearable. He shuffled stiffly from room to room, occasionally bending over to pick up a slab of splintered wood to use as kindling. Looking up, Link could see the first brilliant pinpoints of stars that dotted the sky. He didn’t have much more time before nighttime was in full swing – and so he powered through the brutal throbbing of his spine and eventually made his way outside.

His backpack sat defeated against the brick, collecting dust having barely been touched for days. After arranging the pieces of wood a few yards from the house, Link scavenged within his bag for a lighter. He quickly found his favorite, a translucent sapphire Bic, still brimming with fluid. His jagged thumbnail gripped its silver wheel, and in a fraction of a second, a brassy orange flame was ignited from the flint. Link fixed his eyes on its fiery brilliance for just a moment before ambling back to the wood pit.

Finally, he dipped a sheet of folded newspaper into the flame and shared its vibrancy with the kindling.

Before Link’s eyes could process the information, a crackling, red fire engulfed the ground and spat billows of smoke into the sky. At first, his heart raced – would it ever stop growing? he wondered – but the embers stayed in their respective spots, glowing above the dark and earthy clumps of dirt. There was a stark, yellow reflection in his eye as he turned on his heel and bounded for the house.

A rush of adrenaline surged through Link’s body and allowed him to make it back to the bedroom. He scooted to Rhett’s side with as much haste as he could muster, finally leaning down against the bedside. The blond’s face was coated in a thick sheen of sweat – bead after plump bead trickled down his brow, plopping heavily onto his nose and finally to the mattress. Link placed a careful hand on his forehead, which singed his fingertips like a hot iron. The smaller man brushed Rhett’s tousled hair from his face and cautiously shook him awake.

As soon as the man’s eyes fluttered open, he was reduced to a fit of terrible shaking. Link helped him raise up, though it was difficult, and took note of just how much sweat was rolling off of him. Bits of dead skin hung from his face in blistery patches to reveal a layer of exposed, pink tissue.
Rhett’s beard was shrouded in dry flakes, and his weightless body collapsed dizzily against Link. Anxiety fueled his lungs.

“Hey,” the small man whispered, “I have a surprise for you. Think you can walk? If I help you, maybe?”

Rhett’s hopelessly disoriented body swayed from side to side as he removed himself from Link. “I can t-try,” he stuttered aloud, his voice weak.

Link smiled. Swiftly, he rose to his feet and took Rhett by the hands – but as soon as the man placed the slightest bit of weight onto him, Link’s back refuted with a terrorizing spasm. “Oh!” he flinched inwardly, knees fallen onto Rhett’s. To alleviate the pain, he sank to the ground and adopted a half-fetal position. Of all times for an injury to flare up… a whisper sounded in the back of his mind. Of all times, it’s now…

Suddenly, a tremulous set of fingers gripped Link’s chin and forced his gaze into his friend’s glassy eyes. Another hand sifted through his hair, tugging at the scalp, and brushed the overgrown strands from his forehead. Link swallowed down a burning lump of embarrassment.

“Are you alright?” the sicker of the two implored, a grave concern to his tone.

Link’s brow furrowed. “Yeah,” he said dismissively, angry with himself for one-upping Rhett’s state of deterioration – yet, he was forced to offer some form of explanation if he ever wanted to get the blond to his feet. “I just… I hurt my back earlier – but it’s fine, I’m sure it’ll heal.”

A subtle, vague smile surfaced at Rhett’s lips. “You’ll b-be okay in due time,” he assured. “Maybe I oughtta c-carry you…”

Link could only shake his head. “Don’t be silly, Rhett. You’re worse off than I am by a long shot,” he insisted. “Least I can carry myself.”

The larger man huffed a spasmodic breath. “Wish I could s-say the same…”

“Oh, Rhett…” Link choked out. “C’mon, man. I’m gonna get you outside if it kills me.” With all his might, he sprung up to his feet, though he felt his face contorting into an expression of agony as a galvanizing pain split through his tailbone. Despite the resulting blur to his vision, Link outstretched his hands once more.

Indignant, Rhett winced at the man who stood above him. “Hell, b-brother…” he trailed. “You’re really hurtin’, aren’t ya?”

Pursing his lips, Link looked to the floor. “It doesn’t matter, Rhett –”

“It does matter!” he retorted in a weakened equivalent of a shout. “Sit down, Link. The last t-thing I wanna do is hurt you, alright?”

It was rare of him to defy Rhett at any rate, but an aching pang of self-assurance throbbed in Link’s heart. With a look of pure determination, his eyes drilled ruthlessly into his friend’s. “Well it’ll hurt me a hell of a lot more if I have to drag you.”

In his current state, Rhett couldn’t do much to argue – so instead of trying, he leered at Link with an undertone of what appeared to be sympathy. Finally, he expelled a defeated – almost resentful – sigh, and reluctantly tossed his sweaty hands into those of the man who stood before him.

***
The night was absolutely lulling as the fire’s hiss intertwined with the cosmic beauty of the skies.

Rhett lay on the side closest to the fire, shielding the heat from Link, who had his arms wrapped around the man’s abdomen. At times, he could feel the hunger coursing through Rhett’s stomach as it occasionally attacked in a tremendous wave – but for the most part, it seemed, the shiver had subsided.

One of Link’s hands traveled up to his companion’s chest and rubbed softly. “You feel okay?” he quietly asked.

A low hum vibrated on Link’s hand as Rhett spoke: “I’m warm.”

Link nuzzled his face into the other man’s back, relieved that he was only cloaked in the warmth of a hoodie. Once again, his hands clasped just below Rhett’s chest. Link initiated a subtle move that caused their legs to tangle together, jutting his knee between his friend’s thighs. He hugged him tight.

“How’s the rest of you?” Link muttered, exhaustion in his voice.

Hesitation. “The rest of me?” Rhett responded at last. “Probably the same as you. Hurtin’. Sick. Tired. Hungry… but I’m not paying much attention to it.”

Link’s lungs heaved below a sigh. “But you’ll get better,” he said assuredly – but the same nearing fire that quelled Rhett’s convulsions had begun to singe his hands, and so he began to second guess himself.

“Ahh,” the large man groaned, “I wouldn’t be so sure, Link. You and I both know all this heat’s gonna cook me inside and out – God knows how bad it is already. But whatever happens, I don’t want you to worry about me. I know it’s just your natural tendency, brother, it’s built into you to worry – but… out here, you’ve gotta stay clearheaded, you know? If something happens to me, I want you to be okay. Your anxiety will poison you if you let it.”

Each word that fell from Rhett’s lips was a harsh and terrible stab in Link’s heart. Before he knew it, rivers of salty tears coated his face and sank into the other man’s back. With that, he pulled even tighter around Rhett’s stomach, pressing his nose just below his shoulder blades. “Don’t talk like that,” Link whispered above the snapping fire. “Don’t talk like you’re gonna die…”

A brief, perplexing silence followed the small man’s words – and it wasn’t long before he realized that Rhett, too, had begun to cry. “Pretend all you want to, Link,” he finally choked out, “but I’ve been through some pretty rough times, and none of it compares to how bad I feel now.”

Link’s red-rimmed eyes begged him for sleep, but his heart raced beyond the desire. “How bad do you feel, Rhett?” he asked in a simple and grave monotone.

“Truthfully?” the blond’s voice cracked. “I’ve never been this bad, brother. I’m absolutely starving, but my stomach hurts so bad I can barely breathe… and constantly, I feel like I’m about to throw up. Other than that, my head’s pounding, my skin hurts… everything hurts…”

A wave of partial empathy connected Link to his best friend, his shattered back throbbing against the soil beneath them. “I’m sorry, Rhett,” was all he could manage for a few moments – but then, his slender fingers traced the thinning outlines of Rhett’s torso. Link pushed ever so slightly on the jacket, yet was immediately able to feel the stark dips between the man’s ribs. “Listen, first thing in the morning, we’ll try to get you back on water. If that goes well, we can work on eating. Alright?”

Rhett cleared his throat in response to the compromise. “Maybe if I feel better, Link.”
“You will feel better –”

“No,” Rhett interrupted impatiently. “I might feel better. It’s a coin flip, man. Roll of the dice. Don’t be optimistic about it, Link – if you’re wrong, you’re just gonna be disappointed.” Even in his current state, Rhett was only capable of giving genuine, thoughtful advice.

But, Link mused, the man’s logically centric mindset wasn’t always the best policy. “And if I’m right, that’s one less night I spend awake worrying myself sick over nothing, isn’t it? After all, ignorance is bliss,” he countered.

“Goodness, Link,” the larger man exhaled, “The only thing I want more than for you to be okay is for you to be prepared for whatever hits the fan. There’s a point where happiness takes a back seat to survival, man, and damn it, I think we’re there.”

The point was authentic and absolutely true, Link found – and it was then he realized the selfishness of his own argument. I have placed my mind’s satisfaction before my best friend’s life, he chastised himself. If Rhett could have possibly felt any worse than he already did, Link’s words had sent him to rock bottom.

“I’m sorry, Rhett…” he blurted out of guilt, “I’m sorry. You’re right. I should be worried about you, and believe me, I am – I’m terrified… and if anything ever happened to you, I just wouldn’t know what to do with myself,” Link admitted. “I don’t live for me, Rhett. You know that right? I don’t trudge through this doom-laden hell every day for myself. I do it for you.”

Following the small man’s vulnerable words, Rhett subtly shifted positions so he lay on his back. A liquid reflection of fire melded with his stormy, grey eyes, glimmering in a sheen of silent tears. Despite a grave countenance, a hopelessly desolate smile had plastered itself upon his face, sprouting a collection of thin and red wrinkles below his cheeks. “And I do it for you,” he concluded.

The reciprocation was all Link needed to beam his long forgotten smile – he could only imagine the resulting laugh lines and crow’s feet splayed across his dry skin... but he didn’t care. The only thing that mattered was Rhett – the only thing that ever mattered.

And so, he pressed his chin into his companion’s shoulder – thin and bony, but regardless, Link felt at home. As he nestled into place, his nose brushed across Rhett’s beard, which was closely followed by a pair of pink lips that pressed softly onto his cheek. “I think it goes without saying, brother… but I love you. And I hope, with all my heart, that we can get you fixed up.”

As Rhett shut his eyes, a large tear fell sideways towards the ground. He finally appeared to be content, if even the slightest bit – and just when it seemed the very world had come crashing down, the blond’s head fell right on top of Link’s with an overwhelming sense of calmness.

“Yes too, Link. I love you too.”
Chapter Notes

TW: Implied death

SEPTEMBER 28, 201X

At some point in the middle of the night, the fire burned out and left behind an ashen pile of charcoal.

Link couldn’t tell if he was awoken by the sun’s harsh glow or his own hunger – but either way, his first thought was of Rhett. The man still lay beside him, wrapped comfortably up in his arms, one of which had fallen asleep. It was around eight in the morning, and the sun’s heat had already begun to beat down upon them. In a panic, Link loosed his arm out from under his skinny friend and shook him gently awake.

“Rise and shine, man. We better go inside – sun’s out.”

For the first few seconds, Rhett didn’t appear to respond – but eventually, his eyes opened into thin slits as he faced the sky. “Mm?” he hummed, his intonation gruff.

Relieved his friend wasn’t immediately showing signs of worsening, Link smiled and stroked the side of Rhett’s chest in circles. “The sun’s up,” he repeated. “Can I help you off the ground, Rhett? I’m afraid your back’s gonna go out. I don’t want you to hurt anymore, you know.”

Link could see the desire for refusal in the other man’s eyes, but before he could argue, he grabbed him by the hand and aided him into an upright position. The brunet tossed his other arm behind Rhett’s back and rubbed softly up and down the spine. A few moments passed before Rhett’s stiff body crashed all at once into Link’s – his feeble bones, it seemed, had given out. A difficult sigh escaped his lips.

Calloused and dry, Link’s hand traced Rhett’s arm and fell down to his hip. The large man’s weight only seemed to grow heavier and heavier, and before long, Link was brimming with concern. “You feelin’ bad, Rhett?” he asked, though he knew an affirmative response was inevitable.

Rhett nodded weakly, his head brushing hard against the side of his companion’s chest.

“Everything’s spinning, Link. I’m so dizzy.”

That, Link reasoned, was the dehydration and hunger speaking. “Oh, gosh,” he panicked, “you need water, Rhett… You need food – for heaven’s sake, when’s the last time you ate?!”

“I don’t know,” the hunkered man’s voice faltered. “Eight or nine days.”

Link’s eyes widened. Eight or nine days, his mind repeated as his gaze wandered down to see his best friend, who had once again begun shaking. “Rhett, you – we’ve gotta get working on you today. You can’t afford to lose any more weight.”

A weak, congested cough sounded from Rhett’s lungs – and although it was subtle, Link was able
to detect the familiar echo of fluid as it sloshed within his chest. As his breathing slowed, the blond all but fell completely into the confines of the other man’s embrace, facing the cruel, sandy ground that stretched for miles. Link’s muscles tightened.

“C’mon,” he cupped a hand around Rhett’s chin, “let’s go inside. I’ll help you.”

Rhett’s brows slanted to portray an expression of sympathy. “Please don’t hurt yourself,” he begged.

“I’m not going to, Rhett, don’t worry,” the small man assured him – but just sitting on the ground keeping himself alive required his heart to pound through his chest, and becoming aware of the fact caused his confidence to wane. To accompany the troubles, Link’s back was plagued by a terrible grinding sensation as though the fractured bones were sliding against one another, up and down. He cringed in agony, praying that Rhett couldn’t see him. What he’d give to simply fall backwards and perish with the dust until, like his best friend, the sun consumed his very soul…

But he couldn’t. Rhett depended on him.

With that in mind, Link channeled every ounce of adrenaline in his body to produce the strength it took to lift himself and Rhett from the ground – a vast amount of weight for his tiny frame to carry – as well as the power to endure the irreversible damage to his spine. When he projected his companion into the air, Rhett hardly lifted a finger to help – Link was carrying him all by himself…

“What the hell, Link?!” he cried. “Put me down! Your body can’t handle this right now – you’re gonna mess your back up if you don’t let me help you!” The man’s tone was painfully empathetic; between a history of ruptured discs and chronic pain, Rhett knew its tribulation more than anybody.

“Yeah?!” Link strained beneath a façade of strength. “Well if you don’t let me help you, you’re gonna die!” As soon as the brunet spat the words, he regretted them – but at the same time, it was a dose of reality he desperately needed to swallow.

Rhett’s reaction, however, was mellow. It seemed as though the possibility – or maybe even the imminence – of death had become something he’d grown accustomed to. Instead of further protesting his friend’s motives, Rhett nestled against Link’s chest. “I just don’t want you to hurt…” he admitted. “Especially not more than you already do.”

Link scoffed. The adrenaline’s novelty wore off after a few effortless strides – and suddenly, an enormous spasm galvanized the small man and sent him stumbling towards the ground. The only thing that kept him from falling entirely was the fact that he held Rhett in his arms; he couldn’t let him go, despite his body’s pleas. Link lunged, miraculously catching the other man on his thigh as he cradled him mere inches from the clumpy sand. “AAGH!” he instantly shrieked, loud as his lungs would project. Never had he endured pain of such an intensity – and he ventured to assume, even with Rhett’s past of various physical troubles, neither had he. Tears flooded from Link’s eyes.

Carefully, Rhett was released to the ground, the terrorized man following suit and collapsing at once into the dirt. It was all Link could do to contain his screams – jolt after bone-splitting jolt shocked his spine into immobility.

“Link!” he heard the larger man yell, his tone fueled by panic. Shortly thereafter, a fragile hand landed on his side and inched cautiously back to cover the injured area. Time moved at the speed of a snail, ever-slowing as the pain grew deeper. Unlike every other wound Link had ever received, the feeling never went away – it only became stronger as he lay there, incapacitated,
alongside the small amount of comfort his sickly friend could provide.

Rhett splayed his fingers softly upon the area, but was greeted by yet another yelp – Link found quickly that it hurt to the touch, feeling as though even the slightest movements shifted the fragmented bones together. *Fragmented*, he panicked at the mere thought; but with the way things were looking, Link knew he had to come to terms with reality. *His spine was shattered.*

“*Link…*” the blond tried again, this time more defeated. Oh, how hopeless his voice sounded… so direly devoid of the will to continue.

Eventually, the newly broken man was able to attain his composure despite the dreadful pain that clamped like a bear trap around his spinal cord. The dirt beneath his face was soaked in his own tears – and with Rhett’s as well, to his discovery. At first, he was afraid to speak – afraid to *breathe* – in fear of hurting himself… but with nothing more to lose, Link tilted his head up and gazed shockingly at his best friend.

“*I can’t do it,*” he confessed. “*I can’t get you inside.*”

A foreign expression donned Rhett’s face, and it was the last emotion Link ever expected to see: complacency. Perhaps even contentment. On his own face, Link surpassed the visage of pain as his lips formed into a helpless ‘o’. As he spoke, he fought the desire to pass out:

“*Rhett, I can’t do it,*” he repeated. “*I can’t. And neither – n-neither can you…*” With the declaration, Link’s optimism diminished. Still, a faint glimmer hung in Rhett’s eye – one that begged Link to just *try…* but he couldn’t. Not in this condition. Not without help.

There was an ethical reason that Link was damaged by the fact, and it siphoned the blood from his heart and tossed the carnage to the dust. He was a terribly organized man, each opinion he possessed legislated beneath a specific set of rules and packed away in his mind’s filing cabinet – and this situation was no different. Link harbored a philosophy that if the stakes of a situation involved severe injury or death, he would do whatever it required to avoid the outcome. *If he and Rhett were in danger of dying if they stayed out there, he had to get them inside.*

The loophole that weaseled its way into the current dilemma was the fact that there was a limitation to Link’s abilities, and that was exhaustion. They were a matter of fifteen feet from the battered shelter they called a house, but Link knew he wouldn’t make it an inch off the ground before an electric pain surged through the limbs of his body and knocked him unconscious. There was absolutely no sense in trying.

To accompany his fears, Link could see through his teary eyes the profundity of Rhett’s expression as he pieced together precisely what was happening – though the wrinkles of his face never contorted to show fear, nor anxiety, nor surprise. Only sympathy lingered in his eyes, each piercing Link with the power of a spear.

Rhett was far too weak to save himself, and that hurt Link to no end. The only compromise he could land on was knowing that he tried his damnedest to save his best friend’s life… but in the end, he killed them both.

*Killed* – another harsh word. But, Link found, the world *was* harsh, and no sugar-coatings or euphemisms could soften the blow.

Despite the reality of it all, Rhett only stared back with wistfulness, appreciation, and love. With the amount of heat that poured from his skin, which roasted in the quickly rising sun, the nearing future became all too clear. It was only a matter of hours before Rhett would die.
Rhett’s dazed eyes shifted in and out of focus. Link was able to see a thick glaze that coated them as though they were translucent glass orbs, gleaming in the sunlight. Things rapidly began to go downhill when his eyelids batted their sandy lashes and produced irritated tears at the waterline—and suddenly, as if the worst case scenario were to come true, a heavy stream of blood began pouring from Rhett’s nose. Drop after drop sank into his mustache and crawled down his cheek…

Link’s owlish eyes immediately widened—it couldn’t happen so fast, could it? This couldn’t be the end just yet—he hadn’t said his goodbyes, his “I love you”s, his testimony, his gratitude…nothing. He hadn’t said a word to the man, yet there he lay in a shuddering cocoon of agony. Dying.

By instinct, Link made a motion to thrust his body against Rhett, to wrap him in a boundless embrace—but he inevitably didn’t make it very far before an onslaught of pain struck his back into paralysis. There was a brutal stabbing sensation, and it was absolutely unbearable. For a split second, he yelled at the top of his lungs—but stars and darkness quickly enveloped his vision, and in a matter of microseconds, he fainted hard onto the ground.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

TW: Several vague mentions of death

The sky was darker than night when Link finally awoke.

Not a single star shared its glow with the world, and neither the sun nor the moon stood among the shadows. Somehow, though, the scene around him was not entirely black – the skylight still emanated from behind scrolls of rolling clouds, dimming and brightening as they moved. Distant cracks of thunder sounded from miles away, and Link finally became aware of the situation: it was the first storm he’d witnessed since before the First Night. Drops of rain sank reverently into his clothing.

Seconds after his eyes batted open, Link prepared to turn his gaze to the side, knowing all too well the horror that lay before him. He pictured Rhett’s shining corpse as the rain battered it without remorse, his soaking hair overgrown and stuck to his forehead… the possibility of Rhett surviving hadn’t crossed Link’s mind – not even a miracle could have saved him.

And so, with a racing heart, the brunet blinked the salty tears from his eyes and faced what would be the most terrible thing to ever graze his vision. His mouth fell agape as he stared into the dark abyss, conditioning his eyes to detect any faint bits of light that shone on his best friend’s body. There was absolutely no indication of the man, however – but the ground was miraculously plain as day, grit and all.

In spite of the resulting pain, Link tossed his hand in Rhett’s direction, but even at an arm’s length away it smacked down upon the dirt. Where on earth was he? Had he somehow mustered the energy to crawl off for his final minutes? A billow of dust puffed into Link’s nostrils and made him cough, which shuffled his back just enough to pinch his spinal cord and send a terrorizing shock into his limbs. “AAH!” he cried out, not knowing whether or not the sound was ever heard…

“Get in here, you fool! That’s acid rain comin’ down on you!”

Link’s bloodshot eyes perked up in fear – the voice was not Rhett’s, the only one the small man had heard for months, and it came from the fallen house with an air of dominance. Disobeying its command, Link promptly lifted himself to his elbows and began crawling ever so slowly to his right. “Rhe – AUGH!” he shouted into the darkness once more, collapsing onto the solid ground that had become all too familiar.

“Son of a...”

Brisk, almost hateful footsteps began at the house and became louder and louder as they approached Link. By this point, he was no longer concerned with the overpowering, brawny voice that boomed from so far away – he only wished to see his best friend one more time. To give him a proper sending away that he just couldn’t offer while he was still alive… and it’d be the best damn eulogy he’d ever deliver.

Before Link could traverse any farther, his terror-stricken body was visited by a shadowy figure
who approached from the side. It leaned hastily down on one knee, and with great suddenness grappled Link by the shoulders – but after a pained shriek flew from his lungs, he was released. “Get off me!” he begged.

“Oh, damn – are you hurt, too?”

Again, Link ignored the words and shoved his weeping face into the sand. “Where’s Rhett!?” he choked out. “My best friend –”

“Where are you hurt!?” the figure demanded in a tone so irate Link was left with no choice but to respond.

“I – My back, towards the bottom. I shattered it…”

No response. Instead, Link was scooped gingerly up in the figure’s arms – much taller than he initially imagined, and rather buff as well. By the grace of God, it seemed, the person knew precisely how to hold Link so that his spine refused spasm. When the storm intensified and sent bigger drops of water on Link’s skin, the area began to sting with fury.

Before he knew it, they’d made it back to the dingy home, and Link was tossed carefully onto the bed. The sky gradually became a lighter shade of grey, illuminating bits and pieces of the room he lay in. He attained a clearer view of the person who’d taken his injured body into the house – it was an androgynous individual, kempt hair shaved neatly at the bottom and rather overgrown at the top, kinks and curls splayed across the forehead. Their skin was several shades darker than Link’s – perhaps black, but he couldn’t quite tell in the inadequate light. Compared to Rhett’s six foot seven, their frame was relatively small, yet somewhat larger than Link’s – and additionally, they looked to be in their late twenties. Clad in a specialized uniform from head to toe (though Link was unable to fathom to which organization it belonged), a sense of confusion was sent through the smaller man’s head.

At last, the mysterious person reached out for Link’s wrist and squeezed with a grounding pressure. “What’s your name?” they finally implored, a curious gleam in their eye.

Amidst a range of emotions, the brunet’s brow furrowed in fear of admonition. “Link – Link Neal…”

Breaking eye contact, the other nodded. “Robin Harvey,” their gruff voice projected. “Link – is that right? That’s an interesting name –”

“Short for Lincoln,” he spared the other’s breath; there were much greater things to worry about, least of which being a casual conversation between strangers. “Cut to the chase, would you? Have you seen him? – He’s very tall and skinny, sandy blond hair, he has a beard and greyish eyes…”

Robin was bent over the side of the bed, thumbing through a well-maintained backpack while still glancing occasionally at Link. There was a peculiar solemnness painted on their face that reminded the injured man of morning dew, though he couldn’t decipher what exactly made him visualize such a specific image. Perhaps it was their clean – shaven? – skin, or maybe the way in which their sleek curls produced a sharp, wet reflection, even in the dimmest light on earth. Rising slowly from the unzipped bag, Robin held in their hands a stiff pile of what appeared to be cloth.

“I’ve known some gaunt men in my time,” they responded simply, reaching effortlessly beneath Link’s trim waist and wrapping the cloth around the bare skin beneath his shirt. “You might try being more specific?”

Link’s mind was completely astray from the commotion occurring around his back, as though the
person before him were using pickpocketing techniques to alter his thinking. *You probably saw his body on the way in here!* his sinking heart hissed – but as his stomach lurched at the thought, Link settled on an alternate response. “His name was Rhett,” Link whispered, leaving behind a sweet taste as the name passed his lips. “He was thin… so thin…”

Robin paused for a moment, just after tying a thick knot at the base of Link’s belly button. Their brow furrowed in confusion. “Was? –”

“But still, absolutely stunning,” Link continued. “Alluring. He had such a kind soul, too. We’d have gone to the ends of the earth for one another… and we did… so many times…”

With a hand pressed firm on Link’s abdomen, Robin hastily finished the man’s makeshift brace. They inserted another hand beneath his back and lifted ever so slightly to test the tightness of the cloth, finding it was a good enough job to remove both hands from Link. Their empty, brown eyes had a matt finish – a strange look, but nevertheless stoic. “Tell me more,” Robin pressed.

As a trail of silent tears fell to Link’s face, Robin stared in the man’s general direction and awaited a response. “Well,” he tried, “Rhett was my very best friend. He deserved the world and all its love, and the angels, and diamonds and pearls, and – he just shouldn’t have left like he did…”

After allowing a transitional silence, Robin gave an understanding nod and pursed their lips. “And this Rhett – was he sick for a while, perhaps?”

Link sniffed the runny contents of his nasal cavity back towards his sinuses and began breathing heavily through his mouth. “Yeah,” he stated conclusively. “He got a real bad case of sun poisoning… it got so he couldn’t eat, and he’d shake all the time ‘cause he was so cold…”

Robin smiled. At first, Link assumed it was cynicism – but their teeth were bared in a friendly and authentic manner. “And I bet he was scorching hot to the touch. Skinny as a rail, so bad you could feel his ribs. A gentle giant, weak as he could be.”

Wincing at the far-fetched yet correct list of assumptions, Link grew suspicious of information Robin had yet to divulge. A lump formed in his throat. “How do you know all this?”

A thin but genuine smile stretched up into Robin’s cheeks. Without another word, they rose to their feet and ambled slowly towards the doorway.

“Robin!” Link called out to the still mysterious person – but they hardly acknowledged the man’s exclamation and marched on with the same speed. And so, Link was left to his own, immobilized on the battered mattress as his broken heart sank like liquid through his ribs. Amidst the inundation, there was a solitary detail he could no longer complain about – somehow, his back no longer ailed him…

For minutes he lay there, ash and dust coating his bare skin. Rain pummeled on the remains of the roof, some drops falling through the holes and making their way to the sullen man’s face. They burned with a fiery ache, but Link didn’t care to brush them off, for his mind brimmed with sadness and disillusion.

When he heard Robin returning – a surprise in and of itself –, their footsteps were slower and far less methodical. Each nearing step clacked harder than the last on the noisy tile floor, indicating to Link that something was amiss. With a painless jolt, he rose anxiously from the bed and jutted his palms into its softness. There, by the ever-lightening glow of the sky, the small man could see two long silhouettes staggering for the doorway.

Robin entered seconds thereafter, but certainly not alone – pressed against their hip was the living,
breathing, blond-headed nightmare Link swore he lost to the world’s relentless cruelty so many hours prior. Rhett was a far stretch from health, but the other man’s smile beamed at the sight of his stumbling, six foot seven self; he’d been unable to even crawl just that morning, and to go from knocking on death’s door to walking from place to place in an upright position was absolutely remarkable. A sudden rush of tears came hurdling from Link’s eyes, dropping quickly down his cheeks and falling to his lap. “Rhett…”

Just as the large man made it to his companion’s side, the room’s lighting lifted so that each person within could be made out. Though the sun was still hidden behind the rolling clouds and their respective raindrops, Link was finally able to see both Rhett and Robin with clarity.

Still weak, Rhett fell against his friend and wrapped a pair of dangly arms around his ribs. He was entirely engulfed by Link’s embrace, and the two scooted back so they leaned comfortably against the wall. They were shielded from the rain by a large piece of the roof, listening to its tinny sound as it hit the metal above them. Link could no longer hide his elated sobbing and at once broke down, his hand cradling Rhett’s head against his chest.

“Rhett,” the brunet repeated, “I swear to God – I thought you were dead…”

With that statement, Rhett’s tears sank heavily through Link’s shirt. Together, the men wept for a good five minutes, bodies tangled upon the filthy mattress that had begun to smell of home…

And on the other side of the room stood Robin. Smirking.

At last, Link obtained his composure. His brow furrowed curiously as he analyzed the person who stood before him, his mind filled with both gratitude and umbrage. Giving Robin a once-over in the new light, Link pursed his lips and cleared his aching throat. “So…” he began.

“So,” Robin repeated sarcastically.

Link merely shifted his mouth to the side in response, huffing a frustrated sigh through his nose. “I think we need to talk about this – Whatever this is. You saved my best friend’s life,” he commended, “and I just – Robin, I can’t thank you enough. I couldn’t possibly tell you how much that means to me. But… who are you?”

Robin crossed their arms. “Who am I…” they stalled. “That’s a pretty interesting question, I think. I could tell you my entire life story and have you sat down on that ash-ridden bed for twenty-seven years, but I’m afraid we’d all three disintegrate and become one with the dust of the earth far before I’d be finished speaking.”

Perplexed, Link cocked his head to the side. “All I meant was –”

“Who I am in regards to your purposes, no doubt,” replied Robin with a saddened smile. “Well, if you don’t mind to bear with me for a few moments, let’s start here – my name is Robin J. Harvey, and in April I graduated from the University of Utah with my PhD. I had my life planned out from the third grade, truthfully – I always knew I was going to be a doctor. Helping people is such an incredible, euphoric feeling. That’s something that’s truly never left me, in spite of this nationwide shitstorm.

“But anyway, circumstances quickly dictated that finding a job would prove to be rather difficult, which didn’t make a great deal of sense to me. As the population increases, so should the job openings of those whose profession it is to take care of it… Right?

“Well, those job openings only seemed to be dwindling, and it was quite the mystery – one I couldn’t crack for some time. June rolls around, doctors are being lain off left and right, new
doctors are being denied the new openings based on the silliest things. Sex, race, religion, sexuality, political affiliation, the whole shebang. Hell, if I was a white man they’d have probably denied me for being an Aquarius. You just couldn’t win.

“So the jobs never got filled, and the remaining doctors just had too much stress piled on them and ended up dropping out – some even killed themselves in fear of bankruptcy. When those doctors had gone… well, there were still a select few left who had a tireless perseverance – or so they thought.

“It’s the doctors who care about things beyond their salaries who received the brunt of it, to tell you the truth. The ones who stuck around did so because they knew something inevitable was on the horizon, but they genuinely cared about preparing these sick, injured, hospitalized individuals enough to put themselves under these inconceivable amounts of stress. Now, the danger to perseverance is the underlying psychology of the trait – you go and you go until you just can’t go anymore.

“And that’s precisely what happened with those last few doctors. These people, these intelligent, intelligent people, they’ve got a genetic predisposition to work until they drop. They’re wired like that. As human beings, though, they’ve got personal restrictions – but they don’t realize the sky’s the limit until they’ve made it to the moon.

“To spare you from any other mediocre comparisons, here’s what ended up happening: as the amount of doctors per building continued to drop, stress was no longer a suitable term for the hell these men and women endured. Exhaustion set in – sixteen and seventeen hour shifts, six and seven days a week these people would work, and they burned completely out. Zombified. And it had an effect on their work.

“Detrimental misdiagnoses, wrongful prescriptions and dosages, surgical malpractice, avoidable deaths… Lawsuits, pink slips, incarcerations, bankruptcies, hospital shutdowns… causes and effects alike, all the result of exhaustion. History had never seen anything like it…

“The industry – if you can even call it that, for crying out loud – the industry went downhill, and quickly, too. It was publicized to a certain degree, but for the most part the horror stories blamed the doctors themselves. In general, people have a natural tendency to think upon impulse, and while some are predisposed to believing conspiracy, the majority are either daft or simply uneducated. And truth be told, I can’t blame them. I can’t blame a solitary person for their disbelief, ignorance, or otherwise. It’s such a far-fetched idea, believing that the reason for such high rates of malpractice should be blamed on anything but the carelessness of the people who perform them. To think something else is to blame is preposterous to an outsider.

“Patients were dying rapidly, hospitals were quarantined and heading for vacation… things happened way too fast, which was a big mistake for the people truly at fault – and for the sake of simplifying this story, I’ll refer to these people as ‘the government’; it’s really not far from the truth in the grand scheme of things.

“Under circumstances as wild as these, the truth makes its way out through the minds of the knowledgeable. Unemployed doctors, afflicted patients, and conspiracy theorists made the facts clear and out in the public just before July – I’m sure you heard the stories, at least in passing. As to whether or not you believed them, again, I can’t say I’m able to define your view. In retrospect, it doesn’t exactly matter who believed what, does it? Because right now you’re here doing your damn best to get by. I respect that. I respect how far you made it on your own, both of you. You’re two very tough, smart men.

“I tell you all this to answer your initial question – Who am I. I’m Robin Harvey, someone else who’s just trying to get by. Someone who just so happens to have a doctorate of medicine.
Someone who has the intellectual knowhow to take care of themself and an undying desire to help others. I’m part of a small group known as PARO – the Post-Apocalyptic Reconstruction Organization. We can’t combat the government by any means, but we can damn sure save a life, and that’s worth so much more than a petty revolution.”

By the time they’d finished speaking, Link was completely engrossed by the recollection. Robin had evidently experienced a piece of the puzzle neither he nor Rhett had taken into consideration – but while the story was riveting, Link couldn’t help but wonder how exactly the dots connected. “Man,” he responded with intensity, “Robin, what you’re doing is incredible, and I want you to know that. I believe everything you’re saying because it all makes sense. But I do have to ask – all this doctor stuff… how does that weave into this?” he gestured to the broken world around him.

Robin’s lips twitched with pride. “You’re quick to pick things up,” they acknowledged, “but the answer is quite simple, to be honest. So tell me – how well do you think this went over with people as they started to find out? Conspire?”

Link shrugged, not disturbing Rhett as the man’s head slid down his collarbone. “Not too well, I presume,” he finally said.

“That’s right,” Robin commended. “If the objective were to rid the nation of the sick and elderly, it would have been an excellent plan. But, the task proved to be terribly inefficient – to the point the whole, unadulterated truth had been unveiled by the populace far sooner than the government ever intended. Conspiracy theorists had it figured out as soon as patients were being denied service, and their ideals were only validated as the scheme continued. When the information started to branch out to the public… Well, that’s when things began to happen, and the government was left with a short amount of time to make a very major decision. They were faced with the inevitability of revolution. As I’m not a government official – and truth be told this is mostly speculation – I cannot guarantee the legitimacy of everything I’m about to say, but it’s the best PARO and I are able to put together…

“What we’ve deduced by way of meticulous study is this: each bomb that was dropped was, luckily, low-yield. Essentially what that means is there wasn’t much nuclear fallout per bomb, and it was safe to enter the outside world in a fairly short amount of time. There just wasn’t much radioactivity – the bombs were made of cheap material… but God, they covered a hell of a radius.

“I’m sure you remember that fateful night – July 7th – around nine-forty, when the power went out. Depending on where you’re from, your reaction was somewhere on the spectrum of frustrated to terrified. Me, I’m from Salt Lake City, so I was immediately stricken with horror. A whole damn city’s power doesn’t just go out… And it wasn’t until later that I learned this: it was the whole nation.

“Boys, it’s a combination of luck and strategy that brought you here. Every person who survived the explosions took precautionary measures, but not everyone who took precautionary measures survived the explosions. Had a bomb been dropped within five or six miles of even the sturdiest shelter, the people within wouldn’t have stood a chance. The residual waves flew out from ground zero with lightning speed and unstoppable force. Outsiders anywhere in America were dead. Hell, unless your home was made of cast iron, you didn’t make it without a shelter.

“But I guess it goes without saying – both of you are tough as nails. Even though I can’t tell you if or when this is gonna end, I honestly believe you’ll make out to have a couple of long, fulfilling lives if you’re careful enough. You’ve got to carry each other, you’ve got to push each other, you’ve got to understand each other, you’ve got to trust each other – but greater than any of that, you’ve got to love each other. And from the bottom of my heart, I can tell you this… I don’t think that will ever be an issue.”
Comforted by Robin’s soft conclusion, Link felt a tear weighing down his waterline. Love wasn’t an issue. Love was never a question. Love was shown on the brightest of days and the darkest of nights, and never did it go without reciprocation.

When the tear finally trailed down Link’s cheek, he listened to the lulling sounds of the rain as it pattered on the roof above him. He discovered just how blessed he was to be holding Rhett against his chest as he lay within the trust-bound confines of his best friend’s embrace…

And still, the blond encircled his thin, gangly arms around the other man’s ribs. *Love was always a two-way street.*

“*Thank you,*” Link responded with gratitude. “*Thank you so much.*”
SEPTEMBER 29, 201X

Recovery was a much longer process than Link imagined it to be.

Regardless, he remained patient. Robin’s work was never done, their hands always fiddling with some form of contraption which aimed to assist Rhett. Bottles, pills, bags, needles – anything that could have possibly been used for the bettering of a patient. As Robin stumbled out of the bedroom, Link slithered quickly through the doorway and made his way to where Rhett was, lying flat on the bed. When the blond saw him, he broke into a vague smile and rose slowly so his elbows were jabbed into the mattress.

“Hey, brother,” Link called as he waltzed to Rhett’s side. He then sat behind the man and watched as he leaned back and allowed his head to rest upon Link’s thighs. “You feeling better?”

In response, Rhett flicked his tongue between his lips and stared lovingly back to his companion. “Better than yesterday, that’s for sure,” he remarked. “Robin made me take some kind of nausea pill this morning. It was huge. Kicked in like a charm, though – definitely got rid of the sick feeling. But now I’m starving.”

Link smiled – the situation was gruesome to say the least, but he reveled in the return of his friend’s enduring humor. “I could bring you something to eat,” he offered – but along with his words came a similar reminder; Link’s own stomach ached of emptiness.

Crinkling his brow, Rhett shifted his gaze to the wall before him. “As much as I’d love that, I’ve been instructed to, quote unquote, ‘just lay here’. Doc’s orders.”

“Doc’s orders,” Link sneered – but once more, he was overwhelmed by gratitude and adopted a softer, more authentic disposition. “You seem happier, man. It’s good to see that.”

With the statement, a smile curled upon Rhett’s lips. “Yeah, for sure. Robin’s been fixing me right up. They drenched me in aloe and made me drink mint water, and let me tell you brother – I feel revitalized.”

“Oh!” Link cried, beaming. “That’s great, Rhett. That’s so great.” He lifted a hand and stroked peacefully through the large man’s hair, yanking softly at the tangles as he hit them.

Yeah,” he agreed, “but don’t get too giddy just yet, Link. I’m still weak. It’s gonna take a lot for me to be able to walk on my own. I’m still hurtin’ pretty bad…”

There, Link’s expression faltered, and his lips closed into a frown. “Where at?” he pressed.

“Ehh,” Rhett mumbled. “My back’s got the worst of it, I think – that and my stomach. Headache’s still giving me hell too, but not nearly as bad…” he trailed off – but noticing the fallen expression on his friend’s face, Rhett parted his lips once more for elaboration. “That’s not to say I’m not getting better, Link. I am. I just need time.”

Despite a waning patience, Link suppressed his tears. “I know you need time, Rhett… but that’s something we don’t have a lot of. We’re running out of food. We’re running out of water. Robin’s not gonna be here forever to take care of us, brother…”

“Oh, hell…” Rhett condescendingly whispered. “Link, do you think I don’t know that? For crying out loud, man, I might be sick, but it’s not like I have the comprehension of a damn toddler,
alright? We are running out of supplies. Robin won’t be here to patch up our wounds every time we stub a toe or get a papercut. I know that. What I’m trying to get through to you is this – there are circumstances that we can control and circumstances we can’t. What I can’t help right now is the fact I’m not strong enough to walk more than a step or two on my own, let alone a matter of miles. I can’t help the dwindling food supply. God, maybe if we could just eat this blasted dirt –”

“Rhett!” the brunet yelled, cutting off the other man’s speech. “For heaven’s sake, I’m not trying to scare you into running a marathon when we both know good and well you can’t even walk. I’m just trying to think like you do, man – that ‘face the facts’ logic you always have. I’m just telling you where we’re at. I’m sorry, I don’t want to fight…” At that point, Link began to cry; his least favorite thing to do was fight with Rhett, as the conflict was always resolved by way of verbal assault. When Rhett raised his voice, it was scary – but only because it was usually backed by the weight of the truth, no matter how hefty it may have been. Rarely was he ever wrong…

Rhett released an apologetic sigh. “I don’t want to fight either, brother. I don’t like fighting with you. I’m just… Link, I’m frustrated. No matter how hard I try to get better, my body’s gonna go at its own pace – and that’s really getting to me… because you’re right. There’s just not enough time…”

A massive, unswallowable lump formed in Link’s throat. “But you’re getting better…”

“Hmph,” Rhett scoffed. “Yet again with the optimism, huh? You couldn’t swallow reality if a train hit you with it.”

Taken aback by the man’s sudden change of demeanor, Link furrowed his brow. “But Rhett, that’s the truth –”

“I never said you were wrong,” Rhett acknowledged. “I am getting better – but on a scale of one to ten where ten’s okay and one’s dead, well… I’m about a one point two. I barely made it out alive, Link. The chances of a full recovery by the time we need to leave are nonexistent.”

Link bit his lip so hard it produced blood. Again, Rhett was right – surely, Link reasoned, it was October, or at least close to it. The nights would only become colder and colder, and if it were to precipitate, there was never a guarantee that a fire would stay lit. Traveling north certainly had its disadvantages – and sometimes, Link wondered why they were heading that way in the first place. It was never too long, however, before he was stricken by a firm recollection:

“Don’t you think it’s gonna be too cold to go north?!”

“Too cold, huh? Well where else are we gonna go, Link? South? We’d run into all kinds of crazy people from the city who’d kill us without a second thought for our supplies. East? We’d be trudging through the desert for miles. Houses and supplies would be very, very hard to come by. West? Pacific Ocean. If you wanna make a claim for another plan, my ears are open. What we can’t do is stay here – like I said, crazy people.”

“Goodness, Rhett, lose the attitude! We’re gonna have trouble wherever we go –”

“So we might as well choose the path of least destruction.”

“…Well, I mean…”

“Utah, here we come.”

“Are you okay?”

Link’s gaze fluttered and fell down to his lap where his best friend lay, tense and concerned. He
was only confused until he noticed the thick, iron taste that coated his tongue, the smooth culprit dribbling in an innocent trail down his chin.

“Seriously, Link, what’s wrong? Do you feel alright?”

Lightheadedness followed quickly after Link saw the first drop of blood fall and sink into the fabric of his own shirt. Inhaling a sharp gasp, Link pressed one hand into his stomach and the other on the mattress. That’s blood, he identified in a panic. That’s blood. That’s blood.

Hyperventilation made his ribs ache – but suddenly, a calm hand grabbed his wrist and coaxed him to lie down on his side. Link immediately recognized the calloused fingers as they brushed his arm…

“It’s just a little blood, Link,” the large man said, wiping the vermilion liquid from Link’s lips. “You’re okay, you’re okay.”

“I b-bit my lip –” the small man defended. Thinking too much.

“That’s okay,” Rhett hushed him. He then gathered Link in his arms, allowing the brunet’s face to press against his chest.

Wrapped up in Rhett’s embrace was the most homelike feeling Link knew. He took advantage of the position by nuzzling comfortably against the larger man’s collarbone and unleashing a chain of sobs – quietly, though, so as not to alert Robin. The blood, while traumatizing, was only the beginning of an onslaught of other terrible emotions that centered on Rhett like the eye of a hurricane. He doesn’t deserve this, Link kept repeating to himself. He just doesn’t deserve this…

And of course, the thoughts never evanesced. As he lay pressed into the side of his best friend’s prominent, brittle bones, Link could only remember the healthy layers of muscle and fat that once protected them. When they used to hug, Rhett’s torso had the give of a teddy bear, or a pillow – but now, he was only a skeleton bound by a thin layer of broken, psoriatic skin. Yet, he continued to hold Link in his arms, never daring to release him from his clutch.

“Rhett…” he whispered with a soft inflection. “I can’t stand to see you like this anymore. I want to take your pain away. I want to take it all and have it for myself so you can just catch a damn break for once…”

With all his might, Rhett squeezed his friend against him. “I’ll handle it,” his low voice rumbled. “I haven’t quit just yet, Link. This world’s gonna have to kill me before I give up.”

The words were calming, and they quelled Link’s mind just enough that he was able to catch his breath. Rhett’s optimism was rare, but its scarcity made it all the more promising. For a moment it was as though a physical weight lifted from the small man’s chest, and the blood coursing through his veins gained a new livelihood. But it was easy to see that Rhett was still hurting, and so his heart sank once more.

The morning sun bled warmly onto their legs. Link could only pray as he cuddled up to Rhett, their clashing bones painful as they jabbed into each other’s skin. You can be ‘realistic’ all you want, Link mused. But I know you’re gonna get better – I know everything’s gonna be alright.

Even if you don’t believe it.

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In the midst of their doze, Robin reentered the room, arms overflown with various medicinal supplies.
Link peered drowsily over his friend’s sandy hair. For a short time, Robin was quiet, breathing ever so cautiously through their wide and flaring nostrils – but the silence was quick to dissipate into the newly wet air. In an awkward maneuver, they halted at the doorway and pivoted slowly but analytically on their heel.

“Rhett,” they called out, luckily seeming to ignore the position in which they found the men. Robin knelt to the dusty ground and dropped the majority of the items onto the floor – but they still grasped a Ziploc bag, which was halfway filled with a viscous, white substance. In spite of his own hunger, Link was purely repulsed by the mere look of it – it was almost a shade of yellow, bubbles and lumps swimming around at the skimming surface as if it were respiring. It was disgusting.

When no response was uttered, Robin called out again: “Rhett.” Their tone was no more disconcerted than it was, though slightly more demanding.

“Yeah?” Rhett replied without so much as a glance at the doctor. His voice rumbled sweetly against the man he held close.

“Rhett,” Robin shortly repeated. Their eyes shot at once in his direction – an odd gesture to say the least, but Link opted to look over it. “In this bag is your ticket to health. I’m certain it’s hideous – and I can assure you it tastes even worse – but it’s gonna save you from a lot of sickness and pain.”

With that, Rhett turned to lay on his back, and from there he stared mockingly at the bag of rubbery paste – and it wasn’t much longer before his typically booming voice regained its capacity. “What the hell is in that?!” he rebuked.

Sensing the anger in Rhett’s voice, Robin broke into a derisive grin. “Calm down, calm down,” they hushed. “It’s a mixture of fats, protein powders, minerals, vitamins – things the body needs that you’re inevitably lacking. Think of it as a protein shake that can save your life.”

Rhett’s tired eyes converged to dubious slits which analyzed Robin as though they’d committed a criminal act. His brow furrowed with a degree of suspicion, yet simultaneously his expression conveyed a level of trust. He finally allowed a sigh to push past his lips. “Okay… listen,” Rhett said, his tone apologetic and soothing. “You’re very, very bright, Robin. I don’t doubt your intelligence one bit. It’s not a question of your potential to concoct something that could save my life – but I have to be honest with you here. I’m reticent on the basis of trust.”

As expected, Robin frowned. “Gracious, Rhett, I haven’t killed you yet, have I?” they contended. “I’d actually venture to say I’ve done quite the opposite. I realize we haven’t known each other for very long, but for you to think I’d expend my supplies saving your life once just to turn around and cause you harm is quite frankly ludicrous.”

In spite of Robin’s presence, Link tossed his hand into his companion’s hair and sifted through the blond strands. The point was clear; of course Robin wasn’t out to kill Rhett, that much was certain – and the fact that Rhett considered such a thing was, to say the least, alarming. “C’mon, brother,” Link pried. “Don’t be so paranoid. Nobody’s out to get you – you know that, right?”

Another timid sigh. “I know,” he groaned. “But God’s honest truth, I can barely pick logic apart from emotion these days. That used to be one of my strong points, man – but it’s really started to blur. It’s like nothing I ever think or say makes any sense… it scares the hell outta me…” Rhett choked on his words.

Link instinctively wrapped an empathetic hand around Rhett’s and squeezed until his knuckles turned white. Instead of burrowing deeper into the man’s repressed issues, the smaller man simply
offered a segue. “You’re gonna be okay. Robin won’t hurt you. As long as I’m here, nobody will.”

Exhaustion lingered in Rhett’s face like nothing Link had ever seen. Even so, his lip quivered into a delicate smile that shone brighter than the sunshine that bathed them both. At last, a tear formed in the tall man’s eye and trailed down the bridge of his nose as Link thrust his thumb into the area and wiped it away. “Thank you,” Rhett said, his chapped lips stretching across his face. He then turned to Robin, who still held a particularly defensive expression. “I’m sorry, doc—”

“Paranoia,” Robin interrupted, arms crossed confidently across their chest. “That’s okay, I understand. Truthfully, I should be the one apologizing – see, you’ve been placed under conditions where you have to be wary, or else you could die. I should’ve known better…” they trailed off reproachfully. “Should’ve expected it from you. But if it would provide you any consolation, I could show you the things I used to make this,” they lifted the bag.

Rhett chewed anxiously on his lip before settling on an answer, and his nerves evidently got the best of him. “Yeah,” he replied. “I’d like that.”

There, Robin offered a tender smile and turned to the doorway. Their steps were light – almost fragile – as they tapped carefully on the linoleum and headed for the kitchen. Link rubbed Rhett’s back in firm, comforting circles – but he may as well have been stroking the ribs of a skeleton, the pad of his hand running across each groove like the corrugated surface of a tin roof. His heart ached for the man.

Just as quickly as they’d left, Robin returned with a cargo bag slung over their shoulder. They knelt to the floor and dropped it there, and with that a great rattle diffused through the room. Rhett stared pitifully towards the wall as he and Link awaited Robin’s grand reveal.

Finally, they reached into the bag, though they seemed to struggle significantly with its contents. At last, Robin retrieved a plethora of items, including two handfuls of what appeared to be pill bottles, several opened packets clipped down by wooden clothespins, a canteen, three unopened water bottles, and even IV bags filled halfway with a viscid, clear substance – dextrose? Link’s brow slanted at the observation – the bag seemed to be endless, its contents surrounding Robin in the floor and threatening to engulf the doctor entirely.

“Good lord,” Rhett whispered, “what’s all that?”

Somehow taken by surprise, Robin dropped everything in their hands and faced the tall man who lay at least six feet away. “These are – They’re the things I combined to make your ‘potion’, so to speak,” they stammered. Though Link was initially unable to detect why, he immediately noticed that Robin harbored a degree of unease.

Still, Rhett pressed on. “No, I know that. I mean, what exactly is it? The bottles and the packets, what specifically is in them?”

Reluctant to answer, Robin raised a stalling brow. “The bottles…” they hesitated. Link could see a glossy sheen of sweat beginning to coat their skin. What was wrong?

“Yes…” Rhett was growing impatient. Link feared that Rhett couldn’t see the discomfort Robin was in and subsequently stroked his hand across the man’s bony hip, which protruded like a knob from his side. The brunet pressed his face into his friend’s shoulder.

Holding a bottle in their hand, Robin rested a couple of shaky fingers on the lid and gripped with all their might. They stroked the top with their thumb, all the while staring impotently at Rhett. “M-Magnesium supplements… This bottle’s magnesium…”
“Oh, for Pete’s sake…” the large man sternly responded. “Robin, just read the damn labels. I promise you it’s not that difficult.”

Robin blinked, trying desperately to maintain their composure – but when their hand went flying into the midnight kinks of their hair and twirled nervously through the dark tangles, Link knew it was far too late. “Easy for you to say,” they mumbled just beneath their breath.

Rhett turned his head to look at Link, evaluating his expression before deciding on his response. At first, the blond’s face implied a sense of confusion, maybe even disgust – but it wasn’t too much longer before he came to a revelation in his own mind. He spared another glance at Robin, who had sunk desolately into the floor. “Oh…” Rhett muttered into the air. “Oh my God…”

Perplexed, Link furrowed his brow. Rhett’s tone was brimming with discovery as he appeared to fasten clues and observations together – the small man could almost see the smoke billowing from his ears. On the other side of the room, Robin portrayed an attempted façade of bravery, but their hands shook with ferocity and rattled the pill bottle in their palm.

“Rhett…” Link tried – but he gained no attention from the man.

Rhett arched his brow in such a manner that reminded Link of when he used to scold his children – it was an expression of dominance and superiority, and the mere recurrence of it sent goosebumps down his back. Link rarely saw it for himself, let alone on someone who was essentially a stranger.

A stranger who just so happened to have a big heart.

“Oh… Robin,” the blond spoke firmly, his unrelenting gaze piercing the raven-haired doctor. “Are you blind?”
By dusk, Rhett had been thoroughly examined.

Throughout the evening’s endeavors, Link only speculated as Robin utilized several creative techniques in order to diagnose Rhett with a series of injuries and illnesses. The manner with which their hands whizzed around the man’s body, masterfully poking and prodding every inch of his skin, was riveting to watch. Robin had not only adapted to what some would refer to as misfortune – they thrived with the condition. It was an amazing thing to see; and in turn, Link hounded himself on his own reliance to his vision, a sense he could have never imagined living without – but Robin made it look easy, as though their brilliant methods of analysis should have been second nature to anyone.

In surveying Rhett’s condition, they first got the obvious out of the way – malnutrition, sun poisoning, dehydration… but after those diagnoses, Robin revealed a few surprises. First was that of heat exhaustion – it should have been fairly evident given Rhett’s symptoms of headache and nausea, but for whatever reason it had never crossed Link’s mind. “And what exactly does that entail?” he asked upon Robin’s deduction.

“Well,” they began, “it entails a lot of things. I knew about the sun poisoning as soon as I got here – his skin was on fire, and it was cracked and dry and blistered. When he told me about the headaches, dizziness, and upset stomach, that’s what really set it in stone. It’s a pretty serious thing – to put it into perspective, the next stage is heat stroke… but he didn’t quite make it that far.” With haste, Robin thrust a hand into their pants pocket and retrieved a standard thermometer, handing it imperiously over to Link. “If you don’t mind, gauge his temperature. I’m curious to see just how close he got…”

Link grabbed the device from Robin’s fingertips and pressed the rubber button at the bottom, which turned it on. “Ready to use,” a heavily enunciated voice spoke – A thermometer for the blind.

Rhett had managed to sit himself upright, though the majority of his weight rested on Link’s side. The small man had one arm wrapped around him that folded over his chest in a protective and loving stance. The blond looked up from his home against his companion’s shoulder, his eyes pleading – almost amorous… and Link couldn’t help but smile.

“Open up,” he requested. Link then divided the man’s lips with the tip of the thermometer and tucked it beneath his tongue. Once again, he pressed the button – “Now gauging temperature…” followed by a series of beeps.

The final beep was long and high, indicating the device’s conclusion: “Your temperature is thirty-nine point eight degrees centigrade.” Confused, Link plucked the thermometer from Rhett’s mouth and cocked his head to the side – centigrade?

“Thirty-nine point eight…” Robin chewed their lip. “For comparison, thirty-seven is the ideal body temperature, so –”

“Could you translate to Fahrenheit?” Rhett broke in. “In case you haven’t noticed, Link and I are Americans.” With that, Link’s next breath of air was much more rewarding than the last. That sweet, familiar humor was returning… Slowly but surely...

Without so much as cracking a smile, Robin nodded their head to the ground in insecurity. “Thirty-nine point eight…” they repeated, this time more abstractly. “Fahrenheit, that’s
approaching a hundred and four degrees. To put that into perspective, heat stroke occurs starting at a hundred and five. Rhett,” their flat eyes darted up, “you’re a very lucky man.”

Lucky. Link felt the larger man’s body tense up against his own, presumably as a result of the realization that not only had he been knocking on death’s door – but death itself had welcomed him inside, watching his injured body stagger in with a terrible, coy grin. The visual broke Link’s heart as it wrapped around his neck and choked him like a vice.

Though he was still weak, Rhett tossed his palms to his sides and pulled himself away from Link – sitting up by himself for the first time in days. It was a grand sign of improvement, despite having a long road to tread for full rehabilitation. Even Robin had seemed at loss for methods of providing a quick recovery; but even so, they hadn’t given up just yet.

Realizing Rhett had nothing to say, Robin cleared their throat and proceeded to carry on the conversation. “The aloe probably saved you from heating up very much…” they deduced. “But you were in pretty rough condition when I found you. I’d say you were a few hours from kicking the bucket.”

A cool breeze wafted through the bedroom, serving as a transition. “So what else is wrong with me?” Rhett pressed, his tone gruff.

Robin huffed a bout of nervous laughter. “Well…” they stalled. “The next thing is this – you’ve got two ruptured discs in your spine. You’re so tall, I can only presume you’ve experienced the same thing a time or two in your life…”

Link’s heart sank. With his mouth fallen agape, he turned his saddened gaze upon Rhett – and his soul ached for the man, knowing all too well the hell his back had put him through in the past.

“Yeah,” Rhett quietly confirmed; there was a note of fear in his voice that only Link could detect from behind the man’s stoic façade. “One’s torturous enough – you’re telling me I’ve got two?!”

Robin sighed. They evidently disliked being the bearer of bad news – but, Link wondered, shouldn’t a doctor grow accustom to it? He kept his gaze fixed on Robin’s lips as they spoke: “I’m afraid so,” their voice shook just above a whisper. “Right next to each other, unfortunately. From past experience you should know they mostly heal on their own. Hypothetically you would need to see someone who specializes in either chiropractic or physical therapy – neither for which I’m certified, so I can’t exactly help you out with that.”

The expression in Rhett’s eyes lingered for what seemed like a century. “Well let me tell you, it’s one of the least pleasant things I’ve ever gone through in my life. I wouldn’t wish it on anybody,” he added. “But it’s an obstacle I’ve had to cope with time and time again. I know how to handle myself.” With the statement, Link’s gaze shifted hastily to the man beside him. It killed him to walk with just one – let alone two.

“Don’t get so haughty, now,” he chastised the blond with indignity. “Last time you slipped a disc you were hurtin’ so bad you could barely get out of bed!”

“I know that!” Rhett yelled back. “But do you wanna know something? At this point, pain has become a constant for both of us. We’ve gotta suck it up and move on. And maybe that entails going until my spine snaps in half – I don’t know. But one thing’s for damn sure – until I physically cannot find it within myself to continue, I’ll have a relentless motivation and my toes pointed north.”

Sitting mere feet from the beaten and battered man, Robin glanced to the floor and shook their head matter-of-factly. “Just like the doctors,” they whispered. “That boundless persistence can kill
you if you let it.”

Silence. By then, Rhett’s eyes had long welled up with tears, and one by one the fat drops fell like bullets down his cheeks. He refused to establish eye contact with the doctor that sat before him, presumably in fear of losing his composure entirely – and so he opted to shift his bloodshot gaze to the ceiling, a red and glassy gradient etched in his sclera.

“Well, Robin,” his shaking voice struggled, “what else am I supposed to do?”

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It was a mystery to Link as to where Robin slept that night, or whether or not they ever slept at all. Regardless, he found contentment in his own sleeping arrangement as he lay on the dilapidated mattress with Rhett against his side. As things slowly became graver and graver, so did their conversations – yet at the same time, they fueled Link’s satisfaction in ways he couldn’t quite explain. Their talks were genuine. Heartfelt. Vulnerable. Loving.

The moon hung in the sky like an orb – it was somewhere near full, but not quite. Nonetheless, the night was horrifically cold and showing no signs of discourse. Link had already taken the liberty of swaddling his friend in layers of blankets he’d collected over the time they’d spent at the house, while he himself sported the giant blue hoodie despite how ill-fitting it was. It hung from his shoulders like a rag.

Making sure not to cross his legs (so as to prevent further injury to the spine, according to Robin), Rhett miraculously leaned himself against the wall. Link found the sight to be purely endearing, his friend wrapped up in a cocoon of blankets as the two of them rested upon one another. That night, they shared warmth and love – and within, they cultivated a vague sensation of hope…

For the longest time, hope was the most scarce item of all – beyond food, shelter, health, and safety. The words of optimism that left Link’s lips were rarely genuine, and almost always were they vacant of any real expectation. That night, however, his thoughts were reversed and his mind was quelled by a new and confident feeling that, just maybe, the two of them would make it out alive.

With his face pressed in the crook of Rhett’s neck, Link breathed softly onto his healing skin and felt the heat as it diffused from his body. It was yet another night he was lucky enough to lay with his best friend beneath the stars, although the circumstances may have been terrible – but it was always the little things that provided Link with more joy than he could have ever asked for. Perhaps he was sick and exhausted and in pain… but just beside him sat the man he’d admired more than any other for decades. He wouldn’t have had it any other way.

Link reveled in their time alone – and while he appreciated Robin for all they’d done, he couldn’t help but feel an overwhelming sense of comfort when only Rhett was around. For several minutes, Rhett held him in a one-arm embrace, the dents of his ribs jabbing into Link’s. The moonlight was faint, but Link was able to see the dim face of his companion as he stared in his direction. Rhett’s breathing was calm and collected – and for that, Link was grateful.

There was a stretch of time in which they lay huddled together in silence, but it was shortly put to an end when Link’s lips parted aside the large man’s neck and spoke, gentle and tiresome:

“You’re gonna be alright, Rhett. I mean it this time.”
In response, the large man turned his head to the side – and for the first time in weeks displayed a hopeful countenance. “It’s certainly possible,” he said simply.

“Aww, it’s guaranteed,” Link pressed. “I know you’re in a lot of pain right now, but it’s all reversible. Your back will fix on its own – and I’m sure your fever’s only gonna go down if you get enough fluids and stay outta the sun. I’ll take care of you. Just like we promised.”

A grand smile was perched on Rhett’s lips. “Thank you,” he whispered with boundless gratitude.

“Ohh,” Link dismissed, “I’m always happy to help you make it through rough patches. There’s gonna be plenty more as time goes on… but that’s what I’m here for.”

Carefully, Rhett shifted himself so that he faced his friend. “Well it’s a damn good thing there’s two of us,” he remarked. “But listen, brother… I don’t want to hold you down. I hate knowing I’m the reason we’ve been stuck here for God knows how long. As much as I want us to stick together, understand that there might come a time you’ll have to move on without me. I’ll do whatever’s in my ability to keep going, but I can’t promise we’ll make it through this disaster together.” Quickly thereafter, Link’s gladness waned to nothing – there was the gravity. There was the terrible, unmentionable topic whose mere concept brought him to tears.

Separation.

Link’s throat ached with the lump he swallowed therein. “I’m not gonna leave you behind,” he whispered, insistent. “I won’t even think about it.”

“Come on, now,” the blond persuaded. “You’ve been avoiding this conversation like the plague –”

“We’re not talking about this, Rhett. My mind’s made.” His tone was firm, and it approached intimidating. With a furrow of his brow, Link glanced pensively down to the blanket that covered him and analyzed its patterns.

“But listen,” Rhett continued nonetheless, “this isn’t something we can glaze over. If I know I’m done for, there’s no sense in you staying with me. I want you to make it through – but Link, you’re just so stubborn…”

“Stubborn!” Link scoffed. “You know what – maybe it shouldn’t surprise me you don’t know the difference in stubbornness and love. You’re so distanced from your emotions that it’s impossible for me to convey anything but logic to you… and that’s how it’s always been between us. In the past, we could make it work, but now we’re in a situation where life and death is something we have to consider. I can’t let you off the hook anymore.”

There was an expression in Rhett’s eyes that Link knew all too well – exhaustion. The moon’s light accentuated his crow’s feet and traced over each new line of his face with a soft, white glow. Although the small man had essentially yelled at him, his face only expressed apathy. Rhett had given up.

“Look at me!” Link hissed, grabbing his friend’s face by the chin and yanking it towards himself. “I just want to get something across to you, brother. As much as I want to convince myself you’re gonna be okay for the rest of eternity, I know deep down that’s not the case. One of us is gonna die first – and selfishly, I hope it’s me, just so I won’t have to live out the rest of my days without you. I hope I’ve made it clear, Rhett – I hope you know that you’ve been my entire world since the day I met you. You’ve been my sun and stars since 1984. And it hurts me so bad to know you don’t feel the same way – not just about me, but about anybody. I don’t understand how you don’t
see it’s literally impossible for me to go on if something happens to you. God, you’re so emotionally detached it worries me…”

With that, Rhett was astounded. His mouth had fallen agape and his tired eyes grew deeper, almost sorrowful. Without moving his body, he tossed his hand at Link, who’d begun to cry, and latched pleadingly onto his shoulder. “Oh, Link,” he spoke beneath the weight of a thousand regrets. “I’m sorry… I’m so sorry…”

The brunet quickly swatted the man’s hand away, burying his face into his knees. “You don’t know what sorry is,” he muttered.

…And just when he swore that Rhett would leave him be, Link was surprised to hear the softened creak of the mattress – and that’s when a long and skinny arm enveloped his torso with a grip so strong he could never forget it.

“I know what sorry is, Link,” he insisted. “I know what it is because I feel it every single day of my life. Whenever I fail you, brother… it’s the worst pain I can even imagine. I can’t put it into words.”

Link huffed – he refused to capitulate to Rhett’s words. His lies.

Following the silence, Rhett carefully bent himself where his friend could see him, then dragged the arm he’d slung around Link’s waist across his spine, rubbing soothingly up and down. “I don’t know what else to tell you. I am emotionally distant – I’ll admit that. But that doesn’t mean I don’t care about you. And damn it…” his voice broke and tapered to a whisper before he could finish – but once Rhett regained his composure, he grazed his fingers along Link’s jaw and guided the brunet’s gaze into his own. “Damn it, Link, I love you.”

Before he could even process the words, Link felt the tears damming up behind his eyes – and just as immediately, he pulled his injured companion into his arms. To think his compassion was ever faux was completely ridiculous… but things were never as simple as Rhett’s rule-bound mind made them out to be. Link’s chin fit perfectly in the crevice of his friend’s neck, hooking in place like two puzzle pieces. “Yeah?” he challenged at last. “I love you too, Rhett. So much.”
Chapter 10

SEPTEMBER 30, 201X

Link was awoken by a great racket that resonated throughout the house.

After several minutes of enduring the infernal clanging and clashing of objects, his eyes flew open in spite of how tired he still was. It was still dark outside – not even six o’clock in the morning, more than likely – but the noise never ceased. Rhett, on the other hand, was still sound asleep just beneath his embrace. He was typically the lighter sleeper of the two, so at first Link found it peculiar that the man had yet to wake up from the pandemonium next door. The confusion translated to sympathy, however, and the small man was left with a desolate smile perched on his lips. Poor guy, he thought in passing. He must be exhausted.

Carefully extracting his limbs from Rhett, Link pulled himself away from the man and moved ever so gingerly from the bed to the floor, his newly bare feet chilling among the breeze. Step by step, he inched towards the doorway, following the sounds as they became louder in his ear. Soon, he deduced they were coming from the kitchen – fear pounded through his limbs as he moved closer to the ash dusted tile. Bottles rattled. Metals clanged together. Zippers were pulled closed…

As he silently entered the doorway, he peeked over what remained of the intact paneling and discovered the tireless Robin, who strode from one side of the room to the next in a flash. For a moment, Link only watched as the doctor clambered from place to place with haste – but his curiosity soon got the best of him and forced him to set foot in the kitchen, donning an expression of confusion.

Robin hardly noticed the man as they continued to run in zigzags across the room. They carried a large stick in one hand, maneuvering it upon the floor and adjusting their stride when the tip of it collided with the wall. As they approached the crumbling countertop on the opposite side of the room, Robin ran their hand thoroughly upon the granite, stroking various objects between their fingers and returning their rightful belongings to their coat pocket. Link only stared, darkness enveloping his vision – and suddenly, Robin stopped dead in their tracks. Their back was against the raven-haired man.

“You don’t need to sneak around. I can hear you breathing,” they merely whispered, voice cracking as it was. “Come on in. I haven’t got anything to hide.”

Link’s heart jumped. He hadn’t expected to be found considering Robin’s blindness – but, as he came to find out, the loss of one sense marginally heightens the remaining ones. For a few, solid seconds, he remained frozen in his stance, a numbing throb coursing through his veins.

At last, Robin turned on their heel and faced directly – precisely – in the brunet’s direction. “I said for you to come in,” they reiterated, speaking from behind a stoic façade. “Though my intentions weren’t to wake you, it seems that’s how it’s worked out. My apologies, first of all –” they acknowledged, “that’s truly my own fault. But here I stand, a thief in the night – except my thievery is limited to my own items and I’ve evidently not been as surreptitious as I imagined, but I digress.” Since he’d met the doctor, Link was always humored by their choice of words – and this time was no different. Even so, he perpetuated a stone-like countenance.

“Robin, what are you doing?!” the smaller of the two implored in a whispery rhetoric – but upon further deduction of the room, which had been tidied of the doctor’s belongings, the question only seemed to answer itself. There, Link was left to tap his foot nervously on the tile as his heart pounded with an imminent curiosity. “Are you – Are you leaving?”
With a guilty twitch of the lips, Robin turned to the ground as if to avoid looking Link in the eyes. Of course the truth was that, in fact, they were packing up to leave without a trace – but whether or not they’d admit to it was a mystery. For quite some time, they stood against the counter without a word, caught red-handed by the scrawny man who had his arms folded beneath a shower of moonlight. Robin could only bite their lip as the accusation dug underneath their skin and crawled among their bones.

When no answer was uttered from the other, Link bit his tongue and pinched the bridge of his nose in distress. “Robin,” he tried again. “How are you gonna tell me I don’t have to sneak around when you’re literally packing your things before the sun’s risen and fixing to leave as we speak?”

A devilish arch of the brow framed Robin’s face. Subsequently, they jabbed the stick into the floor and bent over just enough that their chin rested at the top, the splinterly surface raking against their skin. Their gaze seemed to align perfectly with Link’s, and though the man knew Robin was unable to see him, he still harbored a degree of fearful self-consciousness. When their eyes darted to the left, Link comfortably pursed his lips and fumbled with his wedding ring, whose golden surface had soiled in the weather. It was a symbol of lifelong devotion, chipped and battered, but still an intact circle…

Finally, Robin opted to take control of the situation and arise from their hunched stance. “I suppose we’d better talk, huh?”

Surprised, Link nodded. “And by ‘we’, you mean ‘you’. I just happened to catch the tail end of whatever this is,” he reminded – and with that, a galvanizing pang struck his heart like a stone.

Robin tucked the stick beneath their arm and approached Link without a single hint of visual impairment – they truly hid it well, and their other senses evidently compensated to the point that sight was no longer a necessity. The doctor halted mere inches from Link’s body, both of their skin’s heat mingling together as the small man was backed flat against the wall. Glancing to their right, Robin finally relented and stepped backwards – but not without wrapping a hand around Link’s wrist. “Why don’t we have a seat, make ourselves comfortable…” They gestured to the decimated dining table, whose makeshift ‘chairs’ were slabs of drywall, and led Link accordingly to the area by way of the walking stick.

Out of fear, it seemed, Link didn’t object. He sat across from Robin, whose hands wrung above the table’s surface. Their forehead was coated in a sheen of sweat – and Link couldn’t tell whether it was from running around or, simply, anxiety. Whatever the case, their expression was nothing short of dominant, and so Link was left to suffer in a self-perceived pool of inferiority. At long last, Robin’s brow furrowed. “You sound nervous – your breathing… it’s very…” they trailed off. “I’ll grab you something to drink. Stay where you are.”

Link noticed nothing peculiar about his breathing... but Robin knew best.

They hopped up from the table with haste, Link burying his face into his hands and clenching his eyes shut. An excruciating pain pounded through his head like the beat of a drum as he attempted to piece the situation together. The doctor was acting far from their normal self – it was as though they were an entirely different person whose consciousness was translated into the body of Robin J. Harvey, scuttling around the home with the capricious intention of setting off for a new adventure. Additionally, Robin no longer exuded the familiar, comforting friendliness that Link had so quickly latched onto; it had disappeared like sand in the wind, blowing in dusty billows across the land.

In Robin’s absence, Link grew terribly restless and tapped his anxious feet on the tile beneath him. The tension between the two was so blatant that the ebony-haired man couldn’t help but think
he’d walked in on something he shouldn’t have – even the air that entered his lungs seemed to support the theory as it heaved in sharp spurts through his chest. Panicky jitters began to plague his body starting in his limbs, where his wired state took over and manipulated his tremulous hands. Not much more time passed before Link surpassed the state of discomfort altogether and headed straight for sobbing. Without even thinking about why, because why covered a plethora of complex emotions he couldn’t bear to deduce, Link clawed desperately at his face and all but scraped away the skin beneath his eyes as he shed a stream of salty tears that burned the cuts with a fervent heat.

In the months he’d spent in such a doom-laden setting, Link had grown to be rather talented at concealing even his most prominent emotions – yet he rarely bothered to, knowing that, if need be, Rhett would pull him into a sweet embrace and comfort him until the end of time. But Rhett wasn’t there, and so he sucked the snot into his throat and dabbed the tears away with the sleeve of his jacket. Robin would return shortly – he couldn’t let on that he’d been crying, for his pride would not allow it.

Quick, painless footsteps clacked louder and louder as they approached the kitchen once more, closely following behind the gritty noise of the stick as it slid against the ground. Link remained turned away from the doorway and salvaged what he could of his composure while Robin ambled cautiously back to the table. They sat back down on the opposite side and plunked an undamaged plastic bottle onto the center of the table, pushing it towards Link with two dainty fingers. “Drink up,” they ordered. “You sound rather hazy. I’m almost certain you’re dehydrated.”

Squinting, Link complied. He grabbed the bottle in his palm and read the label – **ORANGE Dole. 100% Juice.** “Thanks,” he muttered, thrusting his hand upon the top of the bottle. His body’s need didn’t register a single worry when he twisted off the lid without breaking the seal.

When he took the first sip, an excellent sweetness coated his tongue like no other taste ever had – perhaps it was simply the thirst, Link mused, and with that he gulped down just short of half of the pint-sized bottle, only stopping to breathe. Robin watched him wistfully – almost lovingly – as the man licked his lips with a gasp. When his stomach began to ache of fullness, Link pushed the bottle to the side.

“Good stuff, yeah?” Robin teased, their eyes decorated with crow’s feet.


A look of culpability was laced in Robin’s expression, but Link could barely tell. “Ahh,” they mumbled. “I just want to be sure you’re in good shape is all. That’s my only duty in this chaos.” A dull smile grazed their lips – but it was suddenly shrouded by airy shadows, blacker than night.

Dark, heavy clouds moved quickly across the sky, absorbing the moon and blocking all light from the scene. Link’s pupils dilated – but not enough to see Robin, who was only a matter of feet from his face. Panic arose in his system once more, but this time he was unable to conceal it. Unleashing from his lungs was a series of choppy breaths which choked him like a rope as they released from his throat. Not a word left his lips, but the terrifying heft of anxiety weighed his lungs down as though he’d inhaled a gallon of lead. Trail after trail of salty tears coated his cheeks.

*Because it was dark?* Link wondered. Certainly not – but whatever the case, an excessive level of fear coursed through his veins where there was no sensible reason for physiological change. It was like no other feeling he’d ever experienced; as if by symbolism, the moon disappeared and took with it his emotional stability. His heartbeat was rapid, thumping and fluttering ceaselessly in his chest.
With a great hesitation, Robin encircled their hand around Link’s forearm and squeezed with a grounding pressure. “What’s wrong?!” they hissed, a pang of guilt to their tone. “Talk to me, Link. What are you feeling?” Robin hopped speedily to their feet and used their other hand to fasten a grip on the man’s shoulder. Perhaps fortunately, their professionalism had returned.

Hardly able to speak through the breakdown, Link gasped for air. “I can’t breathe –” he tried.

“Shit…”

At last, Robin pulled the brunet from the chair and pinned him to the floor. It seemed like a last resort type of gesture – and for that reason, Link was mortified. By instinct, he filled his lungs with air and attempted to scream… but as though it were a nightmare, no noise was uttered from his lips. This isn’t happening, he convinced himself. There’s no way this is real.

Robin didn’t say a word – they simply slid their hand beneath Link’s head and elevated it. He found he could breathe much better in that position, the cold air practically flying into his throat as his lungs heaved for its sustenance. Link was far from calm, but slowly he began to arrive at a sense of stability. His breathing returned to normal only a few minutes into the episode, and though the tears continued to pool in his eyes, he felt as if he’d been rescued. Only then did he realize that Robin had thrust an inhaler between his lips.

That was the point in which Link’s suspicions of the doctor’s motives began to wane. With that, he let his head fall backwards into Robin’s palm, plucking the inhaler from his lips to take in an authentic breath of air. He looked around from behind the foggy lens of his vision, and there he could see the worried expression on Robin’s face. The stars had returned.

When Link’s eyes batted open, Robin sucked in a relieved breath and loosed their hand from the man beneath them. “Panic attack,” they softly muttered. “You ever had one of those before?”

Link clenched his eyes shut and, with Robin’s assistance, forced himself to sit up. “A t-time or two,” he stuttered. “They’re usually t-triggered by something though – aren’t they? L-Like, a new medication, or just being crazy, or –”

“Shh,” Robin hushed. “Just calm down. You’re going to be okay.”

Link believed that.

With a vacant smile, the smaller of the two ran his fingers through his hair – but inevitably, something else was amiss. Before he knew it, his eyes grew terribly heavy, begging to be shut. A sudden exhaustion enveloped him like a suede blanket, wrapping him up in a comfortable embrace as he sat on the cold, tile floor. Link’s eyelashes were stuck together with tears.

“Why am I so tired?” he mumbled, barely able to stay awake. His eyes stung desperately.

Robin only smiled. “You’re going to be okay,” they repeated…

…And even in the dazed state he was in, Link managed to put the puzzle together. The sleepiness that followed such a wild and fitful episode of panic could never be explained by his own disposition – no – Link always held his emotional side together fairly well. Something else was wrong.

Just when he swore he was going to pass out, Link was hit with a final spurt of energy. His vision grew darker and darker, but before his eyes shut for good, he parted his lips:

“Robin…” he slurred. “You drugged me…”
As two plump tears were shed from the doctor’s eye, they swiped the hair from Link’s forehead and donned the most guilt-laden smile the man had ever lain eyes on. Robin stared convincingly into his face, almost seeming to absorb each and every emotion that weighed him down – and somehow, by the grace of God Almighty, Link felt at peace. He trusted Robin with all of his heart, despite the circumstances which had him pinned to the floor under the influence of a substance which could have very well killed him. The look on Robin’s face compensated, though – and their saddened gaze made the final words they ever sputtered seem that much more authentic.

“You’re going to be okay.”
Chapter 11

“C’mon, man, wake up!”

Link’s eyes batted open as soon as he regained consciousness. His first discovery was that Rhett was standing over him, face red and swollen beneath a thick river of tears. The large man’s tonality was dreadful – and his eyes conveyed only fear as they were framed by sticky, blond lashes and dry wrinkles. When Rhett saw that the other man had finally awoken, he thrust his hand on his chest and dipped his head violently towards the ground. “Link, oh my God…” he breathed with an even mix of relief and anxiety. He then looked back up, his gaze piercing Link’s, and on his blistered face was an expression of lightened panic. “You’re okay, brother. Just breathe, just breathe…”

Although the sun was shrouded in clouds, Link could tell it was no longer morning. But it was humid – and from that, he determined that it would soon rain. Suddenly, he arose from the floor and clambered to his knees, only to become dizzy and fall sideways against Rhett. Link’s ear was perched perfectly against the blond’s chest, which divided the man and his companion’s thudding heart. Rhett’s thin arms closed like a vice around his body.

“I thought I’d lost you,” he cried, giving his friend a tight squeeze before cradling his limp body in his arms. “Oh, God – do you feel okay? What happened?”

Link clenched his eyes shut and loosed himself from Rhett’s hold – it was simply too dramatic, he figured, for the series of events he then began to recollect. “Listen, I’m fine. It’s not a huge deal,” he prefaced, glancing in the opposite direction. “To make a long story short, I woke up in the middle of the night to a bunch of noise coming from the kitchen, so I hopped out of bed to investigate. Turns out it was Robin. They were gathering all their stuff together – in the dead of the night, mind you – and packing up to leave without saying a thing. I was like, ‘What the hell?’ – but anyway, I was trying to be quiet and watch to see what was going on, but Robin found me out and told me to just go in there and we’d talk. So we sat down at the table to chat. Robin said I ‘sounded dehydrated’, whatever that’s supposed to mean, so they went and got me a bottle of orange juice – and of course I drank the whole thing, because yeah, I was dehydrated. But not to the point I was like, slurring my speech or anything – you know? But uh… shortly thereafter, I started having a panic attack, and after that I passed out. I mean it’s pretty obvious what happened – Robin slipped something into the drink. But it’s not like they were trying to kill me – they actually really helped me out when I was panicking. Got me on the floor and gave me an inhaler. I don’t know how many times they said I was gonna be okay – Rhett, you can’t be mad at Robin, alright? They were helpful until the very end. I don’t know what they were thinking, but… but you know, honestly, it was probably for the best. I’m totally okay right now.”

Rhett’s brow furrowed with concern – almost anger, but not quite. Instead of stating his opinion of Robin’s choice of action, he appeared to take Link’s words as the man intended. Even so, the brunet was able to see the confusion in his eyes as question after burning question sprung from his lips. “Robin’s gone? Like, for good?… Did they say where they were going?”

Biting his lip, Link shook his head. “Would’ve left without a warning had I not caught them in the act. I haven’t got a clue where they’re at or how far they’ve gone.”

Rhett flattened his lips and nodded to the ground. “Well,” he concluded, “if you don’t know, you don’t know, so I guess that’s that. Surprising as it is, there really isn’t a whole lot we can do about it. But really, brother,” he gripped Link’s shoulder, “you’re not woozy or anything?”

A faint smile grazed the larger man’s face. “You’re probably just hungry,” he assured, rubbing the side of Link’s back.

“Yes…” Link whispered, feeling knots form in his abdomen at the mention of hunger. Crossing his arms, the small man fell backwards into Rhett’s chest and lifted his head to look up at him. His face was dry and flaky and red – but regardless, it possessed an indomitable countenance that couldn’t be reckoned with. There was a newfound strength about Rhett – and Link was unable to tell whether it was physical or emotional. He simply cuddled into the soft layers of his hoodie as a ginger arm embraced him from behind, stroking his chest with that notorious, tender love.

After so long, Rhett grabbed his friend by the shoulders and adjusted his body so that they both sat upright. His chin fell just beside Link’s head, his straggly beard brushing the man’s neck. “Let’s hop up. We can have breakfast,” Rhett whispered into his ear. “Like old times.”

Link couldn’t help but comply to the proposition – while he knew his ‘breakfast’ would likely consist of a can of sweet peas or, if he was lucky enough, a sleeve of Ritz crackers and easy cheese, he was stricken with temptation as his mouth watered simply for taste. He jabbed his hands into the floor and made it to his ankles with ease, despite a dull pain that swelled in his feet as he pressed the weight of his body onto them. Even so, Link pulled himself up without even the vaguest suspicion he’d just spent God knew how long passed out in the floor. Rhett followed suit, with the help of his companion’s hand – and with that, both of them headed for the pantry in search of something – anything – to eat…

But as luck would have it, Rhett’s accompanying stride came to a halt, and Link saw him bent over the dining table, his large palms flat against the surface.

Link scrunched his brow and hastened to the blond’s side. “You alright?” he implored, gaze piercing Rhett’s. Before he could even place a hand on his arm, Rhett was engulfed by a brand new agenda, and he reached across the table.

With his hand, he grabbed a grey, rectangular device – and attached to it was what appeared to be a ripped corner of a piece of Xerox paper, taped gingerly to the side. “To Link and Rhett,” the taller man read aloud, his tone curious. Exchanging a glance with the brunet, Rhett ripped off the messily scrawled note and encased the silver box in his fingers. It was decked in black and white buttons, similar to those found on a radio – stop, pause, play, record, forwards, backwards, volume…

“You know what this is, don’t ya?” Rhett thrust the object closer to Link’s face, a dull shine glowing on its matt surface.

Cocking his head to the side, Link squinted at the device. “That’s – That’s a tape recorder,” he answered with a hint of surprise.

“You’re right, Link,” Rhett smiled, his tone reminiscent of the olden days in which the two of them would sit together at a desk before a microphone, playing futile trivia games for an audience of millions. Link was instantly reminded of the past, but quickly shook it off in fear of becoming too wistful.

The smaller man stepped closer to Rhett and slung an arm around his waist. A curious heft weighed down his heart as he imagined the contents of the recorder – of course, he reasoned, Robin had left it behind as their final message to the men. As to why the doctor couldn’t deliver their parting words to them, well… only the recording could tell.

“Play it,” Link demanded, swallowing down a sizable lump that had formed in his throat. As
Rhett complied, he nuzzled his face into the crease between his arm and chest – and with that, the lanky man pressed his cheek to Link’s head and hovered his thumb upon the play button.

It began with the sound of the night’s tempestuous winds buffeting against the microphone – but they were quickly muffled, as though someone had placed a finger upon the receiver. Link scrunched his brow, waiting ever so patiently for the noise to cease…

And at last, it began.

“The following is a specialized message for Rhett McLaughlin and Link Neal, recorded by Dr. Robin J. Harvey on the morning of September the thirtieth. Exact ages unknown – however, McLaughlin and Neal are assumed to be in their late thirties to early forties. Both men were found incapacitated in conditions nine and seven, respectively. In a matter of two nights, McLaughlin was recuperated to condition six and Neal to condition four. Both men experienced an improvement of three on PAROScale, or an average of one point five per day. Both are severely underweight. For each following year under similar conditions, McLaughlin should expect an approximate survival probability of forty percent, while Neal should expect a probability of approximately sixty percent.”

A sufficient pause followed where Link turned his gaze up to meet Rhett’s – and there in his eyes was an expression of horror. It was the sincerity of Robin’s tone that struck Link as peculiar; it was the same voice that a private investigator would use to report information about a deceased person. Robin was a very calculated individual… but the severity with which they asserted each word in the recording was almost enough to convince Link the speaker was an entirely different person altogether. But perhaps, he mused, it was simply their professionalism at work…

And, following the pause, the thought was confirmed.

“Rhett and Link – what an interesting duo, I must commend. In case you’ve yet to figure it out, it’s Robin – though it would take quite a thick skull for one to not have guessed by this point. With other patients I typically cut out the beginning bit of this mandatory departure (leaving it for the ears of PARO only), but decided to leave it in for the two of you, because… See, my organization generally has nothing to hide in the first place, but the reports tend to scare people, I’m afraid. But the two of you are intelligent and curious, so I felt obligated to open your ears to all that I know… and although I was only around for a couple of days, at some points it seemed I’d known both of you much longer than that. I genuinely enjoyed your company.

“And again, it’s not typical that I ramble on all that much in departures – it’s usually a formula of an apology followed by a synopsis followed by a few hints of advice or what have you. For you guys, I’m going a different route. It’s not that I prefer the two of you to survive out of all the people I’ve met in my trek, no – but it’s the fact that I know you’ll both listen to me and take my advice. You’re not above that. It means a lot more to me than you would imagine – so, let’s just hop right in.

“I spent my whole life trying to prove to the world that I could be something. It was never an easy task, believe me – especially if you were just some nonbinary black kid with an anxiety disorder living in the middle of Utah. I’ll grant my childhood one thing, though – and that’s giving me the ability to look at this world from a realistic perspective. In a way, my upbringing saved my life – being constantly torn down only gave me more adamancy to fuel my aspirations, I suppose. It’s not a childhood I’d have wished on anyone, but it is one that made me who I am. I suffered some unspeakable things it would pain me to go into. Things the rest of whatever remains of this world wouldn’t bother to believe… And all I ever wanted was to help people, in any shape or form. Emotional, physical, advisory, or otherwise.

“I settled on physical because, in all honesty, I’m only able to provide others with the truth.
Emotions are something I tend to be in control of, and while it makes complete sense that others are unable to conceal theirs, it’s not something I’m able to fully comprehend. My perspective is not optimistic, nor do I wish it was. My perspective is not pessimistic, either – it is simply realistic. Much like you, Rhett, I look at things as they are presented to me. Not from a high angle or a low angle, but head on. I find it’s the only way to make it through this world alive, especially in the conditions we’re exposed to now. Each patient I’ve encountered in the past three months has had at least an inkling of the same logic.

“Rhett, your deduction skills are stunning. The speed with which you discovered my blindness blew me away – truthfully. I’ve had upwards of thirty patients since the start of PARO and you’re the very first to notice. I take pride in hiding in well – but I’ve come to find out that’s a pretty silly action on my part. There’s not much sense in accommodating people to my own blindness by hiding it, is there? The fact is, whether or not the patient knows it, it’s still there. I feel as though if I were open about it, however, people would lose that sense of trust they have with me as a doctor. ‘Oh, you’re blind – I won’t allow you to help me.’ … it’s that logic. Even if no one vocalizes it, I can’t help but assume it’s in their thoughts.

“And between myself and the two of you, I’ve only been blind since the bombs dropped. When the lights went out, my colleagues and I – the ones who went on to found PARO – gathered together in our university’s bomb shelter. I’d already graduated by then, but there was a premonition weighing me down, and so I created a group message containing the seven of us in my graduate friend circle. It was myself, my best friend Blake Xavier, and five others: Scarlet Tanner, Davis Buchanan, Jay Fields, Perry Jules, and Elsie Floyd. We gathered together around eight o’clock at the shelter – and it was strange, we all had the same feeling it would be that night specifically. I’m not usually one to trust intuition unless it’s VERY prominent, but the fact that all seven of us were so set on an idea of catastrophe... Well, it’s hard to argue with.

“In retrospect, the shelter’s design was not well thought out – and I guess we’ve got the engineering majors to blame for that. The structure was top notch, of course, or I wouldn’t be speaking with you right now... but there embedded in the side of the wall was a two by four-foot window – and it was six feet deep to match the concrete walls. To make a long story short, there was a bomb dropped almost directly on campus – and as you would imagine, the resulting light was so, absolutely blaring that anyone who looked upon its glow was blinded immediately...

“And that just so happened to be me. I looked out the window and it was the last thing I ever saw – it was like having the liquid of two fluorescent lightbulbs splashed generously into your eyes, or having the sun hurdle straight for the earth. I yelled out – I said I was blind… my vision turned from white to black both gradually and instantaneously. Blake pulled me into a hug and she cried into my chest, and she told me I would be okay. Right as the world was crashing down around her. Right as her best friends cowered in the corner of the room holding onto one another, presumably watching us with owlish eyes. I hadn’t even noticed the impact of the bomb – but I recall we later discovered that Perry attained a contusion upon being slammed backwards into the wall, so I can only infer it was quiet disruptive.

“It was originally the seven of us who created PARO, but through association it has grown to nearly five hundred. It was easy to find others who graduated from the University of Utah, as we knew where some of them lived – and at that, there were doctors who survived from the campus itself, most of which only lived because of a meager shelter on the west side of campus. About thirty doctors had crammed into that one, as it was nearer to the medical school than the sturdier shelter my colleagues and I stayed in, where the engineering department was. Perhaps unfortunately, it seemed that it was only doctors who made it out of the university alive – and that’s because it was doctors who were educated on what everyone else called conspiracy, greed, or selfishness. ‘Doctors just can’t get enough money,’ they’d say… and each time I heard that statement, I wanted to smack some sense into whoever said it.
“Because the fact was this – so many of us went to college for eight damn years just to graduate and be let go in an industry where people were being lain off left and right. None of us would ever be hired – and so we would apply for jobs and never hear back. Because there were no jobs in the medical field we could possibly acquire, we were left with the options of either exercising our minors or, if you were like me and didn’t have a minor, working a minimum wage job and praying to hit the lottery.

“We would save and save and save our money, sacrificing meals and clothing and any source of leisure, knowing that in six months’ time we would inevitably be hit with the relentless expense of student loans. There were no loopholes. I worked three jobs back then. I worked three bloody jobs for three bloody months when I’d just graduated from the state’s biggest college with my PhD. If you call wanting to survive in this capitalist American hell ‘greed’, then I’m sorry, but I firmly believe you’re mistaken. All I’ve ever been is just someone who’s trying to get by, and from the looks of it, I guess that’s all I’ll ever be.

“But as we’re all out here selflessly devoting our time, energy, and supplies to save the lives of people who wouldn’t have otherwise made it, I sit back and I think about the ones who told us we were only in it for the money. The only profit we get from this organization is personal fulfillment – we’d all give the shirts on our backs if that means giving someone the chance to live. We want to rebuild this nation into something that, just maybe, won’t corrupt…

“And as far as I’m concerned, people are wonderful creatures. I’ve yet to meet one I haven’t found absolutely fascinating – and the fact is especially true for both of you. You both have incredible potential… but most importantly, there is a bond between the two of you that I don’t believe I’ve ever seen in another friendship. Your love for one another is purely astounding. It’s sacrificial. It’s kind.

“The chemistry you’ve got between yourselves is something I one day strive to achieve – and it’s something that you can use to your advantage. Talk things out, even if it means arguing with one another before arriving at a consensus. I’m sure you’re both intelligent enough to know that a relationship that has been cultivated to the degree of yours requires that conflict is guaranteed and communication is key. What you have in each other is beautiful.

“That being said, you’ve got to watch out for yourselves and one another. It’s required of me to provide you with a synopsis of each of your conditions, and it will let you know precisely how you’re doing. Since I left in the snippet involving your numbers on PAROScale, I’ll go ahead and briefly explain exactly what that means.

“PAROScale was invented by the older and more experienced doctors of PARO, and it’s designed based on a variety of factors to assign a number to a patient on a scale of one to ten that describes the patient’s physical condition. The numbers on the scale escalate with severity, condition one being of least priority and condition ten being of most.

“Rhett – as based on my calculations, you began at condition nine. To put that into perspective, ten is the number we describe as the point of no return; a patient in condition ten has no hope of healing. You were dangerously close to death, Rhett, but just far enough that I was able to snag you back with the help of some medicines and supplies and other therapizing techniques. As logical of a person as you are, I’m sure you have the capability to live a long life in this world – even though your theoretical probability of survival was only forty percent. So long as you pace yourself, I believe you have what it takes to live through this.

“You currently lie at condition six – that’s a three step improvement from the point I found you. Ideally, a person should be at condition three or below to be at the lowest risk of attaining injuries or becoming severely ill. Your condition is where it is mostly because of two factors: malnutrition
and heat-induced exhaustion. I’ve left a bottle of aloe for you on the nightstand – apply a generous amount to your skin twice a day until you find that your fever has gone down and your appetite has returned.

“As far as malnutrition, I’ve mixed up another five bags of what I overheard you refer to as ‘vitamin bullshit’ the other night. I’m aware that it's absolutely revolting, but it’s a concoction that will help you to gain weight. Set a goal to eat one bag a day – that’s not a terrible amount, I don’t think. I also advise you to drink a lot of water to help get rid of your sun poisoning. There’s plenty to drink in the house for both of you. No excuses, gentlemen.

“As for you, Link, you were found in condition seven – not nearly as bad as Rhett, but more than enough to put you at risk of serious injury or death. Of course, the injury bit rang true – your spine was terribly shattered at the bottom, and it caused you some pretty intense pain as far as I was able to tell. I splinted it the best I could by tying some cloth around your lower back, and I hope it’s been somewhat relieving for you. You’re currently in condition four, which denotes that you’re still at risk of developing injury, but if you’re careful enough I’m sure you’ll return to a safer plane.

“My advice to you, Link, is to try and maintain your current weight until you take off the splint. Rapid gain or loss could compromise its purpose and potentially mess up your back pretty badly, and you don’t want that to happen. I recommend you remove the splint in about four weeks for best recovery – by then, your bones will have likely come back together. Though I must add a disclaimer – since I didn’t have an X-ray or any other means of seeing the exact manner with which your bones are fractured, you will more than likely end up having lower back pain for the rest of your life due to the bones fusing together incorrectly. This was pretty well unavoidable, but nonetheless I do apologize.

“Finally, I want you both to know that heading north is the correct direction. The best place for you to end up is the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. Every northbound step is closer – you’re currently in the town of Fillmore, which is somewhere near a hundred and fifty miles from Salt Lake if I’m not mistaken. When you make it to the university, it’s essentially home free from there. My duty is to heal and gather as many as I can within a reasonable radius of the area. By taking my advice and using your own intuition, there’s no doubt in my mind that both of you will be able to make it wherever you decide to go in this life. I want you both to know that although the aforementioned statistics are against your favor, I do truly believe you’re both capable of making it out of this alive.

“Myself, I’m heading south to help as many people as I can before my supplies run out. I estimate I’ll travel another fifty miles or so before returning home – and I eagerly await the day I once again set foot on Salt Lake soil. Perhaps the city was decimated, but there is still an overwhelmingly familiar vibe to it that can’t be mistaken for any other place on earth. It’s the magic of home that shocks your toes and courses through your legs as you step into the city limits. It’s the cool sweetness of the air that inflates your lungs and makes you want to sing. It’s the people you know and love, who unconditionally welcome you back to your roots, whether you’ve been gone ten days or ten years…

“It’s everything – everything I’ll never be able to explain unless you know the feeling yourselves. The bottom line, I suppose, is this – I wish to see you both again, and I wish to see you happy and healthy. Both your unbreakable bond and yourselves as individuals have inspired me in the simplest and most complex ways.

“Boys, I’m in love with my work. With healing people of sickness and injury. In turn, it brings me great joy to know I’ve bettered someone’s life by fixing up their broken parts – I’m essentially a mechanic for humans, and yet it’s everything I have ever aspired to be. With all my heart, I truly
believe that anything is possible. For black or white, for rich or poor, for man, woman, or otherwise...

“My friends, I wish you both prosperity. You’ve worked your asses off to get to where you are, and I’m proud of each and every step you’ve taken. You’ve trudged through darkness and desolation for months in spite of pain and sickness – perhaps working yourselves too hard at times, which just goes to prove your drive is ruthless. You’re two of the most adamant men I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing, and of all emotions I feel, the greatest of them is humble. Stay just the way you are, and I promise you everything is going to be okay.

“With the greatest sincerity I can provide, thank you for teaching me as I taught you. You don’t know it, but your actions alone have been a resource of information that comes from the heart. Your love and sacrificial providence is a beautiful, beautiful thing. Don’t ever change that.

“Until next time,

“Robin.”

Click.

Link had nearly lost track of time when the recording ended – thick, grey clouds decorated the sky in lumpy scrolls, moving quickly along with the winds. Rhett still held him in the same position, pressing him firmly into his side as Link’s wrist hooked around the knob of his hip. At last, the brunet looked up and met Rhett’s gaze – and he found that the man’s eyes had filled with tears that fell in vast quantities down his face, sinking liberally into his beard. There, Link swung his other arm around and hugged Rhett’s thin torso against his own.

“Aw, Rhett,” he spoke lowly. “You’re okay, brother. I promise.”

In response, Rhett exhaled a difficult sigh. “I just can’t believe how close we really were to… to dying,” he uttered – rather easily, to Link’s surprise. “It’s so crazy, Link – so, so crazy. Robin came along right in the nick of time – and I swore that day, man… I swore it was the end of us. I was in so much pain,” his voice faltered. Suddenly, Rhett’s nose buried into the top of his companion’s head, and with no resistance he began to weep.

Not knowing what to do, Link instinctively elevated himself to his toes and pressed his lips chastely onto Rhett’s cheek. “Shh,” he hushed, clasping his hands together as they squeezed from behind the taller man’s back. With no warning, Rhett began to break down in his arms, knees buckling beneath a weight so terribly light that Link was able to pull him back up – but just enough to catch the blond’s fall and rest him gently into a battered dining chair which sat just beside the table. It was pitiful to see just how quickly the world could come crashing down…

Slowly, Link began to sit in his friend’s lap, arms closing around his narrow shoulders. Their faces pressed together, beard against stubble, tears pooling together into a single stream between their cheeks. “We’re okay now, Rhett. We’re alright.”

It took quite some time for Rhett to finally calm down – it was relatively rare for Link to see him cry, but the man had been so overwhelmed it hardly fazed him. Holding him together was fulfilling in a way, as it provided Link with a sense of purpose, but by the same token his heart broke to watch Rhett fall apart at the seams. To see a man as stable as his best friend shatter beneath the embrace of his arms was both grounding and absolutely terrifying… but Link knew his friend was notorious for bottling up his pain and tossing it on his mind’s shelf never to be seen again.

Despite the seemingly foolproof strategy, the bottles were volatile, sometimes shattering at the
drop of a hat. In an unfavorable mood, Rhett would blow up with the spontaneity of a grenade – and truth be told, the capricious nature of his outbursts scared Link. It was an aspect of their relationship they never made a conscious effort to work on – yet with time, the kinks worked themselves out. After so long, the breakdowns stopped harboring an angry intent altogether, and slowly but surely Link began to feel safe again. He still worried for Rhett, however – while he kept himself together the majority of the time, the occasions in which he did feel negatively were brutal. Sadness spiraled into depression, and finally into the inevitable fits of breathless sobbing and body tremors, all of which Link felt as the large man burrowed himself into his chest. At first he felt useless to Rhett – but it was the strength in the blond’s grip that proved to Link that his presence was more than enough.

“I love you, Rhett,” the small man whispered. It was all he could say – it was all he needed to say.

With a fervent desperation, Rhett clung to the sleeves of Link’s shirt, irreversibly stretching the fabric as his fingers clawed inwards. His head hung defeated beneath the brunet’s chin.

A flood of long-repressed sadness glistened in Link’s gaze – he’d begun to rake away the hair from his brother’s forehead in hopes that he would look up at him, but to no avail. Rhett refused eye contact altogether, only finding comfort as he held onto his best friend. It was as if Link’s heart was wrapped in thorns, cutting into the muscle with each beat – and as he sat on his knees doing his damnest to hold his broken companion together, a thick breeze wafted over the walls and cloaked them both in chills. Fortunately, Rhett remained unfazed by the changing weather, the warmth of Link’s arms swaddling him in comfort…

But soon enough, Link was hit with a bolt of panic as a clap of local thunder struck his ear. His fists tightened around the fabric surrounding Rhett’s torso, fingernails running over the ruts between his ribs. Rhett’s hair smelled of sweat, yet it also harbored a pungent freshness, much like the scent that followed North Carolina rain. There’s a name for that… Link pondered, trying to recall the term he’d once defined for Rhett on an episode of Good Mythical Morning. It was from an older episode – season four or five, perhaps – but as he’d come to notice, Link became consistently plagued by memories that had once been obsolete, yet now they crossed his mind with a sweet, sweet vividness. He longed to sit behind that sleek, wooden desk, if just for one more episode. He longed to shoot the breeze with Rhett, not a worry in the world as their knees pressed together beneath their shared table. He longed to return to the studio and work those nights that ended up being so late he fell asleep in Rhett’s lap. He longed for all the little things he’d slowly begun to take for granted…

Betwixt the musings and meditative reverie, Link’s thoughts were interrupted by yet another crack of thunder. This time, however, it was followed by the sensation of water dripping onto his scalp, mixing with the oils of his hair. Gradually, more and more raindrops descended to the desert, and before much longer it fell in sheets, dampening the ground in a flash. A poignant, earthy scent wafted all at once into Link’s nostrils – and that’s when he finally remembered.

Petrichor.

For a short while the scene was calming, for neither Rhett nor Link had experienced enough rain since the First Night to amount to much of anything – but as luck would have it, the serenity was short lived. When the drops hit Link’s face, they stung like no other liquid ever had – some even fell into his eyes, all but blinding him as he blinked the water away. Rhett, however, didn’t appear to be bothered – granted, Link had shielded him from the acerbic drops as much as his smaller body would allow. Only when the pain proved to be too much for him to handle, Link dug his fist into Rhett’s hair and forced the man to look up at him.

“This rain’s burning the hell out of me!” he snapped, drops of it falling down his face and leaving behind a trail of fire.
Rhett looked confused at first – but as soon his own, newly exposed face was pummeled by the sky’s blazing water, he expelled a painful yelp; his skin was still blistered and torn, leaving him to bury his face in his hands. “Link, that’s acid rain!” he chastised the brunet, his voice still drowned in tears.

_Acid rain._ Link recalled the morning he’d awoken in a storm of the same thing – in fact, it was his first encounter with Robin. They called him a fool – they told him to just get up and go inside as if it were even an option as he lay on the ground paralyzed by a shattered spine. They swore under their breath upon hearing Link’s agonizing screams…

But when all was said and done, Robin saved him.

With haste, Link removed himself from Rhett and unzipped the jacket from his own body. He wore no shirt underneath – his skin was entirely exposed to the sour rain, sheets of it crashing down from the sky and creating a fiery sheen on his back. The stinging was unbelievably painful – but Link knew that Rhett’s skin was much in much worse condition than his own, and so he draped his jacket over the hunkered man’s face. Although his skin was on fire, Link extended his hand to grab Rhett’s, pulling both of them up into a standing position. From there, he led his friend through the kitchen doorway and across the hall, finally stepping into the bedroom.

There was a rather large area of the room where the ceiling was still intact – and although the wind was able to whip the rain in any direction it pleased, there was at least a decent buffer to protect the men. As they sat down upon the bed, Link peeled the wet jacket from the other man’s head and attempted to wring it out over the floor – but with the cloth being so large, he couldn’t quite get the grip he wanted, and even if he could the water quickly began to sting his hands. He wiped his palms on the side of the bed, wincing as his skin stretched over his body. With a sigh, Link scooted against the wall and brought his knees to his forehead, embracing his legs as he thrust his face towards the mattress…

And out of nowhere, Link’s bare skin was enveloped by a soft, hefty cloth, trapping the heat his body expelled within the confines of a blanket. Behind him was Rhett, whose arms draped along the small man’s shoulders and clasped at his chest. His chin rested comfortably next to Link’s face.

“You okay?” he asked, his voice so low Link could hardly hear.

“Yeah.”

But it’s times like these I realize how broken we are.

In the midst of Link’s thoughts, he felt on his cheek a dry and warm pair of lips, which were accompanied by the gentle stroke of Rhett’s mustache. Electricity followed the contact – and Link wasn’t quite sure how to handle that feeling.

_I just don’t know where your soul ends and mine begins._
Chapter 12

When the tempest showed no signs of subsiding, Rhett pulled his companion into a hug from behind.

Both men allowed their weight to press against the wall, the blond’s gangly arms folding around Link’s chest in a close embrace. It was admittedly a comfortable position to be in, for he was almost able to feel the large man’s heartbeat pounding from behind his back – but before he had the chance to enjoy it, Link was reminded of his own hunger as his empty stomach released a long, soft grumble. His body folded in on itself, a sharp ache coursing through his abdomen with the velocity of a bullet.

“You sound hungry,” Rhett remarked, his hand traveling down to cup Link’s gauze-clad stomach.

“Starving,” the small man added. He followed with a groan and fell sideways into the arms of his companion, then able to fix his solemn gaze directly upon him. “I feel sick, though.”

A hint of a smile surfaced upon Rhett’s lips, his greying beard bushy as it scratched against his neck. “You’d probably feel better if you ate something,” he said assuredly. “Maybe if this blasted storm would let up we could do that, but it’s not looking too promising.”

“Yeah,” Link agreed. Bile and nausea festered in his stomach like a volcano begging to erupt, but the fresh, ocean-like scent of his best friend’s body was just enough to quell the sickness. Brows suddenly slanted, Link’s eyes darted precisely into Rhett’s. “Hey, are you alright now? Emotionally, I mean? That meltdown you had was pretty rough, brother – I hate seeing you like that…” A crack of thunder sounded from nearby and caused Link to flinch – and with that, Rhett massaged his skeletal hands along the other man’s tense, blanketed arms.

“I’m… I’m okay,” he spoke after a short bout of deliberation. “I think I’d just bottled up so much these past few months I didn’t know how to handle it, you know what I mean? Every so often it’ll all just start coming down at once – one thing after another – and God, it just starts to crush the life out of you. For heaven’s sake, Link, we’ve gone through so much of this shit we’ve hardly had a moment to provide a proper mourning for our families – all it’s been since the First Night is survival, just taking it a day at a time. We swore some nights it’d be the end, and I don’t think we knew if we were devastated or glad. I don’t want to live like that anymore, man. I don’t. And probably the worst thing of all, we have to watch one another struggle to trudge through this hell when we both know good and well we’re just doing it for each other. Neither of us want to be alive anymore, Link. Let’s just face it. I’ve seen more than I ever wanted to see of this world. Felt more than I wanted to feel. Life loses its luster once the grass disappears and all you get to feel under your feet is battered blacktop and hot sand.”

The truth was powerful, but it struck with dejection. Link’s heart sank like ice water through his body, infecting his limbs with a lead-like heft. “Rhett,” he spoke almost inaudibly, rubbing his forehead against his friend’s shoulder. “God’s honest truth, brother… I’ll always want to be alive as long as I’ve got you. You’re the greatest blessing I’ve been given in this life. We’re supposed to be out here – and together, too, not one of us without the other. We don’t function alone – we never have. And as long as we remain smart and cautious, we never will.”

Rhett huffed a breath of discontent – a gesture Link had grown to know all too well. “Watching you hurt all the damn time eats at me more than you’ll ever know,” he said simply.

Disappointed that Rhett seemed to blow off his words, Link adopted an angrier tone. “Do you think I don’t feel the same way?!” his voice rose – yet his limp head never removed from its home
on Rhett’s chest. “Of course I know, Rhett. I know how it feels to watch the person you love most in the world force himself to get up in the morning when he’d just as soon dig his own grave and lay in it. For crying out loud, I know how it feels to be the guy who wants to give up – but there’s something that trumps all of that and makes those things petty and meaningless…” By that point, Link’s voice had begun to falter, and his glistening eyes turned to look at his companion – so beaten up, so broken down…

And he’d been there a thousand times.

Rhett was a skeleton wrapped tightly in skin, the very bones of his wrists protruding like calcified knobs at the ends of his arms. His body was horrifically small and his skin patchy and red, dried blood still caught in the crevices of his face. In the second’s time it took Link to evaluate his brother’s face, he began to wonder just how battered he looked himself – and as his joints ached, and his eyes watered, and his hands shook, and his back stung with an indescribable fury… Link was filled with gladness, for Rhett continued to hold him close despite how hopeless he may have looked.

“…And that something is love.”

The storm only seemed to intensify – but nevertheless, Link was able to hear his roaring stomach above the thunder. Rhett apparently heard it too, as was evidenced by his shifting around on the bed in an effort to cradle Link against him. “If you’re really that hungry, I could run and get you something real quick,” he offered. “There’s probably enough roof out there to keep me dry if I’m strategic enough.”

Link was almost tempted by the proposition, but of course turned him down. “Don’t risk it, man,” he warned. “I’ll be alright. I’m sure this storm won’t last too much longer.”

Rhett nuzzled sleepily into the smaller man’s hair, ruffling the greasy mess with the tip of his nose. “If you change your mind, the offer still stands. And Link,” he added, lowering his voice to a hum, “I love you, brother. Every little bit of you.”

With the declaration, a sob caught in Link’s throat. It was the selflessness in his best friend’s heart that, in the never ending months of hardship, he’d begun to appreciate and admire. Rhett gave and gave until he physically couldn’t give anymore – and his terror-stricken body resented him for it, to the point it damn near killed him. By the grace of a miracle, however, his heart was still beating – a sure sign to Link that even with the cataclysm and misfortune they’d become exposed to daily, the universe was not entirely devoid of mercy.

Rhett continued to shuffle around with Link on his hip, adjusting the blanket around his friend each time he moved. It was warm and sleek against Link’s skin, resembling the texture of lotion as it traced the edges and dips of his bones – and on the other side of it was Rhett, whose breathing was modest and shallow with the brunet’s weight pressed so heavily into him. Together they braved the storm.

The taller man finally settled down and allowed his skinny arms to drape around Link’s waist. With his chin tucked on the other’s shoulder, Rhett turned so that both their heads rested on the wall, Link’s fallen against his own. Their legs stretched to the end of the bed, just short of a break in the ceiling where water ruthlessly soaked into the sheets…

And Link wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.

The embrace paired with the lulling sounds of rain pattering on the tin above their heads was so alluringly comfortable that Link managed to doze off within just a few minutes of shutting his eyes. Just as his consciousness started to drift, though, he began to feel what must have been drops
of rain trickling down his neck – was there a crack in the ceiling? Instinctually, he thrust his arm behind him and swept the moisture away before it had the opportunity to burn – but when the substance lingered on his fingertips without so much as a vague irritation, Link became perplexed. His stinging eyes batted open with difficulty, and ever so carefully he was able to arise from Rhett’s embrace without waking the man. He looked carefully upon his friend’s innocent face, so terribly mutilated by the sun’s ruthless light – and from his sleeping eyes fell tear after colossal tear, rolling like bullets down his cheeks.

***

Easy cheese had never tasted so incredible.

The synthetic cheddar was reminiscent of the descriptions of manna Link had so often read of in the Bible, its savor angelic as it coated the surface of his tongue in orange globules. It was somehow sweet – perhaps the preservatives, he mused, still wolfing down the entire can regardless of its health benefits or lack thereof. Despite having squeezed the thick, snaking substance on a plate of long-expired saltine crackers, Link’s desire was satisfied, as his stomach no longer ached with hunger.

As soon as the storm had abated, he made a beeline for the kitchen at the side of his companion who followed hastily behind. Rhett was more hesitant than he, grabbing a pouch of Robin’s panacea from the pantry before sitting down next to Link above the drywall table. With a stirring spoon, he picked around the edges of the bag as if to test the viscosity of the concoction, which was somehow both brittle and sticky in texture. Link only watched as the man pulled the spoon up at last and thrust a bite of the yellowed, pudding-like gunk into his mouth with a scowl. After just a few seconds of swishing it around in his mouth, Rhett appeared to be staving off an onslaught of dry-heaves – and with the expression on his face, Link could almost taste the acrid bitterness for himself.

“What’s it like?” he finally implored, wincing at Rhett’s reaction.

The blond waited a moment to respond, grunting every couple of seconds as he downed the terrible mixture. He inhaled a sharp and dramatic gasp, eyes still fixed on the table when his tongue peeked through his lips to part them. “I’ll tell you one thing – I’m not excited to eat six of these in a week,” he confirmed – but his brow quickly furrowed as he licked the residue from his teeth, tasting it for the second time. His gaze shot directly at Link, a glint of realization sharp in his eye. “It’s like glow in the dark milk, man. Remember that? It’s so bitter!” He spat out his tongue.

“Oh – really?” Link grinned. “It can’t be that bad, can it? I mean, it’s just a bunch of vitamins –”

“It’s so bad!” Rhett emphasized, eyes glowing brighter than they had in weeks – and for just a moment, Link was reminded of the man’s once jubilant disposition, shining from the past like aluminum under the sun. A set of crow’s feet splayed out from each of Rhett’s eyelids.

“Aw, c’mon – let me try it,” Link demanded, stifling a giggle. With his dainty fingers, he plucked the spoon from Rhett’s hand and scooped a respectable bite from the bag. When it touched his lips, a slick, fatty liquid precipitated from the spoon and dribbled down his chin. That in and of itself was enough to reject the bite – however, Link proceeded to thrust it inside with resignation, allowing his tongue to sift through the chunky concoction and attempt to flatten it with the roof of his mouth.
The taste was indeed reminiscent of glow in the dark milk – which, in retrospect, was the flavor of unadulterated vitamin B50. Link crinkled his nose in disgust as the bitterness burned his tongue – but, as it often seemed from his experience, the nastiest of medicines worked the greatest wonders. If the flavor was any indication, Rhett would be cured in no time.

“That’s heinous!” Link shouted, baring his teeth in a smile. “I couldn’t imagine taking down another bite of that, let alone the whole bag – gosh, be thankful you don’t have a weak stomach, man.”

Rhett retrieved the spoon from Link and fiddled with it in his fingers before sticking it reluctantly back into the bag. “Yeah, I guess,” he muttered, swirling the spoon. “It’s gonna take a lot more willpower than I’d like to put forth if I want to fulfill Robin’s guidelines, but I suppose it’s worth the benefits. Strange how I have to suffer in order to dig myself outta this rut,” his brow fell.

“That’s the price you pay, brother,” Link insisted with simplicity. “We’re gonna be more careful from here on out, alright? When you start getting healthy again we’re gonna keep the ball rolling. You have what it takes to get better, Rhett – I know it – I’m just worried you don’t have the patience.”

With that, Rhett could only shrug. “I think my biggest problem is trying to convince myself the recovery’s worth it,” he admitted.

Link sighed. Instead of chastising his friend for the manner with which he looked at life, he opted to share the perspective. “I know what you mean,” he empathized as best he could, despite being only somewhat able to understand how the other man felt. “We just need to… to spark your incentive. You’ve got an addictive personality, man – once you start, you can’t stop. I can only imagine that’s how it’ll be once you start to feel human again – I bet you’ll feel so fresh.”

“You’re probably right,” Rhett considered. He shoveled another bite quickly into his mouth, learning from the last to swallow the substance whole – a talent of his which always astounded Link, as the small man instinctively chewed everything from steak to pudding. Rhett portrayed a fleeting expression of repugnance, but hastily fixed his gaze on his companion. “It’s easier the second time.”

They continued eating in nonchalance, their conversations light for the most part – a piece of their relationship Link had nearly forgotten, yet at the same time yearned for. Tears and bloodshed had become a constant, almost so much that the long stretches of silence were bright patches in their otherwise dolorous days. Rhett’s eyes were cheery and dry, even with the cracked skin that surrounded them. Though every other hair poking out from his beard was grey, there was a youthful semblance about the blond that struck Link with wistfulness. The lines on his face disappeared and became a smooth plane. His eyebrows were vibrant, glowing with their chestnut hue. His hair brimmed with color – sandy blond, peppered with golden highlights and surrounded by a white radiance that exclaimed livelihood. His previously emaciated cheeks were filled out, not a bone in sight anywhere on his body. His red, irritated eyes were now white like snow, each containing a glistening grey iris – a color Link had come to fall in love with. There was an impish mole to the left of his top lip…

But all of that, of course, was in Link’s head. Aging had always been a horrifying concept to him – in the past because he and Rhett were entertainers and very much relied on their appearances in order to be perceived as such; the mere thought of his hair greying had sent shivers down his spine. To see a comment about it would have been borderline devastating.

However, in their present, aging was more than that – far more. Greying beards and deepening wrinkles were only symbols of time by that point, like mile markers in their lives. They were getting old. Their bodies could no longer withstand what they used to, which was evident in the
plethora of issues that plagued them both. The only direction their health would be going in the long run was south – and that was an admission Link detested to make, but with the unstoppable and irreversible force of time, it was just something he had to accept.

Yet, Rhett harbored a fire in his soul that was purely inextinguishable. Like a burning torch, he shared the flame with Link, and together they powered through whatever was presented to them until their bodies inevitably gave out. When Link felt his fire going dry, he would lean on Rhett, and the hungry flames would once again devour his heart as though they’d been a part of him for decades. He was suffocated by their warmth. Their love. Their power.

The thing about Rhett was this – his mind remained constantly in overdrive, in wakefulness and sleep alike. He had big dreams and big plans, and nobody on earth could convince him that any task was too much. Rhett was an idea-driven craftsman who thrived on concepts and creativity – and any outlet he could find through which to channel his thoughts, he would use until it was fried.

Rhett knew deep down that his job on earth was nowhere near finished – he had to, right? He was hardly old enough to consider death (at least in the olden days of modern medicine, which, granted, had long diminished with the post-apocalyptic winds) – there was no way he’d done and accomplished all that he’d desired. Rhett didn’t believe in ceilings or complacency…

He loved his work. Link knew he did. Perhaps, Link thought in passing, the man had simply lost hope in things returning to normal in any sense of the word. Of course they’d never get their studio back, and of course they’d never retrieve their years of projects and music – but the future was wide open with unforeseen opportunity.

Pinpointing the exact reason Rhett had seemed to give up was a task too daunting for Link to give much thought to. He’d expended so much emotional energy the past few days it would have been nearly impossible for him to determine with much accuracy, anyway. Things were messy – it was like dissolving salt into water and attempting to separate the two. Counterintuitive.

The bottom line was that Link ultimately knew his brother’s feelings up and down, left and right, forwards and backwards, any time and any situation. Rhett didn’t want to die – he was only tired of putting forth the effort required to live, and understandably so. The bitter taste of manufactured vitamins lingered like acid on Link’s tongue.

It was when his thoughts had entirely consumed him that the small man was whipped back into reality by a strong set of fingers that intertwined with his own. He looked to his left, only to see his best friend staring back at him with the same fondness. Rhett’s eyes were large with concern, and his mouth hidden behind a furling mustache.

“Are you okay?” he said at last, his brow arched.

Link didn’t respond immediately. Instead, he took a moment to evaluate the scene – his eyes traveled first to Rhett, whose powerful gaze never relented. Secondly, he looked down at their hands, locked together by the bond of commitment they’d made so many years ago with the blood oath, the scars still lingering in their palms. With tears breaching his waterline, Link then traced his vision down to the table, where amongst the pieces of drywall lay a polished silver spoon accompanied by a Ziploc bag that had been entirely drained of its contents. Rhett had eaten every last bite.

The brunet’s mouth fell open at the sight – and before he had time to craft a vocal response, he began to weep with an overwhelming gladness. The recovery that had once seemed so far away – unattainable – there it sat, a thief in the night, staring back at him with open eyes and consoling hope. In his state of ecstasy, Link hardly noticed his companion had enveloped him in a loving
embrace, whispering carefully into his ear:

“*Oh, Link… Shh. You’re okay. You’re okay.*”

When consciousness fully hit him, Link wrapped both of his arms around Rhett’s narrow torso, his face buried tight against his chest.

“I’m so proud of you, Rhett…” Link finally declared. “*Every single day.*”
“This is the last night we’re spending here.”

Rhett made the declaration later on in the evening, the sun partially engulfed by the horizon as he and Link stood outside watching it set, just like a glowing stone. The smaller of the two looked up to his friend in acknowledgement, noticing a strong, orange glint in his gaze – flecks of sunlight pricked each of his eyes and painted the sky’s palette on Rhett’s sclera, pinks and yellows alike mixing to reflect the most vibrant hues of the universe. As the colors danced and shimmered, Link all but tasted their dominance. Only then did he find that the sunset could be even more alluring.

“You think you’ll feel good enough by the morning?” he doubtfully asked; it was difficult for Link to imagine his companion wholly cured from the previous days’ dilemmas, but trusted him to handle himself with consideration.

Rhett shrugged, not removing his eyes from the sky. “Maybe,” he guessed on a whim. “If I don’t, I’ll at least be well enough to not keel over or something, if that’s what you’re afraid of. Lately I’ve just been tired.”

Tired, by that point, was an irreversible constant – and while they never grew fully accustom to it, the condition was always placed on their minds’ shelves. Even so, it was a persuasive enough point to convince Link that, perhaps, it was time for their journey to continue – they couldn’t wait too much longer or else winter would set in and surely make its mark. Link felt an onset of what felt like pins pricking his eyes at the mention of tiredness, and before much longer he began to wobble in his stance. “I think we both just need a good night’s sleep,” he suggested, followed appropriately by a yawn.

It was then that the large man twitched his gaze to look at Link, an expression of satisfaction on his face. Hobbling over to his companion, Rhett threw his arms around Link’s chest and rested his chin atop his head. As the night grew closer, so did the millions of stars that graciously shared their light with the dusty earth, bouncing off the edges of rocks that littered the horizon. Rhett’s warm embrace contrasted with the increasingly cool winds, whipping Link’s skin like sheets of ice. His teeth began to chatter.

By instinct, the blond rubbed circles on Link’s shoulders in an effort to create friction on his bare skin – but it didn’t appear to help all that much, as was evidenced by the beginnings of a shiver that plagued his body. Goosebumps arose on his arms and almost threatened to puncture Rhett’s if they stayed outside much longer – and so, Link tilted his head back until his forehead brushed his friend’s beard. “I’m cold,” he confessed in a whisper.

Rhett didn’t argue. Instead, he inhaled one final breath of the night’s air before releasing Link from his clutch – and from there, he encircled his hand around the small man’s wrist and led him unhurriedly to the house.

By the time Link entered the hallway, his body had succumbed to convulsions – but not terribly enough he was unable to walk, fortunately. He continued following behind Rhett’s grip and was dragged carefully into the bedroom, where he was then taken by the shoulders and placed on the mattress with caution. He held a fond gaze with his companion’s grey eyes, which looked softly back at him with an equivalent adoration. At the same time, Link was able to see the exhaustion on the other man’s face – dark brown circles hung from his eyes like bruises, just beneath a sickly pink waterline. Rhett was crouched at the height of the bed, the top of his head reaching Link’s chin as he shut his eyes and burrowed it there. With his nose pressed against his brother’s tense, shaken chest, he hugged his arms around Link’s waist. “You need anything before we hit the
hay?” he spoke with difficulty, his speech muttered.

Link lifted his palms to cup Rhett’s shoulder blades, gently massaging his back. “I’m fine,” he assured. “Just cold.”

There, Rhett gave him a final, lingering squeeze and retracted his arms from the embrace. He fell back on his knees for a moment, giving Link a once-over before finally pulling himself out of the floor, a bounce to his ankles as he rose to his feet. The brunet watched as Rhett stretched behind him and yanked on the corner of the bed’s warmest blanket – and, reaching his other arm around Link’s, he pulled it up from the mattress and wrapped it around his friend’s shoulders. With a subtle grin, he gently pinned the fabric to Link’s chest. “Is that better?” he asked meekly, his voice smooth like honey.

Before he could even feel the warmth seeping onto his back, Link bit his lip with a smile and nodded. With that, Rhett mirrored his expression and sat down beside him, their thighs touching as he hooked his arm around Link’s waist. The small man’s eyes attempted to shut, but he fought his body’s desire even as his head crashed against Rhett. As dusk began to fall darker and darker, grains of faraway stars littered the sky. If there was one thing to be thankful for in their doom-laden circumstance, Link reasoned, it was moments like this.

“You know,” Rhett spoke suddenly into the frozen air, “with everything that’s changed these past few months, you’re hard-pressed to find a sense of stability. I know it bothers you.”

Link sighed, knowing all too well a long and emotionally draining conversation was about to ensue.

“Yeah,” he admitted. “It does bother me.”

Rhett’s anxiety-laced fingers danced across his hip, pecking along at the bones like scavenging vultures. Something very particular was on Rhett’s mind – and it was a scary concept to take in in spite of the night’s lulling scene. Link’s muscles grew noticeably tense.

“It does me too, buddy,” Rhett responded at last, a slight catch to his voice. “Humans are wired to have an obsession with routine – some more than others, but regardless. Out here we don’t have that. We’re wanderers. We don’t have a place to call home. Every step we take is a whole new world – no consistency, no familiarity… nothing.”

Link’s heart pounded behind a storm of confusion. After a few moments of silence, Rhett realized his friend had nothing to say and continued.

“It’s a wonder it hasn’t driven us nuts. I’m not trying to be funny, man – Our sanity should literally be on the line if you take all this into account.” He paused for deliberation, made evident by a series of exaggerated gestures. “What do you think that means?”

Link’s shiver had long subsided, yet he continued to bury himself into Rhett’s side for warmth. His head flung skeptically up to meet the other’s gaze, hoping to find in his face a reason for his question. “I think it means you think too much,” he finally responded.

Annoyed, Rhett smiled, a mouthful of air pushing past his lips, which glowed a shade of deep peach in the moonlight. “No, man, be serious. Why do you honestly think we’ve made it this far without entirely succumbing to repercussions? Three months, Link. We’ve been going at it for three months –”

“Rhett, I don’t know what you want me to say,” Link sputtered, a tinge of anger in his tone. “I don’t even know what you’re trying to pride us on. We’ve struggled more emotionally than we
have physically, to tell you the truth. In case you’ve forgotten, let me remind you that just a few hours ago I was cradling you in my arms, trying to get you breathe when you were in the midst of some kind of breakdown – for heaven’s sake, I thought you’d completely lost it. And don’t even get me started on my own tribulations.” His thoughts continued to stir in youthful spirit, trying to connect the dots.

“That’s not what I mean, Link,” Rhett breathed, irritated. “I’m talking full-on mental breakdown. Mania. Brother, we’re a far stretch from the worst state of mind we could be in. I’ve just – I’ve been thinking about those psychological horror documentaries I used to watch with my kids. The ones where people get stranded at sea or in the desert or what have you – they absolutely lose their minds. Then there’s those post-catastrophe accounts, like Hiroshima and Napoleon’s Russian Campaign and the Donner Party – what do you think’s the difference? Why did all the victims of those disasters go absolutely haywire when we’re out here as clear-headed as we can possibly be?”

Link was so exhausted his breathing had begun to slow – and accordingly, his reply was irritable. “I don’t know, Rhett,” he grumbled into the man’s shoulder. “I don’t think those people lost it out of disrupted routine, though, or whatever you’re trying to say. They lost it ‘cause each individual circumstance was so brutal it led to desperate measures.” By that point, Link’s eyes had hopelessly shut. He felt Rhett’s mellow shrug from behind his head.

“I’d venture to say our situation’s pretty brutal. We lost everything, man – our families, our houses, our business…”

“Well Rhett, what do you think it is?” Link finally snapped. “You’re obviously trying to tell me something – just spit it out.”

A stretch of silence followed Link’s rebuke, and for a moment he was convinced that he’d upset the other man. Just when he opened his mouth to apologize, however, his breath paused – although they were surrounded by the midnight’s black hues, Link was somehow able to feel the warmth of his brother’s smile as it radiated like sunshine on his scalp.

“You’re as blunt as you’ve always been,” Rhett said endearingly.

“Some things never change.”

Another pause – but this time, it was filled with the sensation of Rhett’s lips pressing slowly into the base of his hairline. It was an expression of kindness and unconditional adoration, and Link fell for it every single time. His lips upturned into a goofy smile – *and thank God it was too dark for Rhett to see.*

“What do *I* think it is?” the soft-hearted man reiterated. “I think it’s the fact that we’ve got each other, Link. I think we both have that instinctual need for a place to call home – and we find it within the constancy of our friendship.”

That was hard to argue with.

The words made Link’s heart flutter – he felt the truth behind them, and they lifted every ounce of his soul from the ground and made him buoyant with gladness. “Aw, Rhett,” he faintly whispered, a vague grit to his voice. It was impossible for the two to be pressed physically closer to one another, and while the reality made his heart ache, Link’s spirit caught afire once again by the flame that surged through his friend’s body. They were connected in an indescribable way – each day that had led up to the first day of first grade was simply a countdown to the moment the two would meet, and only then did their lives gain meaning and their eyes glow with purpose. Even at the age of six, they both knew they’d culminated something everlasting.
The one thing Link noticed that stuck out more than any other aspect of their relationship was that he never grew tired of Rhett – their love for one another was evergreen, as though they were attached at the soul. They’d spent their whole lives tangled together like a ball of twine, never knowing anything outside of their dreams. Dreams were their reality. That’s why, Link reasoned, they traveled so far, and created so many incredible things, and amassed the undivided attention of millions of people across the globe. It started as the devotion to one another and very quickly spiraled into something more beautiful than either of them could have ever asked for.

Link had nearly fallen asleep, but was suddenly jolted awake simply out of the concept he wasn’t lying down – he was still pressed firmly into Rhett’s side, the man’s arm slung around his back and infecting him with a flood of charity. The brunet was entirely lost in the embrace as it engulfed him with the power of the ocean, relentless yet calming.

“Link?”

At the sound of his name, the small man snapped out of his trance and lifted his head. “Yeah?”

“Are you sleepy?”

“Mhm.”

Rhett stifled a laugh by biting his lip. “You’re precious,” he remarked with sentiment. Rhett then pulled his arm from Link’s waist and instead encircled it around his shoulders. “Get some sleep, brother. Tomorrow’s gonna be a long day.”

In a final maneuver, Link arose from the other man’s side and swept a hand through his greasy, tangled hair. Rhett kept a slight grip on him as he backed onto the mattress and fell victim to the comfort he found within the blankets. Not too much time passed before Rhett, too, collapsed into the mess of sheets. He faced Link, who couldn’t help but burrow himself so he was once again trapped in his friend’s arms – still skin and bones, but recovering, even as the sands of time worked fervently against their favor.

“Good night, Link,” he whispered. “I love you.”

Link’s heart grew warm – and with a great suddenness, he thrust his arms around Rhett and pulled him as tightly as he physically could, his eyes pricked with tears. With his face pressed into the fabric of his brother’s hoodie, Link’s speech was muffled – yet the lifelong devotion still emanated as clearly as it ever had:

“I love you too, Rhett. With all of my heart.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

TW: Mentions of death

OCTOBER 01, 201X

It was hardly the crack of dawn when Link awoke that morning, and his eyes stung with a powerful exhaustion.

It was hunger that had driven him into consciousness, shredding through his stomach in horrendous, rumbling waves – but he was trapped within Rhett’s embrace, making it impossible to move without waking the man. Link craned his neck to view his friend and noticed just how heavily he was sleeping, his eyes softly shut behind a thoughtfully furrowed brow, which indicated that he was in the midst of a dream. Despite the emptiness clawing at his stomach, Link opted to let him sleep, as he looked far too tired to be jostled awake at such an hour – especially on the morning they intended to set off. Rhett’s snoring was light and somehow lulling, and miraculously Link was able to doze off once more.

In just a few minutes, though, he woke up again – but this time, he found that he’d been released for the most part. Rhett’s forearm still rested atop his hip, but not so much that Link was unable to escape. Gingerly, he swept the blond’s hand from his side and scooted forward just enough to press the heel of his palm into the mattress and push himself into an upright position. As he made it to his feet, Link yanked the blanket ever so carefully out from under his friend’s thighs and wrapped it like a cloak around his chilled shoulders. He glanced back at Rhett before exiting the room to make sure he hadn’t disturbed him – and luckily, he saw that the man was still endearingly curled up with his back against the wall, sound asleep. Link tiptoed into the hallway.

Through the dilapidated ceiling, Link could see the sun inching higher and higher into the sky. It was still cold, however – he clutched the blanket at his chest in an effort to quell his shivering, but mostly to no avail. Barefoot, he stepped into the kitchen, regretting the decision immediately as his toes curled above the frozen tile floor – but he pressed on until he was met with the pantry, wherein he discovered a clipped down bag of Goldfish crackers. Languidly, Link divided the cloak with his hand and reached for the bag, and upon snatching it from the shelf he turned on his heel to race for the hallway, whose carpeted floors were much more forgiving.

A handful of Goldfish was really all it took to appease his stomach, partially because they were stale and stuck like gum to the roof of his mouth. Link was dissatisfied with the find and subsequently tossed the bag to the floor, watching the crackers disperse atop the ashen carpet. With nothing else to be done until Rhett awoke, he swept a hand through his hair and squatted down to the ground himself, lying down against the wall and hugging his knees to his chest. In only a few minutes, he drifted back into sleep.

It was quite a while before the final time Link awoke that morning, and his eyes fluttered open to daylight. He was welcomed into consciousness by the gentle caress of his brother’s hand as Rhett slid a thumb beneath his jaw, raking across the stubble that Link tried so hard to rid his face of. With nothing else to be done until Rhett awoke, he swept a hand through his hair and squatted down to the ground himself, lying down against the wall and hugging his knees to his chest. In only a few minutes, he drifted back into sleep.

It was quite a while before the final time Link awoke that morning, and his eyes fluttered open to daylight. He was welcomed into consciousness by the gentle caress of his brother’s hand as Rhett slid a thumb beneath his jaw, raking across the stubble that Link tried so hard to rid his face of. Upon seeing the blond from under the risen sun, he could only stare – Rhett’s expression was angelically lit, but it contained a thick note of worry.
“Is everything okay?” the large man spoke, hardly above a whisper. His eyes were worn.

Link blinked a few times before he responded, unable to see clearly no matter how hard he tried to focus. “Yeah – I fell asleep,” he said, propping himself up on his elbow.

For a moment, Rhett didn’t move – he was on one knee with his arm outstretched and resting on Link’s neck, the sun illuminating his outline with a rich glow. Instead of bludgeoning the other man with questions, he grabbed at something beside his knee, which glimmered in the light as it moved, and placed it cautiously onto Link’s face – and suddenly, he was able to see.

“I found these in the floor this morning,” Rhett said, gesturing to the glasses. “You might try being a little more careful with where you put things.”

“Shut up,” Link broke into a grin, a stark radiance reflecting from his expression.

He was rewarded with the mirrored smile of his best friend, whose teeth had been bared from behind a furling mustache. Rhett scooted inwards and cupped his palm behind Link’s back, his touch consoling as it relieved the tension in the small man’s body. “Sorry,” he softly began, rubbing circles into Link’s ribs. “It’s just kind of alarming to walk in the hallway and see you curled up in the corner with a bag of Goldfish crackers scattered all over the floor – what happened there, man?”

As he began to recount the morning’s events in his mind, Link could only laugh at himself – but before telling Rhett, he pushed himself away from the ground and sat up against the papered wall behind him, urging his companion to do the same. It was warm enough then for Link to remove the blanket from his torso, and so he peeled it away from his shoulders and spread it across their thighs. In a final maneuver, he pressed himself even closer to Rhett, nudging the man’s arm until it begrudgingly fell behind his bare shoulders. Link smiled and bit his lip.

With a spontaneity the brunet was sure had long disappeared from his friend, Rhett reached around with his opposite hand and lightly slapped Link in the chest. “I’m serious – What’s up with the crackers?”

The only response Link could contrive was a laugh that he stifled as his nose squished liberally into Rhett’s shoulder. “I woke up hungry and got tired on my way back to the bedroom,” he reasoned aloud – but, while it was the whole truth, only then was Link able to perceive the ridiculousness of the situation. A suppressed snicker flew from his nostrils, causing Rhett to flinch. Link was practically able to feel his companion’s eyes rolling above him. Instead of chastising the brunet, though, Rhett stroked his fingers through the man’s hair, brushing out tangles when he hit them as a tired but entertained laugh escaped his lips. “You’re quite the character, you know that?” From the proximity of his voice, Link could tell that his friend had positioned himself in such a way that his mouth sat just above his scalp – and in the intimate gesture, he felt a hot fog on his hairline.

“Mm,” Link hummed, a smile snaking onto his face. His eyes were still heavy, but they were approaching wakefulness, slowly but surely. He remained silently pressed into his brother’s side for several minutes – and the only sound he heard was that of Rhett’s breathing, which was calm and slow as it filtered through his lungs. Link tossed an arm around his slim torso and enveloped him in a loose embrace.

The serenity was short-lived, however – Rhett was inevitably forced to change positions, as his back would begin to hurt if he remained sedentary for too long. With a discomfited groan sounding in his throat, the blond thrust his free arm into the carpet and pushed himself away from the wall with Link still tucked against his chest. The smaller man’s attention quickly adapted,
though, and he arose from his companion, moving his hand so it hovered at the base of Rhett’s ribs. Link’s brow folded with concern.

“Are you okay?”

Rhett winced and gritted his teeth – a sign of pain so immense the typically stoic man was incapable of concealing it. He didn’t respond for a moment, presumably because he was trying to collect his composure, but groaned once more before hanging his head between his knees. “My back,” he managed to say, his voice so low Link could barely hear.

With his other hand, Link traveled firmly up Rhett’s spine and applied a palm’s worth of pressure just below his neck. The large man heaved what sounded to be a sigh of relief – yet, he didn’t move. His chin was tucked into his knees, where his arms had neatly folded. Link was puzzled as to how he found comfort in such a position, but continued to massage the area the best he knew how.

“Doesn’t bending over make it worse?” the brunet finally inquired, watching as Rhett’s brow remained furrowed and his eyes clenched shut.

Slowly, Rhett turned his head so that his gaze met Link’s, his eyes glassy and pink. “Not necessarily,” he rasped. “I’ll be alright. It’s just if I don’t move for too long – it really starts to hurt.”

Link’s heart grew soft and began to ache for Rhett. “I’m sorry,” he whispered – and suddenly, without realizing what he was doing himself, he swiftly maneuvered his arms in such a way that he hugged his friend from behind. His hands were clasped beneath Rhett’s ribs, hooking under the jagged bones even with the thickness of his jacket. “Can I do anything for you? I can bring you something to eat if you want to hang out here for a few minutes and rest your back – are you sure you’re okay?” Thoughts shot around in Link’s mind and escaped his mouth just as sporadically, his words jumbled as he muttered them into his brother’s shoulder.

From the side, Link was able to see a gratuitous smile perched upon Rhett’s lips. “Yeah, I’m alright. You’re awful good to me,” he commended, his sleepy grin widening below his beard. “I need to walk around though, if you wouldn’t mind helping me up.”

Link allowed his forefinger to trace the outline of his friend’s chest, then cupped his hands at the top of his shoulders. “Of course,” he stammered, backing hastily away from Rhett before moving to his knees and propelling himself into the air. He stepped once forward and crouched to the other man’s level, extending both hands towards him. Rhett placed both hands in Link’s and was cautiously lifted to a standing position. As the blond towered over his smaller companion, he braced himself with his wrists pressed into Link’s shoulders – and despite the support, he still slouched, his eyes clenched tightly shut just above the other man’s forehead. Upon further inspection, Rhett was holding his breath.

“Hey,” Link spoke, his voice soft as velvet. He lifted his arms and clasped them at Rhett’s side to offer any bit of support he could in the position. He didn’t want to move so as not to risk hurting the blond even more – but to his surprise, Rhett crumpled in his embrace, his elbows hooking at Link’s neck so his arms fell behind his back. The smaller man’s chin rested atop his head which had gracelessly fallen, hanging to the ground in agony – and all Link could do was hold him there as his impossibly light weight crashed into him.

“I’m sorry…” Rhett whispered with excruciation. His breathing had thankfully resumed, but it was shallow and erratic.

Seeing Rhett in so much pain at his hands was a terrible thing for Link’s conscience – and so his
arms fell and clasped his lower back, pulling him into a steady hug. “*Gosh, Rhett, don’t be sorry,*” he spoke reproachfully against the side of his head. “*You’re gonna be fine. I’ve got you.*” It was a promise he didn’t entirely believe himself, but regardless, it flew from his lips at the speed of bullet. Rhett’s hair dripped with sweat and oil, brushing against Link’s neck and leaving behind trails of moisture.

Surely enough, after several moments of not moving at all, Rhett slowly arose to his initial stance – and upon reaching his unabashed height of six foot seven, Link could hear the ruthless cracking in his spine. Instinctively, he wanted to reach out and painlessly pull his companion back against his body, but refrained as he began to see the adamancy in Rhett’s expression. The large man’s teeth had sunk into the flesh of his lip, but he stood nonetheless, his only assistance a hand that remained cupped on Link’s shoulder. With his other arm akimbo, Rhett inhaled a sharp breath. “*Damn, I forgot how much this hurts,*” he grimaced. Among the recent stress, Link had almost forgotten that his friend had two slipped discs – but as he stood before him, the sight of Rhett’s agony-stricken body branded into his memory, he was sure the fact would forever ring in his mind with urgency.

It wasn’t long before Link’s sympathy translated into a rationale – and, with an admonishing squint, he crossed his arms. “Listen, Rhett – If you’re that bad, we can’t leave today. I’m not gonna let you hurt yourself. It can wait, alright?”

The taller man could only shake his head. “It’s October. We’re not in SoCal anymore. It’s gonna start getting so cold we won’t be able to fare it – and with the way this rain’s been in and out, there’s no way in hell we can keep a fire burning if we get stranded somewhere without shelter. Unless we leave *today,* we’re not gonna stand a chance, Link.” There was a horrifying, self-assured tone to Rhett’s voice, and the facts caused Link’s heart to race. At once, his anxious gaze darted to the floor.

“It was cold last night,” the small man admitted – he was kept warm only by his and Rhett’s shared heat beneath several blankets, and still, it wasn’t enough. Link shook his head defeatedly, a lump rising in his throat. “I’m at crossroads, brother… Your back’s not gonna walk a hundred and fifty more miles the way it is. *Look at yourself,*” he sadly gestured.

Rhett sighed, his eyes moistening in the dry air. “I’ve already made a vow that I’m gonna do everything I can to make it out of this alive. Here are the facts, Link – if we end up staying here any longer, it’s the end for both of us. We absolutely cannot run the risk of spending so much as an extra millisecond here. The temperatures are dropping fast and the only place we can go to be safe is a hundred and fifty miles north – and damn it all if I don’t give it my best try before I find complacency in waiting around another week just to die of hypothermia. We didn’t make it three months in absolute chaos by giving into little ailments that don’t matter in the long run. Yeah, I’ve got two ruptured discs. But who cares, Link? Who cares? If my spine snaps in half fifteen feet outside of this house, at least I can die knowing I didn’t give up. At that point, death can have me ‘cause it earned me. If I can help it, I’m not laying around here any longer than I have to, because brother, I didn’t set out with the intention of making it a few months and dying on my best friend. I don’t want you to lose me – but for heaven’s sake, in the scenario we don’t head for the university in record time, we’re both goners.” Rhett paused, cocking his head to the side before opting to finish his thoughts. It was a difficult conversation, but it needed to be had. “Link, there’s no doubt in my mind that you have the stamina to make it. You’re plenty strong enough. The questionable factor is me – the next few days may very well be our last together. Now, I don’t know that for sure… but there’s a pretty high possibility. I don’t want you to worry about me if that happens, okay? Can you promise me you’ll go on without me if it comes down to that?”

Link’s heart all but jittered in his chest, and it sank to his stomach with a dead weight. So many words burned his tongue begging to be said, but he knew each one was futile – Rhett was right.
His chin began to quiver at the thought of being left alone. When the tears pricked his eyes and the erratic gasps filled his throat, Link faced the floor in an attempt to gather his composure. “I don’t want it to come down to that,” he finally whispered, turning his reflective eyes upon Rhett.

“Well, it very well might,” the blond reached his hand so it cupped Link’s jaw, his thumb dragging down the stubble. “I’m… I’m hurt pretty bad, brother. More than I’ve let on the past few days. I’ve been trying to deal with it, but I… I’m finally at the point where I just can’t hide it anymore,” he confessed with a choke. Rhett’s guilty eyes flicked downward and landed on the opposite wall, studying the dust and cracks with an aching conscience.

The news forced Link’s hands to ball into fists as anguish and betrayal washed over him. There, a pang of distrust galvanized his soul and turned it to stone – and so did his heart, which crumbled like a lump of charcoal inside his chest. Sorrow turned to anger as water turned to wine, twisting in Link’s gut with a strength so indomitable it couldn’t be reckoned with – and before he could even control his actions, he came mere inches of striking Rhett directly in the jaw, only missing as a result of being blinded by his own tears. *Everything was red. Everything was fire.*

“What the hell?!” Rhett shouted as the seething man turned his back – the only thing his mind would allow him to do to prevent hurting his companion. Link tuned out the remainder of Rhett’s words and headed straight for the wall away from the man so as to create a distance between the two; it was all he could think to do in order to preserve their safety.

“**DAMN IT, RHETT!**” he yelled back, enraged. “**Why didn’t you tell me things weren’t okay?! WHY DON’T YOU EVER TELL ME?!”**

“**LINK, CALM DOWN!**” Rhett demanded. “What’s wrong with you, man?! Why are you so upset?”

For just a moment, time halted to a complete stop. Link was jolted back into reality by the reigns his best friend had placed on him so many years ago – and despite their decades of friendship, that control never faded. The initial shout begging him to calm down was followed by a much sweeter plea – one backed by a mixture of fear and empathy. Link was taken by surprise when Rhett’s tone converted to a genuine concern, and it was at that point the particles of his heart rejoined and pounded more vibrantly than ever. *He’s worried about me. He’s worried about me,* his mind kept repeating.

*I’m worried about me.*

Three deep breaths and the overwhelming tenseness in Link’s muscles was relieved. At last, he found the audacity to make eye contact with Rhett, though he was able to feel the culpability in his expression. Nonetheless, he swallowed down the golf ball-sized lump in his throat and prepared for his friend a well-deserved apology.

“**God Rhett, I’m so sorry,**” he merely whispered into the space between them. It would never be enough.

As Link’s head fell down into his lonesome hands, the sound of slow footsteps on carpet scuffed closer and all but collided into his toes. He didn’t even have to look up to know it was Rhett who’d slung an arm over his shoulders and pressed his lips onto his temple – and truthfully, it was the greatest comfort Link could have ever been granted. Rhett was so, terribly forgiving…

“**Listen to me, sweetheart,**” the blond spoke, his voice loving and meek. “I love you. I’ll do everything I can if it means never leaving your side… but I can’t promise you I’m well enough to pull through. This is something we have to talk about. Poor thing, you’re in so much denial –”
“Of course I’m in denial!” Link broke in with a sob caught in his throat. “You told me you were okay. You told me you were getting better. I thought you were gonna make it, but now, the morning we’re supposed to leave – the morning we have to leave – you’re dropping the bombshell you might not get through after all. Only now are you telling me you’re in so much pain you can barely stand to move. Now you’re telling me you’ve been faking it all this time and the only reason you’re not anymore is because you’re hurt so bad you can’t. Congratulations, Rhett, you’ve managed to break my heart… Gosh, I know that sounds selfish. But after all, you’re the one who says I’m too hopeful. All you’ve done by keeping things from me is enabled my optimism – I had such high hopes, and now they’re starting to crash down at my feet. You know what? That’s a good thing, isn’t it? Now I’ve got a realistic view of the world, just like you, just like Rhett! Well, I’m standing here crying my eyes out over it. You’ve obviously taken the wrong approach, trying to appeal to my thought process. I’m sorry for screaming in your face and losing my mind and almost punching you, Rhett – I am. But it’s not my fault for being upset when you’ve been lying to me about something important. You mean infinitely more to me than I mean to myself. You’re my entire world. You’re my best friend, my brother, my sun and moon – my greatest joy and my greatest worry, and the only thing in this post-apocalyptic storm that’s given me a sense of home. You take all that and you twist it and negate it until the only thing left in this world I love is gone, and that’s the best I can describe how I feel right now. It’s like someone’s squeezing the life out of me. You’re squeezing the life out of me, Rhett. I love you more than I could even begin to describe. I can’t be numb to this. I can’t…”

“Shh,” the taller hushed him, arms circling Link and squeezing with all his might. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, brother. I didn’t. I’m sorry it’s worked out that way – but listen to me for a second, okay? If it was just me out here, I wouldn’t have even bothered making it this far. I’d have given up months ago.” Rhett paused for a moment, cradling Link as closely as his back would allow. “You know I don’t do this for me, don’t you, Link? Every step I take is for you. My persistence is yours. I’m doing the very best I can, and I’ll continue doing that as long as I’m physically able… I know you don’t want to live without me, buddy. You’ve made that clear. Listen – I promise I’m not giving up if I can help it. As long as you’re stuck in this hell, I want to be by your side, and I want to be the one who laughs with you despite the mess, and I want to be the one who takes care of you when you’re sick. Let me tell you something, brother – look at us right now. You’re losing it and I’m doing my damn best to talk you through it and hold you together. And yeah, it breaks my heart… but there’s nowhere else on earth I would rather be. I want to get you through days like this – and if that means losing my life, then so be it. At least I was there until the very end.”

The very end, Link’s mind repeated bitterly.

Was the end really so nigh?

Tears and snot sloshed down Link’s face and sank into the fabric of Rhett’s jacket. The concept of being left alone hung in his thoughts, never to be erased, and thus a violent chain of sobs erupted from his throat and coursed through the other man’s hollow chest. He clung to Rhett with a vicelike grip.

“Oh, Link,” the stable man whispered, caressing his friend’s hair. “Stay with me. Take a deep breath, you’re okay.”

The advice, while cliché, worked like a charm. Link was slowly able to regain his composure, though his chin still quivered as he tried to speak. His breathing was capricious and choppy as it heaved in fitful waves through his lungs, inhaling Rhett’s nature-crafted scent in the process. “I’m sorry,” he finally choked out. “I’m just so scared…”

In response, Rhett sniffed just enough to clear his nasal passage – perhaps, Link mused, he’d given into emotion himself. “Don’t be scared,” he softly persuaded, then rocking the brunette back
and forth, even from their standing position. As Link’s body swayed, he couldn’t help but be reminded of the sea – he wondered if the ocean was still out there, or if perhaps it’d been baked away by the blistering sun. He didn’t dwell on the thought, though, for it was simply too lulling to be held in the trusting confines of Rhett’s arms.

With not much else to be said, Link carefully thrust his hands behind his companion’s back and stroked downwards with finality. There was nothing he could possibly do to better the situation, conversationally or otherwise – so he opted to remain silently in Rhett’s embrace until the blond decided to break it off. It was a comfortable couple of moments in spite of the anxiety that eroded away and Link’s heart and beckoned his soul to come seeping from his bones. There was something absolutely magical about how the proximity of Rhett’s body made him feel at home… something supernatural. Link’s best friend was a nearly ethereal creature – ineffably tall and thoroughly emaciated, but still so much bigger than the vast and broken world that surrounded them.

_He couldn’t lose him. He just couldn’t._

Rhett sighed after a few minutes and nuzzled against Link’s face as if to monitor his vitals. _Heartbeat – palpitating. Breathing – erratic. Blood pressure – through the roof. Anxiety – crippling. Contentment…_

…Flatline.

_Well, a man could never have it all._
Chapter 15

It was the final morning they sat across from one another at the dining table, eye to eye above a smorgasbord of what remained of the pantry.

Link had already taken the liberty of packing away all the food and water he could fit within the limiting confines of their bags, still managing to salvage quite a bit. On the table, he’d tossed an armload of various snacks ranging from Cheez-Its to Little Debbie cakes, followed by two bottles of water. Rhett, of course, had ripped open a new bag of Robin’s vitamin mixture. He found that using it as a dip made it much more bearable – scooping the edge of a stale Dorito into the goop proved to create what he referred to as the ‘golden ratio’. Rhett’s subsequent laughter didn’t erase the dullness in his eyes, however, and neither did it relieve the anxiety in Link’s heart.

“You feeling alright?” he finally caved, taking note of how quickly Rhett had slowed in eating; it was still astonishing to Link how he’d simply lost his voracious appetite after decades of eating everything in plain sight, but hardly acknowledged the fact amid their myriads of other problems. Regardless, he stared deeply at his companion, whose bulging eyes twitched around the room before finally landing in Link’s.

“I’m not exactly sure how I’m supposed to answer that,” Rhett replied genuinely, a trace of shame in his tone.

The confusion in Link’s face only deepened, and as his expression contorted he began to feel the fold between his eyebrows. “What do you mean you’re not sure how to answer that?” his voice was indignant. “I just asked if you were feeling okay. It’s not rocket science, Rhett.”

With cheese-dusted fingers, Rhett began to nervously stroke the side of his beard, avoiding eye contact at all costs. He preluded with a sigh. “It’s because I don’t know what you’re asking, man. I don’t want you to think I’m lying to you or anything…” he began. “I mean, my back’s hurting – but it always is. That’s a constant. Other than that, I guess I’m alright.”

Link frowned, wishing there was something in his ability to give his friend any ounce of comfort. He could kiss his forehead and squeeze his hand and hug him from behind, but he could never thrust the bulging discs back into his spine – and for that reason, he had a case of heartache that just wouldn’t relinquish. The small man reached out to stroke Rhett’s forearm, an air of consolation to his touch.

“I’m sorry, brother,” Link whispered. “I’m just a little worried ‘cause you don’t look like you feel good at all. I wish you weren’t in so much pain.”

Rhett only shrugged, wincing when his shoulders fell back down. “It is what it is,” he said simply, the phrase falling from his lips with grit.

Knowing there wasn’t much more he could get out of the man, Link waded through the thick silence between them and searched through the mess of junk food displayed on the table’s surface. His hand landed first on a pack of Skittles – for a moment he considered, but quickly concluded his irritable stomach would later reject the candy. Link’s eyes shifted across the array. At last, he tore open the slick wrapper of a frosted cake he’d forgotten to name of, shoving it into his mouth in spite of the sugar content. It was dry and crummy, but just sweet enough to be satisfying.

“So what’s the plan?” Link asked, licking the stale frosting from his lips.

Rhett glanced up from the bitter substance before him and shifted subtly in his seat. “For me, I’ve got to finish eating this,” he reminded, gesturing to the bag that sat respectably beneath his spoon. “In a few minutes, we pack up and leave. Simple as that.”
“Mm,” Link hummed. He was the type to always seek out a sense of closure, but didn’t argue when Rhett suggested they hit the road as soon as they could. After all, the nights were only growing colder – even the noontime sun directly overhead wasn’t enough for Link to break a sweat anymore, and in fact, his bare skin chilled slightly in the air. When the breeze halted, his mind pieced together an elaborate list of all the things he wished to take from the house – a bottle of aloe perched in the corner of the bedroom, a couple of ashen but fluffy blankets to keep them warm throughout the night, the four remaining bags of Robin’s vitamin brew, a bottle of painkillers the doctor had mistakenly left behind on the counter, and a battered red wagon from behind the house amongst other miscellaneous items he could fit therein. Perhaps, he thought, they could throw Rhett’s bag in the wagon – he didn’t need any extra stress on his already injured back, especially if it was preventable. With the plan in mind, Link could only pray the wheels would budge, let alone glide across the ground with ease. The next few days would certainly be tumultuous… but he was prepared to do everything in his ability to make it to the university with Rhett by his side, even if it meant carrying him for a hundred and fifty miles. Link would do anything – his loyalty was boundless.

As Rhett finished the final few bites of his food, his eyes shot imperiously in Link’s direction. Eyebrows arched, he swallowed the mixture without tasting, a blend of eagerness and pain in his face. “You about ready to hit the road?”

Rhett hardly finished the sentence before an immediate rush of nausea began to bubble in Link’s stomach – he felt the pallid flush on his face as the mawkish flavor of bile coated his throat, and at once, he clenched his eyes shut in an effort to conceal the ill feeling. It was the sudden onset of anxiety that had made him so sick and seemingly halted his digestive system to a complete stop, leaving him to hang his head to the ground. A groan sounded from his throat.

It wasn’t long before a calloused set of fingers gripped Link’s arm, causing him to fix his gaze on Rhett. The blond’s tired eyes brimmed with worry. “What’s wrong?” he asked, a soft depth to his voice.

Before attempting to respond, Link swallowed down the acidic lump that had formed in his throat – it burned like a lit match, setting fire to every inch of his esophagus until it finally landed in the pit of his stomach and extinguished. He quickly uncapped the water bottle to his left and stuck the nozzle to his lips, downing just enough of the liquid to calm his blazing throat. It was truly ridiculous how heavily his nerves sometimes fazed him, never failing to anticipate the worst from a situation. Link’s heart thudded.

“Link?”

For the first time in ages, the brunet convinced himself that it was better to lie about his stability than to hold up their plans – so instead of spilling his anxieties onto his friend, Link arose all at once from the table and pointed his toes to the wall. “I… need a few minutes. You stay here and rest your back,” he pleaded just above a whisper.

“Link –”

“Please,” Link demanded, his tone bitter. We’re wasting time as we speak.

Heartache pounded through the small man’s body, coursing through his veins with a dejected throb. He could no longer look at his companion, for the mere sight of his impossibly battered body was enough to trigger within Link a wave of sympathy that all but knocked him face down into the floor. Rhett had opened his mouth to argue, or perhaps to persuade his friend into talking to him – but, knowing there was no time for such shenanigans as expressing his innermost fear to the only man who could talk him through it, Link promptly stepped out of the room and damned
up the flood of tears behind his eyes.

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Life was brutal and sour.

As he’d planned, Link had dragged the wagon to the front of the house and hauled Rhett’s bag into it, which had been further stuffed by various items the small man retrieved from the home. He stood just outside of what was once the front door and glanced at their luggage – two bags and the red wagon, hopefully containing everything they’d need to get to Salt Lake City. Link spoke a silent prayer before trudging back into the house for the final time and retrieving his friend.

The walk was vaguely sentimental, as the dingy pile of bricks had become their home for many days – but at the same time, Link was glad to say goodbye; there was only so much nostalgia he could harbor for the dust and cracks and crumbling drywall that decorated the walls and carpet. The house’s acrid scent infested his nostrils.

Upon reaching the kitchen, Link was able to see his brother still slouched over the table, supporting himself with his elbows. He hadn’t moved from the spot in the nearly fifteen minutes Link had been gone – which was concerning to say the least. With spring in his step, Link hastened to his companion’s side. There, he placed a hand on Rhett’s back and rubbed in ever so careful circles, just above the afflicted area. “You okay?” he sputtered with ease.

Even after Link had spoken, Rhett didn’t lift his head to look at him – which wasn’t a good sign. Instead, the blond shut his eyes and buried his blistered face into a pair of scrawny fists. “Just a minute, Link,” he forced past his lips as though he’d been punched in the gut. His eyes were watering.

When he saw Rhett’s face, Link couldn’t help but shed a few tears himself. His lip quivered as he continued rubbing Rhett’s back, nerves twisting every which way to bring back the sick feeling – but this time, he opted to ignore it. “Oh gosh, Rhett…” he spoke beneath his breath. “Can I do anything? Can I help you up?”

Rhett shook his head and stuck his index finger into the air – the pain, evidently, was so unreal that he couldn’t bring himself to tell the other man to just wait a moment… and with that, Link expelled a dejected sigh. Crouching to Rhett’s height, the small man slung an arm over his shoulders and dunked his face into his friend’s view, who finally flicked his gaze over to Link. Two bloodshot eyes pierced him like bullets through the heart – and with nothing else to say, he grabbed onto Rhett’s forearm and squeezed with a grounding pressure.

Neither moved or spoke for several seconds. Rhett kept his breathing under control for the most part, though Link could see in his expression that all he wanted to do was yell out in agony. The air between the two was thick and filled with disquietude, Link’s nerves jumbling more and more with each second that passed in silence. Eventually, Rhett removed his hands from his face and slowly lowered his arms to the table – and there, the brunet clasped his fingers around the palm of his companion, waiting patiently for him to say something.

At long last, Rhett parted his lips to speak, shifting his glazed eyes shamefully to the table. “Help me up,” he merely whispered. There was an unmistakable catch in his voice.

Link sighed, his emotional energy completely exhausted – and it was hardly noon. “Okay,
brother,” he exhaled. Instead of offering his hand, Link latched onto Rhett’s bony wrists and pulled his arms around his neck. There, he stood slowly, moving his own arms to his friend’s lower back, so as not to hurt him any worse. He found that Rhett’s skeletal frame was fairly easy to lift, even when the man was hardly helping himself to stand. His feet basically dangled above the ground before landing flat on the tile – and even then, Rhett hardly supported himself. He bit his lip and halfway removed himself from Link, still applying a vast amount of pressure onto the other man’s shoulders with his forearms. With his head hanging to the floor, Rhett groaned, putting forth no effort to camouflage the pain.

“A hundred and fifty miles. Yeah right.”

With the remark, Link couldn’t help but nuzzle into Rhett’s hair, tears streaming down his nose as he kissed the top of his head. “Take it a step at a time, Rhett. I’m not gonna leave you behind.”

When the words escaped his lips, Link almost regretted them. He half expected Rhett to retort with another decree ordering him to move on without him – but, he was pleasantly surprised when, despite the tears that rolled down his cheeks, a smile surfaced on the man’s lips. “Thank you,” he mumbled with gratitude. “I appreciate that, Link.”

Saltwater sloshing down his cheeks, Link pressed his lips once more into Rhett’s hair, sopping with sweat and oil. Thank God he isn’t arguing, he thought to himself – amongst the hundreds of other issues at hand, Link wasn’t sure he’d be able to take it. It was then that the small man shifted ever so slowly in his stance, his hands resting around Rhett’s waist, and coaxed his friend into walking without having to expend all of his energy making sure there wasn’t too much pressure on his spine. It was a method Link had observed in physical therapy – it took much more than a brace or a cane or a walker to carry an injured person from point A to point B. Sometimes it took the assistance of a person…

And as Link came to find out, he liked being that person. He liked knowing that Rhett needed him, though he hated seeing the man in the state he was in. Even with the help of his best friend, the blond had to grit his teeth in order to make it out of the door in a pace much slower than that of baby steps. Even so, Link smiled when they made it outside. It was progress.

Rhett finally got to the point that he was able to stand by himself for the most part. Link took advantage of the fact and zipped his bag open to grab the blue hoodie, which he pulled around his shoulders like a shawl – it was certainly ill-fitting, but it would protect his skin from the sun’s merciless rays. It was then that his eyes flicked over to Rhett, whose exposed skin was scarred from the blisters that had boiled thereon. The tall man was leaned against the house’s exterior with his head resting heavily onto the brick – and Link pitied him, knowing the man was doing his damnedest just to keep himself upright. A wave of sympathy passed through his system at the mere sight...

As he went to zip his bag shut, though, Link spotted the bottle of aloe, which hovered above the rest of the items – perhaps it wouldn’t cure Rhett’s greatest problem, but it would at least alleviate his skin of the burning sensation. He grabbed the bottle with haste and turned on his heel to look at his companion, forming his expression into one of subtle comfort. “Look, I know this isn’t gonna fix you, but I promise it’ll make you feel better,” he spoke softly.

Rhett’s eyes were worn, but he smiled out of obligation. “Robin did advise that,” he recalled. “I’d be better off slathering myself in it than not, I suppose.”

“Yeah,” Link affirmed. Sticking his thumbnail beneath the bottle’s glossy cap, he managed to flip the top open to reveal a singular hole whose edge was embossed into the surface. Instinctively, Link lifted the substance to his nose and squeezed the bottle to propel the scent into his nostrils – pure, unadulterated aloe. “I wonder where Robin gets stuff like this – gosh, it smells like shower
gel!” he remarked.

“Well, Robin’s part of pretty big organization. They probably raided every Wal-Mart in Utah to get stuff like that,” Rhett guessed. “I’m sure the university’s stocked up with all kinds of things that’ll nurse us back to health. I can’t wait to see it.”

Such optimism, Link told himself reproachfully – but he just couldn’t wipe the grin from his lips at Rhett’s positive approach. Whether or not he genuinely expected to make it all the way to their destination, Link couldn’t tell, but he was content with his friend’s words nonetheless. From there, he stepped closer to the other man and pinned his shoulders carefully into the wall. “Don’t move,” he whispered, sweeping the shaggy curls from Rhett’s forehead. Link squeezed a quarter-sized portion of the gel into his palm, placing the bottle in the pocket of his hoodie when he was finished. He first dabbed two fingers into the pool of aloe, then stretched his hand to Rhett’s forehead and rubbed the viscid substance into the man’s skin. Link’s fingers traveled down the bridge of his blistered nose, and finally to the apples of his cheeks, which were especially prominent as they poked out above Rhett’s bashful smile. When his hand’s supply of gel was exhausted, Link rubbed his hands together to rid them of the excess and proceeded to daintily pull the zipper of Rhett’s hoodie. “Let me just get your torso and arms and we’ll call it a day, alright?” he laughed.

“Sounds good,” Rhett confirmed. The large man grabbed at his sleeve and carefully pulled his arm out, slinging the jacket easily down to his opposite foot. Still, he remained with his back against the wall – the only way he could stand comfortably.

Link gave him a once-over, taken aback by the poor condition Rhett’s body was in. His skin had shrunken tightly around his ribs – every bone was visible through the sharp ridges in his chest. His belly caved into his ribcage, navel folded shut from the excess skin that hung from his bones as a result of such rapid weight loss. Red, scabby patches infested his entire torso in such a way that Link would’ve believed he’d been boiled alive – bubbles and pus still shone at the tops of his shoulders, frying in the sun…

Even so, Link tried not to convey the grievance it caused him – he simply smiled and squeezed another mound of aloe into his open hand. This time, however, he tossed the bottle to the ground and scooped half of the gel into Rhett’s chest in one go. Link rubbed in circular motions, covering every inch of the dry skin he was able to see. He made sure to coat Rhett’s arms with caution – he didn’t want to yank too hard in fear of hurting him, and so his movements were steady. When he was nearly finished with the front, Link took a moment to give his friend a proper massage on the shoulders, thrusting the base of his thumb into the collarbone – and Rhett was pleased, as was evidenced by the manner with which his head fell against his brother’s when Link kneaded into his pressure points. His hands crossed many scabs and dimensional scars, but with the lubricative gel, they slid like ice over Rhett’s body. Link could feel the smirk forming on his mouth. “Is that good?” he asked, breath mingling with the other man’s beard.

Sheepishly, Rhett laughed – not a single undertone of pain in his voice, to Link’s relief. “It’s very good,” the blond praised. “The aloe’s doing its job, I’ll say that much. Really takes the edge off the sunburn.”

Sunburn, Link scoffed to himself as his fingers prodded at the flesh and lumps that adorned his friend’s shoulders. Rhett had always bruised like a peach, that much was certain – but his sensitive skin evidently didn’t stop there. Additionally, he had psoriasis, which intensified the sun’s reaction with his skin and painted his body crimson and pink. There were many sizable white flakes in Rhett’s hair which had fallen away from his scalp, which must have burned like fire – but in spite of it all, he powered through with an energy greater than Link could have ever fathomed. Rhett was boundless.
“Turn around, brother,” the small man finally whispered. Rhett’s eyes lost their jubilance at the concept of having to move, but the deed had to be done. Assisting himself using Link’s arm, Rhett cautiously swiveled himself around, exposing his bare back to his friend for the first time in days – and what Link saw there was so shocking that he was sent stumbling backwards in fear.

Because of how skinny Rhett was, Link was able to see every bone protruding from his backside – and he was especially alarmed by what stared back at him at face level. There, extending from Rhett’s spine, was a colossal pocket of what appeared to be bone with a diameter of several inches. There was a massive, plum-colored bruise that spanned the area, and it sickened Link to no end – just imagining the torture of the injury was enough to break his heart to pieces. From the looks of it alone, he knew Rhett shouldn’t be able to walk. The pain must have been paralyzing.

Link was only snapped back into reality by the very man who’d caused him to slip away – and with a voice so consoling, how could he ignore it? Rhett’s tone was like honey, fueled by concern despite the ineffable agony he must have been in himself. “What’s the matter, Link? Are you alright?”

The small man cringed at his friend’s words, which felt like acid as they entered his ears. That selfless nature’s gonna kill ‘im, Link thought, sinking his teeth into the flesh of his tongue. Him worrying about me’s gonna kill ‘im.

No longer able to bear the tension between them, Link caved – and at last, the silence was broken. “I see them…” he stammered, horror trembling in his lips.

Another pause. Finally, he heard Rhett sigh, almost exasperated. “You see what, Link?” he replied, his tone terribly soft. For a few seconds, everything was silent, even the dilapidated world that surrounded them – but before too long, Rhett was forced into getting his friend to talk to him. As though Link were a startled child, the blond’s pitch rose. “You see the discs?” he asked slowly.

“Mhm.”

There was a catch in Rhett’s next breath, which indicated both physical labor and emotional unease. “Listen, brother – what you’re seeing is inflammation from the injury, not the bones themselves. It… I’m sure it looks a lot worse than it is. I’m feeling oka–”

“Don’t give me that,” Link broke in with such a stern gravity he was sure the space between them would crack. Although there was a sob begging to be released from his throat, he pressed on. “Don’t you dare lie to me again, Rhett. I can hear it in your voice.” Not an inkling of sarcasm evaded Link’s lips.

Rhett slowly looked towards the ground with a guilt-laden countenance. His shaggy, shoulder-length hair brushed against his back as it fell in tangles on either side of his neck – and he held himself up by only one palm, which he’d pressed into the house. “We’ve already been over this,” he said hoarsely. “I don’t know what else you want me to say, Link. The pain’s atrocious. My back’s killing me. You already know all that, though. I’m not gonna complain about it just to be complaining.”

Eyes welled up with tears, Link shook his head from left to right, despite the fact that the other man was unable to see him. “I don’t know how you’re able to move, brother. It looks so bad –”

“Link, stop it!” the blond snapped. “You’re worrying yourself sick over me and I don’t want to hear it anymore. I’m a grown man, I can look after myself, alright? If it makes you feel better, then I promise that if it comes down to it, I’ll make you spoon-feed me and wait on me hand and foot. I’ll let you know when something’s wrong. Just give me a damn break.”
Link shook at the irritability of his companion – but at the same time, he knew he needed the assurance that Rhett wouldn’t hide anything from him. It was the only aspect of trust that had ever been severed in the history of their relationship, and it was difficult to reconcile - but Link tried his best to remain positive nonetheless. Just like always.

It took several seconds for his nerves to calm, but eventually Link was able to gather his composure. “You’re right, Rhett,” he confessed. “I’m sorry, I – I’m just so worried about you I can’t think straight.”

It was only after Link had squatted to the ground to pick up the bottle that he heard the sound of the other man sucking what he presumed to be tears back into his nasal cavity. Rhett’s arms were crossed and his back hunched – and from the position Link was in, he was able to see his brother’s expression; he was exhausted beyond repair, and the only livelihood that reflected from his face came from the aloe, which shimmered in the sun. From there, Link rose back to his feet without a second thought, and with much caution he wrapped his arms around Rhett’s small waist, hands clasping just in front of his abdomen. The brunet pressed his forehead into the taller man’s shoulder, the tip of his nose smooshed into the parched, blistered skin. “I love you, brother. I’ll never be able to say that enough. Never in a million years,” he started, tears dripping all at once down his face. “One day this is all gonna end, you hear me? One day you’re not gonna be sick and tired and hungry and in pain every second of your life. We’re gonna be living in this wasteland for the rest of our lives, Rhett, but there’s a light at the end of the tunnel. The university’s just a hundred and fifty miles up the road. You’re tough as nails – I know you’re hurting like nobody’s business, but even so you’re the strongest son of a gun I’ve ever met. I’m gonna do everything I can to get you where we’re going – ‘cause it’s where we’re going. Together.”

There was an elongated and distressed sigh that pushed out from Rhett’s lungs – but to Link’s relief, it wasn’t followed by a statement to negate his own. In fact, the larger man didn’t say anything at all – he simply dropped his arms from his chest and cupped his hands on top of Link’s, as if to renew between them a vow of trust. In spite of the sun overhead that scorched his skin and arose sweat between their bodies, Link remained pressed into his companion’s back for several minutes; it was the most comfortable he’d felt in days.
Victory was a hundred and forty-eight miles away.

As they now had a destination and approximate traveling distance in mind, Link made a note to keep track of mile markers – that is, the ones that still remained and could be made out. They began at Exit 158, as he was able to tell based on a rusty green sign that had been halfway tossed into the road, and had traveled about two miles since. Link pulled behind him the red wagon which contained both of their bags and made a hideous noise with each miniscule turn of the wheels – it had evidently been knocked out of line, veering off course constantly as the small man yanked it northwards at the side of his brother. It was a rather irritating setup, but Link didn’t complain; he was simply grateful for the single fortune he’d been granted – the life of his best friend.

Rhett was doing extraordinarily well. He walked with a noticeable limp, but pressed on regardless – and although they were moving at quite a slow pace, Link could only appreciate the fact that his endlessly strong companion was able to move at all. There must have been a metric ton of adrenaline coursing through his blood to give him enough relief to go as quickly as he did – and truthfully, Link feared the man was setting himself up for destruction. He held himself back from admonishing him, though, as he recalled their most recent conversation. *Rhett’s a grown man,* he told himself. *He can hold his own. I can trust him.* The fleeting thoughts were mediocre in helping to aid Link’s conscience, but they at least kept him from snapping at Rhett. After all, it was probably the last thing the poor guy needed considering the state he was in.

A few hours passed without a second’s break, and miles seemed to zip by – the last Link was able to tell, they’d reached 165, a full seven miles from where they’d started. It was only a drop in the bucket, especially considering the time and energy they’d put forth to get there – but determination still swept over them both like arctic winds on their skin. Link kept a steady hand perched at the bottom of Rhett’s back to offer a bit more support for him – just in case.

It wasn’t too much longer before the large man started to give in and rest his body against Link’s as they trudged on. The brunet didn’t care to assist him, of course, but he became instantly concerned when Rhett’s weight pressed into his side almost entirely. In addition, he could hear the man’s labored breaths, which sounded as though someone had thrown a hard basketball against a gymnasium floor each time Rhett exhaled. Unable to watch his friend suffer, Link was left with no choice but to stop in his tracks, holding Rhett behind with him. His cupped palm traced soothingly up and down the other’s spine, noting the irritated yet relieved look on his face. “You’re pushin’ too hard, man,” Link declared, his voice dry. “Take a break, alright? The road’s not going anywhere.”

Only out of necessity, Rhett acquiesced. In fact, he threw every ounce of himself onto Link, forcing the small man to embrace him so tightly that every inch of their bodies touched. Despite the acrid setting, there was an undertone of serenity that festered between the two men and fueled Link with a degree of satisfaction he wouldn’t have found elsewhere. The only thing that kept him going was the nightmare of a man he held in his arms, whose heaving lungs were on the verge of giving into the comfort in his best friend’s proximity. It didn’t take too long, though, for Link’s strength to falter – and gradually, they were both forced onto their knees, which dug into the cracked and dusty blacktop that had no doubt been eroded by Utah’s acidic downpours. Link still supported Rhett’s shoulders as the blond’s head hung defeatedly to the ground.

“Relax, take it easy. You deserve it,” Link spoke quietly, sweeping a calm hand up and down Rhett’s back when the man finally crashed into him. “You’ve done so good today, brother. So, so
Rhett adjusted himself as comfortably as he could, each position he tried pinching his back in such a way that he was quickly forced into, once again, pressing his entire side into Link. The brunet happily cradled the much bigger man in his lap, never objecting to anything so long as it gave his friend comfort. At last, Rhett expelled a sigh. “I wish I could do better,” he groaned, disappointed.

With that, Link’s heart broke a little. “That’s nonsense,” he reassured him, nose pressed against Rhett’s scalp. “I’m proud of you. Even if you don’t walk another step today, you’ll have made a pretty incredible distance. Don’t be so hard on yourself, okay?”

A pained, dismissive chuckle sounded from Rhett’s throat. “You might have to pull me in that wagon before it’s all over,” he quipped, a vast tiredness laced in his speech.

“Maybe I will,” Link smiled, embracing his brother’s shoulders and thanking God the man was still able to function. It was obvious, though, that their break would be a fairly extended one – but that was okay. It was far better for Rhett to rest when he felt the need than for him to charge full speed ahead and hurt himself permanently. He was the single dearest thing Link held close to his heart, and so it was vital that Rhett was in good health. He wanted so badly for the man to feel okay. He wanted him to feel so indescribably well that he could climb mountains at his leisure, or move them with his bare hands, or conquer what remained of the world as they knew it – but with Rhett’s heft, albeit miniscule, pressed so wholly against his chest, he began to realize the futility of the concept. Together they lay, Link’s fingers splayed through the blond tangles of the other’s hair – and in spite of the circumstances, their souls were intertwined.

Fatigue settled in only minutes later, engulfing both of them in blankets of exhaustion. Beneath Rhett’s furling mustache was a smile that Link had grown to appreciate in their desolation, especially since the man had been sick. Contentment was an emotion the large man seemed to have left behind to hopelessly corrode in the dust and winds, never to be seen again. His heart was thus left devoid of any and all positivity – all, of course, besides one, very prominent aspect...

…his unconditional love for Link.

By that point, the mere idea of separation had become absurd; neither would last a day without the other, whether their failures would be physical or otherwise. Emotional sickness, Link reasoned, was just as legitimate as any bump or scrape he would ever receive. Rhett’s company meant more to him than anything else – and perhaps even greater than coming to terms with the fact was knowing that the feelings were reciprocated.

Thought after droning thought shot like a rogue ping pong ball in the walls of his mind – but even so, the tiredness began to absolutely inundate him. Link’s eyes almost seemed to swell shut, stinging with fury the longer he forced them open. It was only after he fought the sandman’s persuasion for half an hour that Link finally capitulated to his spell and collapsed backwards into the guardrail that supported him, arms wrapped sweetly around Rhett as the top of his head resided firmly against his sternum.

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The men ended up covering twenty-five miles by nightfall, leaving them at almost exactly a sixth of the way to their destination.
Rhett’s newfound endurance came as a surprise to both of them. He still needed help getting from point A to point B, of course, but he’d come such a long way since the morning. The poor man was hardly able stand up on his own, which at that point appeared to be the main constituent in impeding their journey – but, just like every other task that Rhett had ever been assigned, he blew the expectations directly out of the water and sent them flying for the stars. “The more I move, the less it hurts,” he’d said – and as to whether or not that was a lie, Link was unable to tell. The only thing he could do was harbor trust in his companion’s words and stay faithfully at his side, never removing his arm from around Rhett’s waist. They walked for hours without relent, each step more agonizing than the last, even for Link – but as long as the injured man felt he could continue, they both persisted. After all, neither knew what the next day would bring – they ended up reaching a mutual consensus, wherein it was agreed that it was better to walk as far as they could each day, in case they were unable to the next. Link would never push Rhett enough to hurt him, obviously, but with the weather changing so rapidly, they’d arrived at a point where tiredness could no longer be an excuse.

When the sun dropped under the horizon that night, it was below freezing. Even beneath the warmth of an oversized hoodie, goosebumps pricked Link’s skin and painted him in a layer of numbness. Luckily, he and Rhett had arrived at a rest stop by then and decided to settle down for the night – the conditions were far from ideal, but it was a building nonetheless, which they would use to defend themselves from the chilling winds. Rhett’s sandals clacked against the pavement as he trudged seamlessly towards the brick structure before them. He walked on his own for the most part, grabbing onto Link only when the decline of the blacktop proved to be too steep for him to fare alone. Together, the men made it to the building, the last bits of sunlight shining peacefully on their backs as they entered.

Link perched the wagon against the outside wall, keenly shifting his eyes to the scene. Beneath the battered awning at the front were two glass doors that had been smashed to pieces, with sizable shards decorating an ash-dusted welcome mat. Unfazed, Link stepped over the mess and through the frame, Rhett following closely behind him. Looking around proved to be pointless, as everything within was entirely black – nothing like the home from which they’d emerged that morning, whose ceilings and walls were filled with countless holes that allowed light to diffuse through. With that in mind, he turned to Rhett and grabbed his hand, preparing both of them for the dark abyss that lay ahead.

“It’s black as night in here,” the larger of the two remarked, his tone gruff as it approached Link’s ear.

“S’why I’m leading you around like a horse.”

Rhett laughed, allowing himself to be dragged God knew where at the hands of his best friend – and to Link’s surprise, there was no resistance in his step. “You’ve got a flashlight, don’t you?” he asked just as the brunette halted out of frustration – he couldn’t see a bloody thing, for the starlight was dimmed by the ceiling’s barrier. Link tried to retrace each and every little thing he packed into his bag, which, after twenty-five miles of walking, had become crippling heft on his shoulders. Did he have a flashlight?... Oh, yes, he’d grabbed it from the kitchen sink and tossed it in the front pocket. The small man breathed a sigh of relief.

“Good thinking, Rhett,” he commended. Link slung the backpack onto the floor in a swift maneuver, alleviating a colossal heap of stress he didn’t even realize had burdened his shoulders. Rhett crouched just as the other man did, and there, Link began to feel around the surface of the bag for the zippers. Once he managed to open them, he fumbled around the inside in search of the plastic barrel of the flashlight. At last, his fingers hit just what they were looking for, and with a vast satisfaction they pulled the tool from its home in the bag. “A-ha.” Link mumbled into the night. His thumb rested atop the on button and easily pushed it down – and that was when the
entire room was illuminated with what must have been the brightest light that Utah had ever known.

Link soon found that, of course, it was only the contrast that made the light seem so strong. When he turned the glow to his companion’s face, there were stark shadows in every divot – and there were creases and cracks that the brunet had yet to observe, but it was hardly a surprise, as their age had crept up on them with the slynness of a fox. A sunken dimple presented itself beneath Rhett’s cheek when he smiled.

Link couldn’t help but reflect his friend’s contagious expression. “What are you grinnin’ like a possum for?” he lovingly inquired, nothing but amusement in his eyes.

Rhett’s head dropped out of embarrassment – but judging by the vibrant contour of his cheeks, it was easy to see that he’d retained that authentic, platinum smile. The blond established eye contact once more and exhaled with a reticent tinge of adoration. “I’m happy,” he confessed.

...Happy? Link deliberated, more confused than anything. Surely, he figured, his face showed it.

Happy…

What a strange thing for a person to feel.

Snapping back into reality, Link was instantly hurt by the faltered expression of his brother, whose smile had dampened, and whose eyes brimmed with vacancy. As if to shake the image from his mind, the small man blinked and tossed his head from side to side. “You’re – You’re what?” he demanded, all but stupefied by the concept.

Bashfully, Rhett’s gaze flicked to the ground. “Happy,” he repeated with simplicity. His eyes gleamed with emotion – and a good emotion, too, one constructed of relief and glee. Link wasn’t certain from where it had emerged, but he certainly didn’t object – he only basked in the sweet, sweet flavor of his best friend’s contentment. It was like a coating of sugar on his tongue, so strong he could hardly believe it was there, but so vast it was impossible to ignore.

Link’s eyes began to water, and soon enough there were tears beading down his cheeks. In a second’s time, he discarded the flashlight at his knees and wrapped both arms around Rhett, sniffling against the warmth of his jacket. He kept his composure fairly well, however, allowing him to enunciate his words rather clearly as he spoke. “Rhett,” he began in a whisper, steadily increasing in volume. “That’s the best thing I’ve heard in months – oh, I’m so ecstatic for you, brother – it truly means the world to me. Knowing you’re happy means so much.”

The large man hugged him back, his bony arms like concrete rods. “And to think it’s all because of you,” Rhett insisted.

“Psh,” Link hastily dismissed. “Well, if it means anything, I feel the exact same way. At this point I’m starting to think that if we had to do all this over again, knock on wood, I wouldn’t have walked two steps out of the shelter with anyone else. But for you, Rhett – you’re worth it. You’re worth all those mornings I’ve woken up so sick and tired I’d just as soon have been dead. I can only imagine you’ve felt the same way tenfold, brother. It absolutely warms my heart to know you’ve not given up. Whatever your incentive may be, I don’t want you to lose sight of it, okay? You’ve got to hold on to it and never let go. I know you can make it through. You walked twenty-five miles in a single day, Rhett – there’s no doubt in my mind it’s only uphill from here.”

It was so strange, having even a shred of authentic positivity flee his lips – but Link was certain in his words, and for once felt no regret.

The room in which they sat only grew colder as the night dragged on. It only became evident to
Link, however, when he began to hear the sharp, quickened breaths of his companion as they surged through his body with a galvanizing chill. The smaller man ended the embrace with a quick peck on Rhett’s jawline and fell backwards onto the floor. By only the faintest glow of the flashlight, the blond’s features were visible – the defeated expression of his brow, a set of crow’s feet donning his tired eyes, a mouthful of chattering teeth – and the sight of it all caused a hurricane of sympathy to douse Link like a thousand buckets of water. He kept an eye on Rhett as he leaned gracefully into reach of his bag, which he opened once more, only to find that he’d been able to jam only a single thin blanket into its confines. There was another blanket in Rhett’s bag, which was still outside, but it was far too cold by then to consider braving the bone-chilling temperatures – they’d both lost so much weight that settings which once felt warm turned into shivering and goosebumps at seventy degrees. It was something Link had noticed gradually, but never made a point to mention, as it was impossible to control given their limited supplies. With that in mind, his eyes flicked down to the meager cloth in his hands. The one blanket, while thin, would have to do – but Link harbored no anxiety over the fact, knowing that their combined body heat would be plenty enough to fare the night.

In his final maneuver for that day, Link raised the blanket into the air and allowed it to unfurl towards the ground. It was just long enough to cover the two men from shoulders to feet, and wide enough to encapsulate them both. Link did just that, slinging the opposite corner around Rhett’s arm, ultimately coaxing him into lying down into the floor. He wrapped the other corner around his back and proceeded to follow his friend onto the ground, wedging his chin comfortably into the tall man’s ribs. Rhett’s arm fell so naturally behind Link’s head that neither questioned it – Link was simply grateful, listening to his brother’s heartbeat as his ear was pressed into his chest. It was strong. Tenacious. Interminable.

Link’s forearm traveled innocently closer to Rhett, only stopping when it rested on the dip of his stomach. In spite of the rapidly dropping temperature, Link found that there was incomparable warmth within the cotton sheath he shared with his best friend. Perhaps the perception was irrational, but nevertheless it swaddled his body in comfort – however, he couldn’t help but notice the overwhelming amount of tensity in Rhett’s body. Before he could even object, Link’s hand instinctively began to rub circles into the other’s side, just to offer a subtle assurance that he was there. Rhett responded with a nearly inaudible groan – but it triggered within Link an unhinging of sadness. In an effort to provide any bit of consolation, he hugged the man as closely as his one arm could pull.

“Laying on the floor hurts your back, huh?” Link assumed with relative ease. For his friend’s sake, he longed for the squalid mattress that they’d abandoned twenty-five miles south, wishing vacantly that there was something he could do to help – but it was essentially hopeless, seeing as the only furniture in the building had been overturned and demolished, even with the walls still intact. The flashlight still burned its yellowy glow, particularly highlighting the ever-growing patch of grey hairs that poked out from Rhett’s beard. Given the rapidity with which their bodies had changed, familiarity was a distant feeling. Aging seemed to have grabbed them both by the throats and thrown them mercilessly against the ground, only to be stepped on and crushed by a slew of problems they could have easily avoided in their twenties. Link sighed heavily into his friend’s chest.

Finally twitching his head down to look at Link and subsequently interrupt his reverie, Rhett stroked his thumb down the man’s elbow. “Aw, don’t worry about me,” he started at last. “I’ve slept on rocks for months. I’ll be fine. A kempt tile floor is a blessing.”

Link smiled as a result of Rhett’s hopefulness. “I hope you’re right,” he said conclusively, staring past the man altogether and eyeing the dim gradient of the light as it faded into the room’s midnight abyss. His adoring gaze then flicked up to Rhett. “As for now just try and get a good night’s sleep. We’ve got a long week ahead of us and I want you to feel as well as you possibly
“Alright.”

Rhett bit his lip pensively before returning eye contact – but once his eyes fell on Link’s, the apples of his cheeks made themselves prominent from above a beard-veiled smile. “Alright.”

With jovial splendor, Link bared his teeth in an expression of utmost elation. He lifted his head from Rhett’s arm and propped himself up on his elbow – and with his opposite hand, he reached behind their bodies to grab the flashlight. Rhett watched him with curiosity as Link’s soft eyes traveled from the light source to the recumbent, shadowed man – and there, he placed the flashlight cautiously on Rhett’s chest, which illuminated his face with a sharp glow. Finally, Link leaned steadily closer to the floor, his muscles relaxing when his body made contact with Rhett’s. He was able to see every crack, every blister, every wrinkle, every scar of his best friend’s face. They were signs of battle and indomitable strength – and they adorned such an alluring, gratuitous expression. To Link, there was absolutely nothing in the universe more beautiful than the man he was honored to call ‘brother’. His heart, in its entirety, belonged unconditionally to Rhett.

Because the stark light accentuated the blond’s features so drastically, Link was overwhelmed by the hell that surfaced them, and thus by Rhett’s fortitude – and so he leaned down to kiss his forehead in an intimate gesture, feeling the divots and imperfections beneath his lips. His nose met Rhett’s hair, and the earthy, familiar scent brought him home. Steadily, Link arose, his smile tender as Rhett came back into view – and only then could he see the same expression reflecting back at him with an equivalent degree of adoration. For just a few moments it was as though they were twenty years old again – it was 1998, their sophomore year of college. The dorm window was ajar. Their stomachs were taut with pizza and ice cream. Link had pinned Rhett down in the midst of wrestling on the bottom bunk. The world wasn’t chaos. They were happy.

As the wintry breezes from the front door coated their skin, and as Link lay hovering above his brother’s body with a vast delight washing over him, he began to realize that perhaps they weren’t too far from their nostalgia after all. The one talent Link could grant himself was the fact that he could always find a reason to smile, in thick or thin. He was an optimist. Sure, the nation was in ruins, never to return to its power again – but he had Rhett. He had somebody who loved him, and who would never leave his side.

And that was enough.

Together, the two men reveled in their glee, even though the world around them was crumbling like the sand that composed it. There was a glimmer that appeared in Rhett’s eye that night that remained there from then on out – one of resolution and complacency. It was as though a switch had flipped in his mind and relieved Rhett of anxiety altogether, the tension in his muscles slackening significantly. After all that the man had endured, it was so incredible to see him in a good place emotionally. Link’s heart swelled with joy at the sight, and never did it evanesce, for his friend’s happiness had become so scarce. Eventually, he wedged himself back into Rhett’s embrace, finding that it was easy to fall asleep when only sweet thoughts plagued his mind. Before shutting his eyes for good, Link spared a final glance at the man who held him tight, then switched the flashlight off and tossed it to the side. He then slung his arm over Rhett’s ribs – sharp as daggers, but slowly softening beneath a layer of what could hardly be considered fat. They huddled together as closely as they could, their bodies bound to one another by the blanket, which trapped them in position. Everything was so comfortable.

Link was half asleep when Rhett decided to turn his body towards the man and throw his free arm over his back. It was impossible to see in the blackness, but Link detected a series of soft breaths which sounded to be several inches above his head. Seconds later, Rhett buried his face into the top of Link’s hair – and his hands massaged the brunet’s shoulders calmly enough that he was nearly sent back into a deep sleep. He didn’t, though, as he was jolted into wakefulness by the soft
words that rumbled atop his head:

“Good night, sweetheart. I love you.”

Link grinned in ecstasy, allowing his forehead to fall at once onto Rhett’s shoulder. There was nothing more rewarding than hearing that his best friend loved him, even though he knew for a fact that it was true – there was just something so authentic in the expression itself, and it satisfied the small man to no end. The appropriate yet genuine response danced around in his mouth like a bullet, begging to be spat out – and Link instantly capitulated.

“I love you, too.”
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

TW: Detailed descriptions/mentions of death

OCTOBER 02, 201X

It came as no surprise to Link that his friend had trouble getting out of the floor that morning.

Fortunately, Rhett wasn’t in a terrible amount of pain, but he was rather irritable, which Link attributed to the dull ache he’d complained of upon waking. Both men ate almost immediately upon climbing up from the ground – though having not eaten anything since the morning before, Link was still accustomed to the routine of going days at a time without food, and thus his body felt no real need. However, he did reluctantly manage to down a sleeve of cheese crackers (which he and Rhett referred to as ‘packs of nabs’ in their youth) as well as a distastefully lukewarm bottle of water. Rhett, on the other hand, somehow consumed two whole bags of his designated vitamin brew and enough trail mix to feed an army, still claiming to be hungry when Link persuaded him to quit. He feared that Rhett would make himself sick if he took in even half of what he used to – and although he was grateful to see his brother’s appetite return, there simply wasn’t enough food to supply a reasonable diet for the man. After all, there was no telling whether or not the rest of their days traveling would be as productive as the one before, so they needed to conserve as much as they possibly could. Perhaps they would be lucky enough to run into a gas station or something of the like that hadn’t yet been ransacked – but there was also the possibility that their bodies would give out within a mile of leaving the rest stop. Times could always be harder. Things could always become worse. And they almost certainly would.

There wasn’t much packing involved before heading out this time, seeing as the only items Link had removed from the bag were the blanket and flashlight. He tucked them both back into their rightful spots, pulled the zipper shut, and hurled the bag over his shoulder with relative ease. With the sun shining through the windows, it was much easier to see inside the building than it had been the previous night – but to Link’s dismay, there were no salvageable items lying in the halls. In the entrance corner there lay a busted vending machine which, evidently, had already been raided, indicating that another person had already gone inside and pilfered anything of use. Chip bags and candy wrappers littered the floors, not a single crumb to spare. To Link, it symbolized the desperation that the rest of the world experienced along with them, most of whom had probably already died off – and with that thought, he somehow began to empathize with a stranger he’d never met.

In a more macabre state of mind, it was brought to Link’s attention that he and Rhett had never in their many miles run across a recently deceased body. In fact, the only human remains they’d lain eyes on thus far were dismembered and decayed bits of anatomy, irrevocably separated from the identities from whence they came. It was rather strange – surely not everyone was making it out alive, right? In fact, they themselves were only saved by the miracle of a traveling doctor when their intelligence was, presumably, superior to that of the general populace. Food and water were so immensely scarce that there was absolutely no way everyone was able to survive – so it must have been that the exceedingly vast majority of the nation had been killed off on the First Night. The entire country was a ghost town. Aside from Robin and one another, neither of them had encountered a single person in weeks, nor had they seen animals of any kind (save for the
occasional cockroach or horse fly). The world seemed as vacant as their energy was sapped, and sometimes Link was convinced they were the only two men left on the planet at all…

But then again, did it really matter in the grand scheme of things? Everything Link needed he found in his best friend, who so graciously provided him with more love than he could have ever asked for in a world so desolate. Rhett was the only shred of home he had left, and he held onto it for dear life. Link would carry him to the ends of the earth on two broken legs if he had to, and without a second thought – he’d come to terms many years prior that the bond between them was more similar to a marriage than it was a friendship. There were blurred lines and unconnected dots spanning their relationship, but that was okay. It was more than okay. It was so, incredibly okay.

It was only after they set off that Link realized just how quickly the season had turned. Granted, they were traveling north – but in a week’s time the sun had gone from scorching their skin in the daytime to all but disappearing behind an eternal scroll of clouds, leaving the temperatures to drop far below what they’d have been in the now distant past. Sighing halfheartedly, he tossed an arm around Rhett and lugged the wagon back onto the post-apocalyptic remains of Interstate-15, not an ounce of zeal in his step.

The day had begun as overcast, but as they trudged further and further to their destination, the clouds grew substantially more menacing – just a few miles into their journey, the sky was a lightless shade of grey, threatening to unleash a downpour at any time. The muscles in Link’s core tensed gradually as he walked, his notoriously wired mind anticipating the worst case scenario. As the sky continued to rapidly gain depth, the anxiety soon got the best of him, and with his entire body he nudged Rhett and stopped moving his feet altogether. When the tall man looked down at him with his brow furrowed in bemusement, Link discovered he had nothing to say – and so his pleading eyes drifted to the sooty road beneath them.

“What’s wrong?” the blond spoke cautiously, his massive arm like a programmed machine as it swept Link fluidly into his chest.

“I’m scared.”

Rhett was quiet. He apparently noticed that Link’s anxiety was rather vast and subsequently shifted his undivided focus on the man. His arms draped lovingly over the other’s shoulders. “Scared of what, Link?” Rhett’s hand drifted up to his friend’s hair and ruffled the streaky locks.

Link huffed, inadvertently drawing attention to his own distress. “Those clouds are looking bad, man. Real bad. And we’re so far from shelter that if it starts raining we’re gonna be stuck out here with no way to fend for ourselves.” Verbalizing the fear only intensified it – it felt much more like a real threat than the statement which had pinged around in his head.

There was no arguing with the fact seeing as Rhett himself was unable to provide one. Instead, the large man massaged Link’s back with his tough, calloused hands, trying desperately to relieve the tension therein. “Take a deep breath, okay? Try and collect yourself,” his soft voice carried. “I’ll tell you what – we’ll take the next exit and find a place to stay until it clears up. We’ll be okay –”

“But what if we don’t make it in time?” Link countered, his voice noticeably shaken. “The rain’s like fire, Rhett, it burns like the devil – and we’ve only had a taste of it. I can’t imagine what it’d do to your skin…” he trailed off.

“Shh,” Rhett hushed him. “Don’t worry about me, Link. I’m gonna be alright. If it rains, it rains, and that’s that. We can’t do a whole lot about it. But I’ll tell you one thing, standing here holding onto me with all your might isn’t gonna better the situation either. I don’t mean to be hasty but if you don’t want rained on then we’re gonna have to move pretty quickly, brother. That’s all there is to it.”
Even since they’d stopped, the sky’s color had grown discernibly closer to black. Link’s heart began pounding at the sight, knowing all too well that it was only a matter of minutes before droplets of acid would inevitably come pattering onto the earth. Rhett bit his lip and gazed hopelessly into the distance. The next few moments seemed like centuries to Link, thought after grueling thought passing through his head too quickly for him to respond to the situation at hand. The only man Link could trust to react reasonably to their dilemma stood apprehensively before him, just as clueless. With a look of pure terror, he stared up at Rhett, hardly able to see him in the inadequate light – and precisely then, the low reverberation of thunder rumbled faintly in the distance. Link’s eyes grew wide with fright, drilling into Rhett’s and begging for a solution he didn’t have…

And seconds later, the rain began to fall.

It was the first time in their decades of friendship that Link had ever seen his best friend respond purely out of panic. When the first drop landed on his skin, Rhett ducked to the smaller man’s height and grabbed him protectively by the shoulders in an effort to shield him from the precipitation. Link obliged and tucked his head just beneath Rhett’s chin, his torso entirely covered by the blond’s massive stature. His heart pounded with the force of a grenade.

“Rhett –"

“Can you run?!”

Link was startled by the intensity of the demand, but out of fear he responded immediately. “I – yes, I can run, but you can’t,” he warned.

Another clap of thunder.

“Well Link,” Rhett declared, hugging his brother tight, as though it crossed his mind that it might be their last, “it’s run or get skinned alive.”

Indeed, those were the facts – and in spite of Link’s optimism, he couldn’t avoid the concrete wall that faced them. He pried himself away from Rhett wondering if Mother Nature herself was on a mission to wipe them off the face of the earth, only to be buried under the heft of their failures, but quickly quashed the thought as the never-slackening rain burned his skin. At last, he outstretched his hand, and by nature their fingers interlocked as if to offer a radiant contrast to the storm.

“Okay.”

With Link’s permission, Rhett dug the tips of his fingers into the pad of his hand and charged full speed ahead – it must have been adrenaline coursing through the man that kept him from collapsing to the ground, Link was sure of it. He followed easily behind, the blazing drops electrifying his face and hands, and very rapidly seeping through his clothes. It took only a few minutes for the rain to pummel entirely through the thickness of his hoodie, settling on his body’s surface with a sensation so impossibly excruciating he was sure his very skin would peel off with the force alone – and possibly even worse than that, his shattered spine succumbed to the pressure engulfing it and sent galvanizing jolts up his back, making itself prominent for the first time in days. With that, Link couldn’t help but shriek out in pain.

Rhett’s sympathetic eyes only glossed over his friend as they continued to run, both praying to see an exit in the distance – hell, Link would have settled for a shack made of newspaper in the eye of the storm – but they saw no such thing in any direction. Link could tell by his companion’s excessively labored breaths that his body was giving out fast – and with his own heart throbbing with exhaustion, the small man could easily say the same for himself. Rhett’s grip remained strong, though, even as his twig-thin legs all but stopped completely. Even as his lungs heaved for
the sustenance of air. Even as his heart pounded out of his dreadfully emaciated chest…

And the next thing Link knew, Rhett let out a bloodcurdling scream – and in seconds he stumbled and fell facedown onto the asphalt.

Link was dragged down with him, as his hand was still clasped within Rhett’s, but the brunet was able to catch himself on his knees. He didn’t bother to dust himself off, the only priority being the endlessly agonized man who lay mere inches to his right. Rhett’s body shook erratically, his face skinned even worse having just smashed ruthlessly into the blacktop – his elbows were stretched out in front of him with his head buried therein, desperately trying to mask the sobs that fled from his throat. The pitched noise was unmistakable, though – Rhett was crying, and he was crying hard.

A million thoughts grazed Link’s mind before he finally resolved to slinging the hefty bag from his shoulders and tossing himself on top of Rhett in a solicitous embrace. He felt pinpricks in his eyes, which preceded a slew of salty tears that beaded down his cheeks. Link’s stomach turned – he was nearly unable to speak, but somehow unearthed the capacity despite the debilitating anxiety that coursed through him.

“Rhett!” he pleaded over the thunder. “Rhett, talk to me, please – what’s hurting you?”

There was a chilling catch to Rhett’s voice like none other Link had ever heard – but he managed to cry out: “Everything…”

Even with the raindrops sweeping across his skin like daggers, the greatest pain of all was the one which stabbed Link in the chest and twisted his heart out completely following Rhett’s distressed utterance. “Oh, baby…” he whispered sympathetically, stalling his subsequent course of action – rarely had he ever been placed in a situation of absolute control, for his mind simply did not operate well under the circumstance. Plus, Rhett was always around to take the initiative for him… but this time was different. This time, Link had to take matters into his own hands – and he hoped to God he would somehow, by the grace of a miracle, take the correct strides in sparing his brother of any more agony.

Shock alone made him pounce back to his feet. Link kept a careful eye on his companion as he slowly backed away, just enough that he was able to grab his bag. He then returned to Rhett’s side and yanked from the zipper, once again, the blanket they’d shared the night before. In the midst of his panic, it was the only thing Link could think of that could have possibly been used to shield the prostrate man of any further injury – and perhaps it wasn’t a bad idea after all. “Fetal position if you can, brother,” he called out as he unfolded the blanket and stretched it a couple feet above him. Perhaps, he figured, holding the blanket in such a way would prevent the sour water from seeping directly onto Rhett’s skin. The solution was far from perfect, that much was certain – but Link made do with the supplies he had, doing everything in his ability to ensure Rhett was in the best condition he could possibly be.

Somehow the feat worked, hardly any rain falling onto the collapsed man no matter how intense the storm became. For Link, however, the tactic proved to have the opposite effect – as he sat impotently beside Rhett, back against the winds, the acidic raindrops drilled mercilessly into his body. The longer he braved the grueling storm, the more evident the slick, burning sheen on his torso became. For a few, infinitely long minutes, it seemed as though it would never end – Link’s heart brimmed with despair for their situation, thoroughly convinced he would never forgive himself for letting it all happen. The mere sight of Rhett’s motionless body was enough to brand his conscience with harsh contrition – everything was Link’s fault. If only he’d spoken sooner. If only he’d kept an eye out for Rhett like he was supposed to…

But as Link came to find out, his life was filled with “if only…”s. His best friend meant the entire
world to him – more than anything else ever had – but love, he was confident, was not the issue. It was really the only thing the man could pride himself on if he were honest. It was the boneheaded decisions and ignorance of wisdom that got him in trouble – the two things combined, he concluded, placed him in the situation of fending for Rhett’s safety with a paper-thin blanket in the first place. After so long, burns became sores, all of which Link felt he deserved as they remorselessly ate away at his skin. He prayed that Rhett didn’t feel the same way, oh God he prayed, but even with the minimal amount of rain making contact with the man’s skin, he was already in such terrible condition that Link knew it was unlikely. Tears beaded from his irritated eyes, the saltiness a relief as it washed down his cheeks.

By the time the storm finally started to abate, Link noticed that the parts of his hoodie that faced the rain had lifted in color, some portions of the fabric even eroded away by the scathing water. With that observation, his eyes flicked to the blanket, which contained several large, corrosive holes in its thin surface. The sight of such destruction made Link’s body burn even worse than it already did – and as though his helpless and futile pleas had finally been answered, the sun split through the clouds, lifting the tempest away with it.

As soon as the pattering ceased, Link balled the sopping blanket up in his hands and tossed it impetuously to the side. To his relief, Rhett’s back was relatively dry, hinting to the conclusion that most of the damage to his already maimed body had been done. The small man bent down so his face was only inches away from Rhett’s and placed his palm just below his neck with caution. Tears continued slipping past his waterline – and at last, his best friend turned to look up at him, glints of weariness and gratitude in his eyes. Link flashed a small but comforting smile.

“I’ll do anything I can to help you, Rhett – anything. Just talk to me…” he begged. “Please…”

Nothing short of complete and utter torture plagued Rhett’s body, but the pain outwardly manifested itself as exhaustion. Instead of dwelling on the blatancy of his discomfort, though, the blond twitched his gaze fondly into alignment with Link’s. “Stay with me,” he whispered with simplicity.

Link’s heart crippled at the mere concept of leaving his companion behind, and so a newfound torrent of guilt was unleashed upon his soul. In his throat, there sat a colossal lump that he just couldn’t swallow no matter how hard he tried, and it lent a distinct catch to his voice. “Of course, brother,” he assured with absolution. Link proceeded to gather the injured man in his arms ever so carefully, noticing the limpness of Rhett’s body as the man made next to no effort climbing into his lap. He cradled Rhett’s head against his chest as though he were an infant, all the while a chain of forlorn sobs ripped through his lungs. It was the first time in Link’s life that his best friend wasn’t there to comfort him, and it was the loneliest he’d ever been – the gaping sores that decorated his back were no match for the infinite desolation that drenched his heart like poison. As badly as he wished to just collapse backwards onto the corroded highway, splaying his limbs across the road as if to exclaim to the universe that death could have him – he couldn’t. He just couldn’t. Not when Rhett needed him…

…and Rhett needed Link now more than ever.

After a few minutes of rocking the man back and forth, Link came to suspect that most of Rhett’s pain likely stemmed from his back. Granted, his skin had been all but ripped to shreds – but the manner with which he’d immediately collapsed onto the ground just didn’t add up to the scorching rain being the only issue. The suddenness of Rhett’s decline indicated that something else was amiss – and it all pointed to the same condition which had impeded his quality of life for decades. Now, he lay speechless in the confinement of his best friend’s arms, his fitful breathing the only red flag that something was horrifically wrong with him. Link cried against his side, his throat sore as the sobbing stripped it raw – it appeared that Rhett McLaughlin was done for.
It was both a tragedy and a shame. There they sat, perhaps only a hundred and ten miles from safety, and Rhett’s body had given completely out. *He never should have run*, Link scolded himself, *I never should have let him*. But regret was amongst the least prominent emotions he felt at that moment. With the vulnerable man crumpled in his embrace, Link couldn’t help but spiral into severe depression. It was the fault of the world that led them to this point, and for leading them so far with a false sense of hope.

That was the point that Link opened his eyes to reality. It was when he first caught a glimpse of the world as Rhett viewed it, never looking for hope where it didn’t exist – and there, as his outlook changed arguably for the better, the oddest feeling of all washed over him...

Relief.

The empty expectation of Rhett’s improvement disappeared in a flash, alieving a significant amount of anxiety from Link’s shoulders. Of course he wanted him to get better – but looking at the situation from a bystander’s point of view as opposed to the endlessly hopeful eye of a best friend, Link quickly came to terms with the fact that the concept of recovery was doubtful. Impossible.

That’s not to say that his heart was drained of empathy, however – Link still cried against his brother and callously scolded himself for being so irresponsible. He hated himself with every ounce of his being for allowing something so avoidable to happen, something so despicable. It was a wonder Rhett hadn’t shouted his contempt in Link’s face despite the indescribable pain that paralyzed him completely. How he permitted his body to be held by the man who had essentially ended his life was astounding to Link – there shouldn’t have been a single ounce of forgiveness in his soul. Even in the miraculous scenario he did make it out of this alive, the only logical course of action would be to split apart from Link eternally. He couldn’t let something like this slide. It was *manslaughter*.

*It nullified the blood oath.*

*At least, in Link’s mind.*

It came as a great surprise to the small man when Rhett reached his hand out and swept his fingers delicately along Link’s arm – a gesture that reminded him of the endless devotion they harbored for one another. Through his fogged up glasses, Link was only able to partially see the adoring expression in Rhett’s eyes, but even that was too much. He held a dying man in his arms – a man that he’d helped to *kill* – and still, Rhett looked at Link as if to accept his unspoken apology without hesitation. It was sick and convoluted, so much that a thick layer of bile shot up in Link’s throat and nearly made him throw up into his lap. He’d committed a vile, unspeakable crime – if only the government still existed to its citizens, perhaps they would incarcerate him. Perhaps they would sentence him to life in prison. Perhaps the electric chair…

Only a few seconds into his brooding thoughts, though, Rhett interrupted him. “I know that look, babe.” – a sweet, gravelly voice. “This isn’t your fault. None of this is your fault, okay?”

“*Bullshit,*” Link swore through his tears, not looking at the man who lay against him.

Rhett sighed. His energy was far too sapped to argue, which may have been a good thing – Link’s self-loathing was far too difficult to contend with at any rate. Instead, he opted to change the subject to the other, more major situation at hand, preceding the conversation with an audible gulp. “I – I guess you know…”

“I do,” Link’s reply was short.
Rhett frowned. “Listen to me, dear, and listen carefully,” he spoke with clarity. “I’m not getting out of this one, Link. Not this time. We’ve been able to slither our way through things by the skin of our teeth ‘til now, brother, but I’m afraid that’s come to an end. It was a good run,” he laughed sadly, “we sure gave it our best shot. But I finally rest my case. I have to. I have never in my life been in so much pain as when I fell – and even now, man, it’s killing me. Figuratively and literally, in fact…” he trailed off, ending with a helpless sigh. “Link… I’m hurt so, so bad this time. More than I can convey to you with words alone. There’s nothing we can do about it. Hell, we’re not doctors, man – we don’t know jack about anything if we’re honest… but I guess what I’m trying to get across to you is that I can’t do it anymore. The pain’s too much. It’s unbearable as it is – I’d almost definitely pass out if I tried to get up and walk. So unless we’re blessed enough get another doctor wandering down the interstate, it’s safe to say it’s game over for me. We haven’t got the supplies or the knowhow to fix me, Link. I’m sorry.”

Tears pooled in Link’s eyes and poured in great masses down his face. There was no chance this time – absolutely none. The only thing he could do was hold Rhett in a way that gave him more relief than he would have had lying on the ground. The poor man was in such pitiful condition…

By some divine grace, however, Link gathered his composure. “Well the last thing I’m gonna do is leave you here to die. That’s just not an option,” his voice faltered. “I realize this is it. I realize it’s the end. But if it’s the end for you, then by God it’s the end for me, too –”

“Don’t you dare pull that stunt,” Rhett warned, seemingly irate. “I want what’s best for you, Link, whether I’m dead or alive. Believe it or not, I care more about you than any other person I’ve ever known. From the bottom of my heart. I love you.”

The authenticity of the man’s words nearly knocked the breath out of Link, leaving his lungs empty as he attempted to speak. “I know that, Rhett. I love you so much,” he choked out at last. “But I just can’t do this without you.” After all their months of fighting tooth and nail for survival, it finally came down to the cliché statement. Desperation, it appeared, had won.

“Link, yes you can –”

“No I can’t!” he fervently retorted. “I can’t and I won’t. Face it, Rhett, there’s no reason for either of us to go on without the other. You’d be the same way and you know it.”

There was a short bout of silence after the rebuke, followed by the vague, solemn nod of Rhett’s head. “You’ve got me there,” the larger man admitted, his empty smile devoid of resolution. “I think it’s safe to say we’re wholly and entirely devoted to each other. I’m nothing without you and you’re nothing without me – ‘least not in this world…” he trailed. “I guess I just want to believe that you are something, you know what I mean? I want to be proud of you. The whole reason I named a star after you is because that’s everything you’ve always been to me. You’ve been this brilliant light that my entire existence has revolved around. You’ve been my closest, dearest friend for so many years. You’ve been everything and more… but I suppose that in constructing the metaphor I failed to notice that I’ve been the same to you all along.”

The star. Link couldn’t shake the tsunami of raw emotion that followed its mention – how for years he deemed himself unworthy of the gift, yet showered Rhett with all his gratitude upon receiving it. Now, the thoughts were only symbolic of his inferiority to his best friend, knowing for a fact he didn’t deserve the friendship he so graciously offered. Rhett loved Link – he loved Link from the deepest chamber of his heart. There was no doubt about that in either of their minds; it was only a question of why.

“I can assure you,” Link began, “that there is no one else in the universe, dead or alive, that I would rather have gone through hell with than you.” And that was true.
“Yeah?” Rhett spoke wistfully. “I feel the same way, sweetheart. I really do.”

Link smiled, tears clouding his vision.

“We did pretty damn good, didn’t we?” the injured man continued. “We made it God knows how far on nothing but our feet. Days without water, weeks without food, months without adequate sleep. Breakdown after breakdown, miracle after miracle. And you know, as ridiculous as it might sound, brother… I’m not too fazed by the fact that I am inevitably going to die. I consider it a blessing that I have the privilege of leaving this world with the man who’s essentially my soulmate right beside me… you know that, Link? Our hearts are synchronized. I am nothing without my best friend.”

Although the sun shone with brilliance on their bodies, there was a thunderstorm in Link’s mind. With vast caution, he lifted Rhett in such a maneuver that their foreheads touched – but in doing so, the emotional destruction only intensified. “I can’t believe this is happening,” he forcefully whispered. “It’s so surreal to me. It’s like a bad dream. A terrible, terrible nightmare…”

“But it’s not,” Rhett’s soothing tone broke in. “It’s reality. Here’s the situation, dear – we’re over a hundred miles from the university. I’ve got two slipped discs, and with the pressure I put them under while running, the damage is irreversible. They absolutely will not get better on their own. I can’t get up, and I can’t walk, and because of that I am going to die of whatever kills me first. Dehydration, starvation, weather… I don’t know. Whatever it is will be a long, grueling process. One I don’t want to watch you going through if there’s anything you can do to help it. If there’s any way I can get you to go on, Link, any way at all – please, for the love of God, let me know…”

An impractical scenario. Link batted the water from his eyes and sucked the snot down his throat. “I already told you,” he reminded, stern. “The only way I’d ever walk another step north is if you were right beside me.”

Rhett sighed, presumably from the concept of having wasted his breath on keeping his brother calm, and to no avail. “Well, Link, unless you’ve got a spare splint in your bag and some anatomical expertise, then I’m afraid there’s nothing you can do to make that happen.” His voice had progressed quickly from collected to short, indicating a strong layer of frustration – but miraculously, with Rhett’s snarky retort, a spark of an idea ignited and blossomed in Link’s mind. Perhaps he had no ‘splint’ per se, nor did he possess any level of knowledge regarding the human body… but when the consequence of his lack of action would lead to the death of his dearest friend, Link was willing to try just about anything. He realized then that, just maybe, Rhett’s realistic world view missed out on some valid points after all.

“Rhett, call me crazy… but I have an idea.”
“Don’t be stupid.”

The statement was so unwarranted and condescending that Link inadvertently leered at the man who had spoken it. *I’m not stupid, jackass*, he retorted from within his intemperate mind. Having just gingerly hauled Rhett so that he was face down on the road, the smaller of the two was in no mood to be ridiculed, especially with the price of his intent – but knowing his brother’s mind was influenced by the dire condition of his back, Link allowed the unnecessary comment to slide. Rhett’s chin rested easily on the pair of clasped hands beneath it, his gaze critical as it followed each of Link’s movements.

“’m not,” Link replied, busied by the task of filing through the contents of his backpack – it only took one look at Rhett to know the first thing the man needed was a tremendous dose of aloe on every inch of his body. There were several dry, pink and red splotches decorating his ragged, exposed skin – and so, Link grabbed the bottle from its designated pocket and tossed it to the ground. He continued fumbling around the inside until a few moments later he stumbled upon a Swiss army knife, which just so happened to be precisely what he was looking for – he’d figured in his mind’s vague blueprint that the item would allow his plan to work at least somewhat more efficiently. After just a few more seconds of displacing the bag’s objects, Link rediscovered a long forgotten canteen, whose weight indicated it was about half-filled with water – and with a flick of the wrist, he pitched it onto the sooty highway. With all the items he would need now at his disposal, he promptly zipped the bag closed – and with a blank expression, he turned to Rhett.

“I’m gonna lift you up, okay?” Link declared, preparing his friend for the once simple action of arising from the ground. Before he’d even fully reached down to wrap his arms around Rhett, though, Link noticed his expression contorting into one of horrification. Rhett’s eyes were so tightly shut that Link feared the skin around them would rip, his lips pursed to invisibility from behind the sandy beard that concealed them. Even so, Link peeled him ever so slowly away from the asphalt, never letting go no matter how sharp his gasps became – and in only a few seconds’ time, Rhett’s weight was once again pressed wholly into the side of his best friend. There were still several indications of pain drawn in the lines of his face, despite the fact that he wasn’t supporting himself in the slightest – but even in their doomful plight, Link hoped to somehow restore the smile he’d dreamt of seeing ever since its disappearance on the First Night. *One day*, he vowed, *I’m gonna make him better again."

“You okay?” Link spoke softly, giving the other man a moment to rest.

“Not really.”

The honesty was both rewarding and brutal. Link squeezed Rhett’s ribs so that they collided with his own, then proceeded to nuzzle into his golden, oil-sopped hair. “I’m sorry you feel so bad,” he whispered.

“It’s okay.” Rhett seemed to be speaking from behind a robotic façade, his responses typical and curt. It was concerning to notice the rate with which his talkative nature declined – it left Link’s heart to bind within the pressure of even more anxiety than what had already crushed him. The brunet refused to think too much of it, as it would surely have drastic repercussions on his own emotional health, but still it lingered in the back of his mind with the dull constancy of a pendulum.

Persistence flushed Link’s face, and before he even realized what he was doing, he snatched the zipper of Rhett’s jacket between his fingers, pulling it swiftly down to his stomach. “Can you
“Raise your arm?” he asked automatically, yanking the sleeve from Rhett’s shoulder when he complied. Eventually, the entire garment was loosed from the tall man, exposing his skin in its authenticity – and Link was startled to speechlessness by the sight.

He gawked at Rhett’s body, bony as it could be – and in addition to his grotesquely thin frame, his chest and abdomen were stripped to the flesh with sizable blisters and spindles of blood infesting his entire torso. Acid had evidently eaten away at his skin until the hoodie was removed from him, and it did such an incredible amount of damage that Link’s chest physically tightened upon looking at the wounds. Rhett’s body was an invitation for disease, the sores that covered him gaping and moist with a glossy, viscous fluid. There was a spot on his neck, presumably where the rain collected and festered at the jacket’s collar, that was crimson with blood and partially scabbed over in black crust. It was around one and a half inches in diameter – pus seeped from the center and sides alike, liquids of all transparencies oozing from the source. Link was petrified.

“Rhett, oh my God…” his ravaged voice shook. “I didn’t know it was this bad – oh, you poor thing…”

“It hurts…” Rhett cried, burying his face into Link’s shoulder. Sobs fled from his throat – the tender breeze that wafted over his body and oxidized the sores was simply too much for him to bear.

“I know, I know…” Link hushed him. He was afraid to touch Rhett, knowing that it would both be excruciatingly painful for the man and put him at even greater risk of developing an infection – so instead of pressing his hands directly on him, Link pulled the sleeves of his jacket over the heels of his hands and coaxed Rhett into his lap. The ill man let out several pained yelps in the process of lying down but was determined to abide by his friend’s demands – sacrificial loyalty was his cornerstone trait.

When Rhett’s back was pressed into his thighs – which must have been dreadful – Link hastily grabbed the canteen from his side and dampened his hands with the stagnant water in an effort to sterilize them. After sniffling down the barrel, he deduced that there was no distinct odor to the water – and with the discovery, he drizzled it generously over Rhett’s body, praying there were no waterborne diseases that had found their way into the liquid. He continued to douse Rhett’s sores until the drainage was clear, which didn’t take quite as long as he’d anticipated, and recapped the canteen with water left to spare. Gently, Link massaged his fingers along the skin, and with some labor he managed to thrust his hands beneath Rhett’s back, blindly cleaning the area as best he could. The large man whimpered as he approached the ruptured discs – and each time, Link retracted his hand, knowing that one wrong move could end it all. He was ginger with all his movements, making absolutely sure that Rhett was as relaxed as he could possibly be – then, when he was finished cleansing the wounds, Link reached for the aloe.

It must have allevied much of the stinging sensation, as Rhett breathed what sounded to be a sigh of relief when the other man began rubbing the substance into his skin. With his shaking hands, Link could do only a mediocre job, but he was satisfied when a thin, glossy layer coated the upper portion of his friend’s torso. The brunet closed the bottle and tossed it onto the road when he found that he’d achieved an even coat, taking note of the endlessly tired expression of his best friend. Link then squeezed the muscles of Rhett’s shoulders in an attempt to loosen the knots therein – anything to provide the man with comfort.

The humidity was strong, and it burned Link’s throat to breathe – it must have been the uprising acid vapor, he figured, his chest struggling to filter through the blazing air. Surely Rhett was receiving the brunt of it, as his head was closer to the drenched and sour ground than Link’s. The day wasn’t hot by any means – in fact, it was more chilly than anything – but it may as well have been, seeing as the stinging moisture made it practically impossible for either man to function.
Link coughed several times in an effort to rid his lungs of the acerbic film, but he found that it was bound too strongly to the walls of his insides and once again capitulated to the hateful tides of nature, the same as he’d done for months.

With Rhett lain firmly in his lap, Link pressed on with the next step of his plan, which at that point held the promise of a filthy, tattered cloth. Braving himself for Utah’s inescapable gust, the small man unzipped his jacket and pressed it flat onto the ground before him – his hands were sticky with aloe, and they picked up bits of sand and gravel from the road, which he swiftly knocked off with a quick sweep of the fingers. There, Link thrust his arms beneath the scrawny man and shifted him on top of the strategically placed hoodie with care. Rhett bit his tongue during the maneuver, doing everything in his ability not to cry out in pain, but was unable to hide the erratic breaths that exited his lips. With that, Link frowned – if there was any shred of hope to be found in their situation, he prayed to somehow unearth it. All he wanted was to save his best friend…

But with each passing second, the practicality of the goal only proved to become more bleak. Only moments after being placed on the ground, Rhett hurled his head backwards and yelled defenselessly into the heavens, his tone reminiscent of scalding water as it rung like an alarm in Link’s ears and caused his heart to cramp with sorrow. The poor man may as well have been boiled alive – perhaps it would have been a better fate than the torture that pinned him down to the world that so cruelly sapped him of his spirit. Where, Link wondered, was the vivacious soul he’d fallen in love with so many decades ago? Was it trapped somewhere within the confines of the empty, agonized shell of a man at his feet? Was it a recoverable piece of his personality that would heal as time went on and his health grew stronger?

…Or was this Rhett now?

Any way he rolled the dice, Link concluded that he would love his brother regardless of their circumstance. That’s not to say the questions weren’t troublesome – they certainly meant a great deal, and Link wished desperately for Rhett’s inquisitive and lively spirit to rebound – but if the answers ended up against the affirmative… well, that was okay, too. Nothing would ever stop Link from adoring his best friend, for they had far too much between them to even consider terminating their relationship. Amidst their mutual loyalty and dangerous codependence, not a thing in the universe could split the two apart. Where Rhett’s soul ended, Link’s began. Where Rhett went, Link followed. Where Rhett faltered, Link did his absolute best to pull him back together. It was never an easy task – but it was also never a debate. Link would sell his soul in exchange for Rhett’s safety in a heartbeat, that much was certain.

And so, as Rhett writhed on the ground in his torment, Link retrieved the knife from its home on the beaten asphalt and slid the blade against his side. In a single movement, he managed to slit the cloth from his barren torso and drop the knife hastily back to the ground. He offered only a momentary glance at the split material, feeling the weight of his mistakes clamping around his spine like a bear trap as the fragmented bones succumbed to the forces of gravity – but Link didn’t regret the decision in the slightest. In fact, he’d have pulverized what remained of his back if it meant his brother’s life was in good hands.

As luck would have it, though, Rhett’s eyes flicked indignantly over to his friend just as the audible rip of the fabric struck his ear – and when Link started to unravel the makeshift splint from his abdomen, the brusque admonishments began.

“What the hell are you doing?!?” the large man bellowed in spite of his injury. “You put that back on right now, you hear me? You’re supposed to leave that on for a month! Robin said –”

“Rhett, I don’t care!” Link interrupted, terse. He continued yanking at the pesky threads that had clung to his skin and collected the garment in his palm as it fell. “In case you’ve yet to figure it out, sometimes we have to hurt ourselves to spare one another – and we’re willing to do that
because we’re family. We’re *brothers,*” he declared with intensity. “And that means nobody gets left behind.”

When the brace was completely removed, however, Link’s head spun, and he began to think otherwise – his shattered spine prodded his back like a wad of needles, stabbing him ruthlessly from the inside out. It was the pain he unfortunately knew all too well – and as though it decided to manifest itself tenfold, he was forced into the fetal position, his own lanky body hovering over Rhett’s.

Raw gasps swallowing his lungs, Rhett clenched his eyes shut and turned his head away from the other man. “Link… Just put it back on,” he pleaded in a whisper. “I don’t want you ending up like me. Please…” he begged.

Tears pricked Link’s eyes at the authenticity of the blond’s statement – or perhaps it was the sheer, familiar agony that electrified his lower back – it was difficult to tell. Even so, he very quickly realized that the only way he could persuade Rhett into wearing the brace was to straighten up and convince the man he didn’t need it himself. The feat would have been near impossible, as Rhett was just as intelligent as he was empathetic; he’d always been able to sniff out Link’s petty white lies, ever since they were kids.

Link was never too good at hiding how he felt, anyway.

So instead of even attempting to dissemble his emotions, he allowed them to pour freely out just as they normally would. He dug his fingernails into the road. He pressed his forehead on top of Rhett’s chest and cried desperately into his ribs. He yelled and cursed and heaved a series of sharp breaths, and in turn earned a sympathetic backrub from the shattered man beneath him. The pain had hardly improved since the morning Link collapsed and fainted onto the ground trying to carry Rhett into the house – and upon the passing thought he came to realize that all of his own problems stemmed inherently from his brother’s. Rhett had flung him into the floor and broken his back in the first place, in fact – but even so, Link could never have left him to die in his illness. He could have never held a grudge against Rhett. *He just meant too damn much.*

By the power of adrenaline, Link mustered up the capacity to lift himself into an upright position. Between the two men, it was evident that Rhett was in far worse condition – he couldn’t even peaceably lie on the ground, let alone walk another hundred odd miles in *any* amount of time. The fact broke Link’s heart – but even when the toxic carnage threatened to poison him, he remained optimistic about his plan to fix Rhett. As the expression in the man’s face grew more and more harrowing, the smaller man could no longer find it within himself to stall time, and so he clutched the fabric in his palm and outstretched his other hand to his companion whose spirit had all but given up. Rhett flicked his gaze to follow the gesture, his eyes filled with anguish and scrutiny – and slowly, he looked over to Link.

“Brother… You’re not –”

“*Take my hand,*” the brunet urged with dictation. *We’ll make it, I swear.*

Rhett’s brow only furrowed deeper with Link’s demand – but then, in the midst of criticism, his expression grew sympathetic. “I’m sorry, dear, but I can’t do that. I can’t take away from you,” he insisted with difficulty. His eyes had averted from Link’s.

Tears breached Link’s waterline at the gravity of their situation, and he bit his lip, begging it to stop quivering. After a fatal gasp, he exhaled a steady breath and thrust his shaken hand once more into Rhett’s view. Only then did Link realize he’d been forced into giving his friend an ultimatum.
And so he parted his lips, knowing the decision may have very well been Rhett’s last. “You either take my hand,” he spoke with frightening persuasion, “or you take my life down with your own. It’s your choice.”

The statement was enough to stop time altogether. Without hesitation, though, Rhett sighed and batted his lashes in wonderment of his best friend. So many unsaid words danced in the man’s eyes and illuminated his face like two glowing candles. His awestruck mouth was pried agape – and as he nodded his head as vigorously as his broken body would allow, he clapped his palm firmly into Link’s, signing the unspoken contract between them without so much as a single regret in his grip.

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It only occurred to Link when they intended to continue their journey that he’d left half of their supplies with the wagon a good fifteen minutes’ hike south.

He’d ditched the wagon in his panic just as the rain began to fall – there was something about the direness in Rhett’s grip that had caused him to drop the handle and run steadfast towards a place of potential safety, though the outcome proved to be much more unfortunate than he’d originally hoped. There was no question in his mind that they had to backtrack and collect what they’d left behind, for it was simply too much to just abandon beneath the layers of muck and rain it had been shrouded in. Perhaps it was good for them to return south, Link convinced himself, as the familiar terrain would serve as a test run for Rhett’s new brace. It wasn’t much of one – Link knew his middling effort was nowhere near the relief Robin was able to deliver – but it allowed the man to walk nonetheless, and that had to count for something. When he was able to assist Rhett onto his feet without so much as an expression of discontent, Link was wholly satisfied with his work. Still, he slung an arm around his back as they walked – it was a combination of wariness and love that fostered the gesture.

As they moved south, Rhett appeared to be doing rather well. Of course, he was far from perfect – but he was no longer splayed upon the ground, yelling obscenities into the sky for only Link and the winds to hear. Progression typically came quite easily to him, it seemed, always coursing through Rhett and channeling itself with tireless perseverance. Though it didn’t take a genius to see he was still in quite a bit of pain, Link couldn’t doubt that he was marginally better. It was an addling relief.

The moisture on the road evaporated in visible mounds, creating a humidity so thick and sour it was nauseating. After several minutes of polluted air filtering through his lungs, Link began to feel his stomach bubbling with sickness – its tart, vile flavor rose to his tongue and burned his throat as though it were boiling. He did everything in his ability to conceal the distress the setting caused him, but still had a not-so-inconspicuous hand clamped to his abdomen. Rhett looked at him knowingly, sympathetically – it was like the men were suffocating to death in a sauna, wherein the water vapor was replaced with gasoline. Nothing ever seemed to work in their favor…

Yet, they trudged on.

The only reason Link was able to walk as well as he did was because he’d tied a shirt around the outside of his jacket, which worked to compress his fragmented bones in such a way they didn’t move. It wasn’t nearly as functional as the cloth, but it was clear that Rhett had needed it worse, and so he had no problem dealing with the extra discomfort. Slackening, grey clouds rolled gently overhead like they’d never known a storm – but Link resented them nonetheless, kicking back
angry billows of dust with each step. Even a frigid breeze dared to emerge from behind and draw
goosebumps from his skin.

It was amazing to Link how the disastrous landscape fell around them and how quickly he’d
grown accustom to the catastrophe. He’d come to ignore the angular boulders and once lush
shrubbery that had been yanked away from the roadside and now littered the median. The
obstacles were so common they may as well have just been part of the road – the two men had
been mindlessly wading through the earth’s clutter for months, paying no attention when they
were forced to walk around the mountainous obelisks which had fallen from the sidelines.
However, it wasn’t nature that testified the loudest – it was man and all his creations whose voices
all but yelled down from the heavens. It was never the fallen trees or the dried up grass or the
mounds of parched soil that warranted a reaction from Link, no – it was the chunks of missing
highway mankind had worked so hard to make. It was the crashed, dilapidated vehicles with their
exteriors hopelessly bashed in. It was the ever-dwindling pungency of human remains as they
passed through a nest of casualties, the scent indicative of just how long it had been since the First
Night. It was the desolation that plagued a nation once populous, but now devoid of living things
altogether. Everything had happened at once – and its aggregate aftermath was enough to drive a
man to insanity.

In some sick, twisted way, though… it was kind of beautiful.

There was something alluring about the chaos, something about the way Mother Nature seemed to
displace her harvest across mankind’s inconceivable footprint – Link found it to be utterly
intrinsic. There were so many details lodged in the setting it was made impossible to analyze – the
charcoal and ash of burnt wood, the occasional battered vehicle rammed fatefully into the adjacent
guardrail, the fallen signs and mile markers, the craters spanning the median where bombs had
been dropped, followed surely by their subsequent ramifications…

*Three hundred million people – three hundred million lives, stories, secrets – gone, just like that.*

Link had always been a sensitive man, but the mere permanence of calamity had become
something of an apathetic mantra in the back of his mind. It wasn’t that he didn’t care – it was
simply that the constancy of brokenness had led his subconscious to adapt to the idea that their
situation was normal. Link’s feet dragged rhythmically alongside Rhett’s, his steps calculated and
sluggish. Perhaps the man was right – human nature craves routine and goes out of its way to find
it.

Conversation was empty, but Link’s mind was full. He thought of his family and how dearly he
missed them. He thought of their fans, their millions upon millions of fans, and the fact that the
majority had likely been deceased for months. He thought of the miles they’d yet to travel, now
questioning if either of them would make it. He thought of Rhett, whose maimed soul remained
tied to him by loyalty alone…

But no tears fell from his eyes, for he was too tired.

Only about ten minutes passed before Link was able to see their abandoned luggage in the
distance. He wanted to just make a run for it and grab the items in his arms – he wished to run
hand-in-hand with Rhett through meadows and greenery all the way to Salt Lake City – but with
the weight of his own backpack throbbing against his spine, he came to realize the fantasies were
just that. Like Rhett, he’d have to toss his bag into the wagon and lug it on stubborn wheels until
they reached their destination, for his back would never handle the stress it was forced beneath
then – not for a hundred and ten miles.

When they finally reached the wagon, Link slid his fingers through his hair. It didn’t take an
awfully long time to get there – or perhaps his never-ending train of thought had sped up the
process tenfold. Either way, he was glad to have arrived, his back aching terribly enough that he allowed his bag to slip gracelessly from his shoulders and plop at once into the wagon. Rhett empathetically furrowed his brow as he glanced in the man’s direction – he knew the feeling all too well, and to a degree unimaginable. Link clenched his eyes shut in a blend of excruciation and relief – and just seconds into his spine’s decompression, he felt a carefully placed weight on his shoulder.

“You gonna be alright, brother?” Rhett asked, his voice so soft it caught the other off guard. Link could only smile for a moment, his eyes welled up with tears comprised of pain and adoration. He was so blessed to call Rhett his best friend – it was his unwavering concern for Link that made the man feel as though he wasn’t alone in the world, no matter how endlessly broken their surroundings were. He finally expelled a sigh, though, and grasped onto his brother’s arm to signify his mutual support. Link’s grip was ruthless in its strength, and it exuded every ounce of his loyalty.

“I’m not all that worried about me,” he admitted slowly, gaze fixed solemnly on Rhett. The larger man huffed, a distressed smile adorning his lips. “Well maybe you’re not, but I’m worried as all hell,” he muttered. “Don’t get me wrong, Link – please don’t take this the wrong way – I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. I really do. But the giving scale is unequivocally tipped here.”

The words were foreign as they fell on Link’s ear. “’Unequivocally tipped’?” he parroted, indignant. “I swear if you’re saying what I think you’re saying –”

“Link, listen to me,” Rhett interrupted, austere. “I know you’re sick of hearing it, okay? I know. But damn it, I’m just too empathetic. I can’t let you give me everything you’ve got. You’re putting yourself through hell for me and my conscience just can’t take that. I feel like I’m sapping the life out of you and injecting it into myself –”

“Oh, would you stop it with the metaphors!” the brunet hissed, his voice shadowed in vexation. “You know what the bottom line is? We’re getting each other through this. I know good and well you’d do the same for me and more, Rhett. Neither of us is anything without the other. It’s honestly a selfish desire of mine to pull your wounded carcass to Salt Lake, but God, I love you. If all you’re concerned about is my well-being… well let me tell you something. It depends entirely on you being right beside me. Rhett, how many times are you gonna make me say it? You are my entire universe. You always have been. Year after year, decade after decade. You’re the only piece of me I can’t sacrifice…” With a quake to his voice, Link felt a swarm of tears beading down the bridge of his nose – but just after closing his eyes and turning away from Rhett, he felt himself being enveloped by a figure much larger and scrawnier than himself…

And in those arms, he found, he was home.

“Shh-shh,” Rhett hushed lowly, binding his arms around Link as tight as his weak body would allow. “You’re gettin’ awful soft on me, Linkster,” he humored, to which Link responded with a teary laugh.

“I know it.”

Though Link was unable to see, he felt the subsequent smile on Rhett’s face as his lips stretched out above his hairline. “But you know what?” he spoke at a whisper, voice merging with the breeze. “You’re absolutely right. As much as I hate to see you hurt, I know you’re only doing it for me. You’ll never be able to erase the guilt, brother. But believe me when I say I’d rather die than reach the university without you. We’re a package deal, Link – just like we’ve always been.
I’d be stupid to let you go.”

The smaller man only hugged Rhett tighter. He found it impossible to stifle his cries by that point, so he opted to thrust his face into the other man’s side and let them pour out with ineffable violence. It was the umpteenth time that week alone he’d broken down in the arms of his best friend, and in the mechanical repetition he’d noticed something—he’d only become less apologetic. No longer did Link attempt to barricade his emotions behind a concrete wall, never for Rhett to see. No longer did he close himself off and lie to his brother, who had never deserved anything apart from the unadulterated truth…

And no longer did he see his weakness in a negative light, for their situation was simply too despairing to bat an eye at something so trivial.

So instead of pulling himself together with the strength he didn’t have, he continued to cry—not because he was sad, per se, but because whatever conglomerate of emotion he possessed that day was heavy. He found it easy to fall apart at the seams, as Rhett was gracious enough to keep the man as stable as he could possibly be. Some breakdowns were, inevitably, more difficult than others—but nothing stopped Rhett from loving Link. Nothing ever had, and likewise, nothing ever would. Rhett was his guardian angel. Rhett was his security blanket.

...And a damn lot more, too.

By the time Link finally let go, he’d lost track of time. It felt as though he’d been wrapped in Rhett’s embrace for an eternity, yet somehow it wasn’t quite long enough—and with that, he swiftly decided to collapse against him once more. Autumn’s sunlight scattered across his back, and Rhett’s broad arms encapsulated him like a never-ending cotton sheet.

In body and spirit, Link was warm.
The preceding night had fallen so quickly that the brothers were forced onto a random exit ramp, guided to shelter by moonlight alone.

Link awoke in the arms of an unstirred Rhett, a setup he’d almost begun to take for granted – yet, he relished in the warm proximity of his friend’s body, as the mornings seemed to have finally reached a temperature that chilled his bones. The men were bound together by a scroll of blankets thick enough to keep them comfortable during the night, but just barely. Because they were traveling north, it was vital that they covered as much distance as they could, for each step they took was one into a more arctic climate. Winter was approaching at an almost unfathomable speed – it hadn’t even been a week since the blistering sun all but boiled the two alive, but there they lay atop the frosty floorboards of an unscathed cabin, listening to the bitter creaking of the walls. Rhett’s thumb traced thoughtlessly down Link’s clothed sternum, palm resting on his stomach.

“You know all that crackling,” the blond instigated, voice low as it sounded just inches from Link’s ear, “that means it got really cold really fast.”

Link exhaled softly, grateful for Rhett’s embrace as it lingered around his torso and entangled their legs. “Yeah, something about how wood shrinks when it gets cold. I suspect you know more about it than I do,” Link admitted. “I’m not exactly the scientist of this duo.”

Rhett huffed an obligatory laugh. “Temperature change, man. It happened so quick the walls didn’t have a chance to contract in a standard fashion. It’s not the individual pieces of wood making the sound either, it’s how the pieces are stacked on one another. Y’know, like Lincoln Logs.”

“Mm,” the small man mumbled, disinterested by the subject of his friend’s words – but he appreciated the return of Rhett’s topical absorption nonetheless. The chilly morning was enough to irritate Link’s eyes, and after having blinked over the dryness a thousand times, he reached out for his glasses, which were perched on the oak floor before him. “Whatever the case, the days are only growing colder. I don’t know how much longer this arrangement,” he gestured freely to their cocooned bodies, “is gonna keep us from freezing to death. Even now, man – it’s daylight and I just can’t find the gumption to get out of the floor and face the weather.” Goosebumps arose from his skin and sent a shiver down his spine, only curbed by the heat that emitted from Rhett’s body.

“Aw, come on, now. Only ninety-six miles to go,” the blond reminded, his voice laced with gladness knowing they were finally in the double digits. It was true – they were on Exit 202, a short distance from I-215, whose eastern branch would take them straight to the university. Rhett had discovered a state map buried in the cabin’s rubble and deduced their journey to a T, marking off their current location with a dab of charcoal. “Once we get to 298 it’s home free, brother.”

Link exhaled a daunting breath. “How long you reckon it’ll take us?” he rasped, turning his head to view the other man for the first time that morning. Once their eyes met, Rhett’s smile was unmistakable.

“Oh, I couldn’t tell ya,” he stared, lost in his companion’s expression. “It all depends on how fast we move. If we covered twenty-five miles a day, which would be record time, it’d take us four days. But the way things are looking, I’d be surprised if we made it by my birthday.”

Link’s eyes immediately widened at the remark, and his heart sank to his stomach. Birthday, he
repeated to himself, sicken[ed] that he’d forgotten. *It’s almost his birthday.*

“Rhett, what *is* today?” Link asked, spacey.

“It’s October third.”

_Eight days._ The smaller man’s chest tightened with guilt for the fact slipping his mind, and with sympathy knowing his friend’s birthday would likely be spent in torment. His subconscious mind floated back in time, wishing to spoil Rhett just like he did every year – he wanted to hug the man in the midst of their delighted laughter, and to bake him a pizza cake, and to buy him a new whittling kit, and to give him all the Hawkman merchandise known to man… Or perhaps to return the unredeemable favor and buy him a star…

He would have given Rhett the universe, but his hands were only so big.

“Oh _gosh_ , Rhett, *I’m sorry*…” he whispered, knowing the only thing he could offer the man was an apology. “It totally slipped my mind, man, your birthday –”

“Link, don’t worry about it,” the tall man replied with haste. He rubbed his hand down Link’s torso with finality, subtly urging him to undo the blanket so that both of them could arise from the ground. “Seriously, at this point, what does it matter? We don’t live in years anymore. We live one day after another. Step after incessant step. It’s all a game of chance.” By then, his voice had softened to a gravelly rumble, indicative of a particularly tetchy mood.

“For crying out loud, Rhett, it’s not even nine in the morning,” Link countered, his tone stale. “Don’t get all negative on me already.”

“Negative?” the bigger man spat, the term like poison as it fell from his tongue. “You think I’m being *negative*? Buddy, it’s only negative if what I’m saying’s not true. I’m just being realistic.”

Link’s soul brimmed with fire at the response – they’d had this conversation one too many times, and it always traveled in hopeless circles until, reluctantly, he capitulated to Rhett’s unquenchable obsession with being right. The fact of the matter was that their mindsets were different – neither was necessarily wrong, but given a life-or-death situation, their differences unearthed a world of problems. Link knew this to be fact, and for the sake of his friend’s sanity always tried to make a conscious effort in repressing his positive outlook – but Rhett rarely made the effort to do the same, convinced that his manner of thinking was right. That it was ethical.

And to be fair, if worldviews could have been considered with such stark, diverse splits of right and wrong… well, Rhett’s probably _would_ have been the most ethical. He always looked at things from a realistic perspective, but it provided him nothing but the satisfaction of possessing good insight. He’d always been the better advice giver of the two, Link was willing to admit that – but the downfall was that Rhett’s ego was absolutely indomitable. He never left his pride at the door, nor did he ever consider wagering it for false hope. Why, to even consider it was _unthinkable_ – who would do such a thing, replace thoughts of the inevitable for a few preceding moments of consolation? Who could bear to convince himself for even a second that things might turn out okay, even when the doleful premonitions yelled with fervency in the back of his mind? Who truly possessed a mindset that could possibly be so… so _wrong_? Even beneath the waves of peril, there stood a sharp light that Rhett would have only described as ostentatious stupidity…

But Link… he called it comfort.

To have his security blanket actively derided by his best friend was utterly humiliating, but amongst their plethora of greater tribulations, a conversation regarding the matter was never had. It was futile to bring his feelings into the mix – after all, emotion was more often than not concealed
behind an enduring expression. Sure, the men would talk about their feelings – but their talks always involved more serious matters, like the subject of death, or injury, or the prospect of one of them having to go on without the other. They spoke of loyalty and of love, and of pain, and of all the other pressing topics that danced in their minds and needed a conversation. They never talked about such petty things as hurting one another’s feelings. Not anymore.

But instead of carrying on their stoic tradition, Link finally opted to break the unspoken rule. Perhaps, he reasoned, a discussion of the matter wasn’t vital – but it was certainly something worth mentioning, as he found his mental health was at risk. He could only hope that Rhett would understand, and so he kept his tone especially calm.

“Rhett… would you please listen to me,” he pleaded, his eyes tracing the rickety ceiling. The rafters were far from new, but coated in an obviously redone gloss finish – but the observation did no good at stalling Link’s emotions, and so he continued. “It needs to stop. Okay? This me and you fighting and bickering over the morality of how we choose to see things. Listen, I get that you’re stressed out and worried and scared, and my God, I am too. I’m terrified. But I choose to cope with that anxiety by telling myself it’ll be okay. You know what I mean? It’s just a coping mechanism, that’s all it is. There’s no truth behind it. And even if I did have high expectations, Rhett… give me one good reason you’d have for ruining that. And give me a real answer.”

As if he’d been punched in the gut, Rhett distanced himself from the other man as his brow pinched together with awe. “What do you mean give you one good reason?” his voice rose – and he ignored Link’s flinch, instead opting to yell. “I’ve given you plenty reasons, Link! I’ve said it a thousand times, but if you insist upon being this dense, let me remind you: I’m just being realistic. I’m not tearing you down to see you upset, I’m doing it for your own good. You’re living in a damn fantasy world where you’re just consistently disappointed and I just want you to be prepared for once. I’m the way I am not by choice, but by necessity.”

The statement was meant to be conclusive, but Link just couldn’t let it go – he had to defend himself, despite his friend’s anger, and despite his own tendency to withdraw from conflict. He was indeed mindful of the advice Rhett had once given in regards to their relationship – “conflict is guaranteed, and communication is key.” It was difficult to abide by now, though, as the larger man’s anger had only increased as their situation spiraled further and further into despair. Now, it seemed that instead, conflict was repressed and communication was forbidden. It was a broken system – but when paired with the toxicity of Rhett’s mood swings, Link was willing to let the pettier things slide. Most of them.

“You’re not understanding me,” Link forced through gritted teeth, his eyes fixed stably on the ceiling. “Stop acting like your thoughts have anything to do with mine, because they don’t. You always think you’re right about everything, and if I’m being honest, it pisses me off. I’ll think how I want to think, Rhett, and you think how you want to think. I just… I just can’t dream about doom all the time, okay? I know that’s what’s happening, but I don’t understand what good you get out of spending your life consciously submerged in it. If you find comfort in that, so be it. I don’t care. Bask in it all you want, brother. But just know that you’re stronger than I’ll ever be. Doing that would absolutely tear me apart.” There was a blatant catch in his voice – and for the first time in ages, the dejection was not aided by the embrace of his best friend. Tension, evidently, was just too high.

A long bout of silence followed Link’s rebuke where the men only stared away from one another – but somehow, the small man felt that their hearts were unified. Finally, he put forth the effort of turning his head in Rhett’s direction… and in his vision was a reflective sheen, simultaneously expressing sorrow and forgiveness. The blond’s chin quivered, almost undetectable from beneath his shaggy beard, and in his narrow expression there lay an unspoken apology. Link crinkled his brow at the sight – the fire of their arguments was always extinguished by sympathy. At last, Rhett
sighed, biting his lip before finally spilling the sour emotions within his heart.

“You think I’m stronger, huh?” he merely whispered, softened gaze falling slowly in line with Link’s. “I can tell you right now that’s not true.” A quiet smile adorned his lips with the statement – and it didn’t falter in the silence that followed, proving the testimony therein.

Oh, but it is, Link so desperately wanted to say, but there was a bitter taste in his mouth that accompanied the statement’s circular futility. And so, Link stared vividly at his best friend, whose barren face was a clean slate, devoid of expression yet fueled by emotion. Thankfully, their squabble seemed to be over – the mere solemnity in Rhett’s eyes was enough to affirm that, appearing to analyze every wrinkly, shadowed cranny of Link’s face. When the man’s cheeks shot up in a smile, crow’s feet crinkled his skin like a patch of disturbed leather. How truly lucky Link was to have a friend who understood him in spite of a short temper. Sure, Rhett’s patience was quick to wane – but with reluctant guilt, he would always rebound. That was why the two never split ways, even amongst the binding, undiscovered tensions that pressurized their hearts. Sitting up against the wall, Link clutched his chest – and Rhett touched his hand with his own, soft but firm.

“I’m sorry,” he verbalized at last. “I shouldn’t have blown up on you, dear. There’s no excuse for that.”

Link smiled in vain. On one hand, it was relieving to know that Rhett wasn’t playing victim – but on the other, knowing the man felt sorrowful for his actions was enough to make the small man pity him. Glasses slid halfway down his nose, Link’s eyes flicked to his broken companion, who couldn’t help but shed a tear for their dilemma. Unfortunately, empathy got the best of him – and so he responded the only way he knew how. “It’s okay,” he whispered faintly, twiddling his thumbs.

Rhett frowned. “No, buddy. It’s not,” his gravelly voice rumbled. There, he allowed Link’s head to fall with grace onto his shoulder, the small man’s nose buried against his collarbone as if to receive comfort from him. “You’re on edge. We both are. Last thing you need’s somebody yelling at you, you know that? But here you are telling me that my habits are okay. Let me tell you something once and for all – if ever you feel that I’m hurting you, I want you to speak up. I know I’ve been acting like it, but… I’m not a monster. This environment may have changed me for the worst, but I’m still able to reason. Even though I’ve probably not made that clear. Goodness, Link, you’re so fearful around me it breaks my heart. Hell, I know it’s my own fault – all I’ve done these past few months is yell and get upset over trivial things. I’ve only got myself to blame. I know. It’s really no wonder you’re scared.” Rhett’s hand traveled to his friend’s hip where it hooked at the bone and pulled him closer, and Link instantly fell victim to his touch. “You’re such a sweetheart. I love you to death. Just… please, I’m begging you Link, please put me in my place when I need it. I’ll do everything in my ability to make sure I’m not losing control. I want you to trust me again, and I want you to truly do that for me. You’re my entire universe, brother – all that and more. I can’t have the universe crumbling to the ground because of me.”

That was the point that anxiety dissipated altogether. Link knew then he could let down his guard – he was safe for the moment, an almost supernatural feeling. No longer did he feel endangered by the world’s harm, nor from Rhett’s threatening disposition – or so he assumed as he was wrapped in his brother’s embrace. He was shielded by a man who was weak in body, but possessed an impenetrable soul. He was loved by a man who admittedly made mistakes, but had constellations in his eyes and galaxies in his veins. It seemed sometimes that Rhett was absolutely boundless in every possible context – and for that, Link was grateful.

So he cuddled closer to the blond for warmth. Their clothing was far from ideal considering the temperature – it couldn’t have been more than fifty-some degrees, not to factor in the
compounding emaciation of their bodies. Skin clung to their bones, not so much as a paper thin layer to separate them. Only minutes after having escaped their cocoon of blankets, Link began to shiver in the arms of his most beloved companion. Responsively, Rhett hugged him nearer – goosebumps blanketed his arms like tiny mountains, only quashed in the areas the bigger man touched him.

“Thank you,” Link timidly chuckled, choosing to let their previous conversation slide – it was the same one they’d had a thousand times before, and thus it’d slowly begun to lose its meaning. For a few moments, they lay pressed against one another, Link growing intolerant of his hunger as it ripped viciously through his stomach – perhaps, he hoped, Rhett was feeling the same, though his stoicism seemed relatively genuine in the moment. Eventually, however, an accompanying pain built up in his abdomen – and so, a disgruntled sigh flew from his lips and crashed at once into Rhett’s ear. Damn it, he cursed his body in admonition. I’m sick of being sick.

Of course, the disturbance was followed by a swift expression of concern: “You okay?” Rhett spoke softly, leaning lovingly beside Link’s face.

Link only smiled, gratitude causing his eyes to shine. “Yeah,” he began, voice strained. “I’m alright.”

“You’re sure?” Rhett pressed – and is if to quell Link’s worries with the flick of his wrist, he encapsulated the man’s hand in his own. With the gesture, Link was consoled.

“Yes, Rhett,” he persuaded with finality. “I’m fine. And if I’m not, I will be someday. I’m sure of it.” His phrasing was admittedly mysterious, perhaps even symbolic – but to assert a claim with such broad positivity was exponentially reassuring.

Rhett huffed a puzzled breath, his entire body cradling Link as though the man were a defenseless child. There was a momentary pause where he allowed his face to nuzzle softly into the top of Link’s head, to which the small man was compelled. He could feel his friend’s teeth-bared smile in spite of not being able to see him – and only then did Rhett respond. “I’m not so sure what you mean by that,” he lowly confessed, “but for what it’s worth, I trust you a hundred and ten percent.”

It was there that trust was fully regained, hopefully never to be lost again – Link’s tired eyes closed with contentment, relieved of the veil of anxiety that had so voraciously devoured his soul. Someday, things would get better. They would reach the university. Though it was only intuition – and garbled intuition at that – of those things, Link was absolutely certain. The men had trudged too many miles past nests of casualties and manmade disaster to give in just ninety-six miles short of their destination. At that point, the small man reasoned, momentum alone would push them to the finish line. Perhaps their weary legs and broken hearts would give out – but both their dispositions were resolute, unrelenting. They would make it out alive and in one piece. That was a fact.

But for the time being, Link allowed himself to doze into a peaceable sleep, encountering in Rhett’s arms a tender and homely abode.

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A combination of exhaustion and frigidity led their weary bodies to the once quaint town of Nephi, which hosted the remains of destroyed agriculture and scorched farmland.

By Rhett’s calculations, they’d thus managed to elapse a total of twenty miles that day – a statistic
that exceeded their expectations, yet was somehow disappointing. It was only by the unpredictable scattering of exits that forced them to travel as far as they had – coming from Exit 202, they surpassed only a single road five miles into their trek, moving on in hopes another selection of off-ramps would follow nearby. Unfortunately, their theories proved to be incorrect, and so they were impelled to arrive at Exit 222 several hours after nightfall.

Amongst the hundreds of decimated buildings, Rhett determined their best bet was the only edifice that still stood. It was made of block, rusty peach paint corroded from the sides to reveal an unmodern concrete foundation. Upon reaching the door, Link took it upon himself to read the busted neon sign that hung within the frame – it was a 7 Eleven, ash and dust leaving the outside in ruins. Likewise, the interior was unrecognizable, racks of food and shards of wood and glass littering the floors and walls alike. A long-forgotten soda machine had toppled onto the tile and splattered an amalgamation of sticky liquids all over the store. It was as if a cyclone had hit the small city and uprooted any indication of a civilized world. The scent that wafted into Link’s nostrils was absolutely putrid.

As if by a miracle, the counter at the front of the store still stood. Its base was cracked, but the granite top was inexplicably unscathed – of course, it was difficult to see in the dull lighting, but the moon was able to partially glow through the hollowed ceiling. A last jolt of energy pushed Link to the front of the store, where he jabbed his hands into the reflective countertop and hoisted himself onto the surface. Rhett followed suit, his features tired and dim as he approached the brunet. Link’s head was several inches above his brother’s – a strange feeling indeed, but he began to care less and less as the gap between them dissolved. With a tilt of the head, a warm but sleepy grin adorned Rhett’s lips. “In all my years, I’ve yet to meet a man as innocent and childlike as my best friend,” he stated with little thought – and simultaneously, he expressed no regret.

The words broke the silence with the surprise of a chaste kiss, and in turn, Link’s cheeks swelled with an invisible blush. His eyes flicked teasingly to the floor. “What makes you say that?” he spoke with a monotone.

Rhett shrugged. “You’re like a cat, man. Always like to be as high as you can be – in mind, body and soul. Am I wrong?”

Soft laughter cascaded from Link’s lips with his friend’s lifeless attempt of making sense, but he agreed with him nonetheless. “Yeah, you’re right,” he said mockingly, gaze fixed on the dark, jagged shadows beneath Rhett’s eyes. It was a combination of the man’s features and slurred speech that led him to appreciate the innocence of Rhett’s disposition – and as his jaded eyes batted open and closed, a grin was plastered on Link’s face. “You’re getting tired on me, huh, brother?”

Cheeks prominent above a muted smile, Rhett reluctantly nodded and proceeded to thrust his head into his friend’s chest. With his arms encircling Link’s waist, the tall man allowed his elbows to rest upon the counter and support his miniscule weight. Rather fatigued himself, Link lightly reciprocated.

“Hey,” he whispered quickly, knowing good and well he needed to speak before Rhett nodded off. “How about you lay down, okay? It’s been a long day for both of us.” It was true – the men had run themselves ragged, so much so that Link earnestly considered lying down on the counter for the night before he realized the granite top would be much too cold for his thin, haggardly body.

Rhett didn’t budge – and in the embrace, he shrunk. “But I’m comfy,” he petulantly whined.

With that, Link couldn’t help but dissolve into a bout of quiet laughter. “I know, I know,” his sardonic tone adhered, though with a hint of genuine comfort. “You’re gonna get awful cold if
“Mhm,” the blond mumbled, seeming to drift from consciousness. Though the man was low on sleep, his behaviors were mismatched with his character – Rhett was in a nearly drunken state, it appeared, and for that Link was concerned. In a twisted way, though, it was kind of adoring – to see the man who lost everything he’d loved and accomplished in life smile for any reason was utterly remarkable. Even so, Link nudged his thighs into Rhett’s chest and coerced him into backing up. He kept a grip on his shoulders, assisting himself as he hopped into the floor – in the state his scrawny knees were in, they’d have never survived the blunt impact alone. Link held his friend’s hand so as to ground him, turning back to the countertop to unzip his bag and yank out the blanket he’d so carelessly tossed inside. There, he noticed the shiver in Rhett’s hand – it felt like an onslaught of violent tremors vibrating arrhythmically against Link’s knuckles. His breathing was hardly any better, erratic gasps surging through his nostrils in response to the rapidly dropping temperature. If their heavily clad, adjoined bodies trembling in the frozen air was any indication, it was going to be a hell of a night.

Instead of cloaking both of them in the blanket like he typically would, Link loosed Rhett’s hand and singly wrapped him up in the cloth roll. He then wrapped his arms around the man, pinning the ends to Rhett’s back and clutching the fabric tightly into his fist. They remained sedentary in their positions for minutes, not a word exchanged between them – but the silence, eventually, was cracked by none other than the small man on the outside:

“Getting warm?” Link began, trying to direct his voice so it fell on Rhett’s ear, but failing as the sound was lost in his chest.

“Mhm,” Rhett repeated, this time with a layer of authentic contentment.

Link smiled. “Good,” he simply replied. “Can you lay down for me, dear? I’ll help you down – just follow my lead, okay?”

Rhett did.

Together, the men reached the floor, knees dug into the infinitely frozen tile. Rhett’s head had collapsed forward into his brother’s shoulder, but Link didn’t care – in fact, the implication of trust was euphoric. Cradling Rhett with as much caution as he could muster, the brunet finally managed to lay him belly-up on the floor. Moonlight poured from the sky and ignited his features with a pale yellow glow – it was soft on his harsh, bold features, and in turn Rhett appeared much younger than he looked in broad daylight. His greying beard became a uniform shade in the darkness, as did the wrinkles on his forehead and around his eyes. Despite only being an illusion of light, Link discovered beauty and inspiration in the youthful façade of his companion. His lips had curved upwards into a mellow smile – and that had to count for something.

Only a thin layer stood between Link and the tile as he lay upon it – but, he found, a single hoodie was far from enough protection in such chilly conditions. As he lay shaking beside his best friend, he could only feel relief on Rhett’s behalf. He knew his own comfort was secondary – but even when his conscious mind grew selfishly more aware of his charitable decision, Link was incapable of quelling his discomfort. In addition, hunger was two-fisted that night, deeming it nearly impossible for the poor man to sleep – and so he dealt the best way he knew how: cuddling up to Rhett in spite of himself, hugging him as close to his skeletal torso as physics would allow.

With his mind finally at ease, Link tossed his glasses to the side and shut his eyes once and for all. He fell asleep that night convinced that their situation was reparable. Perhaps, he reflected, Robin was right after all – even though the odds were consistently stacking up against them, there was a blaring hope to be found. It wasn’t something either man could attribute to himself alone, however – it was the marital bond between them that cultivated every shred of positivity they could get their
hands on. Nothing could truly be said for the so-perceived impossibility of their dilemma considering they’d overcome more tragedy than any fictional story could even dream of – it sometimes seemed they were victims of magic, healed by sorcery and pushed by witchcraft. Somebody must have been watching over them, Link was sure of it. A guardian angel of sorts…

Or, the brunet mused, it was only the love and endlessly driven support they harbored for one another that brought them to where they were. The possibilities, it seemed, were endless – but before Link could begin to put a finger on it, he instead found himself fast asleep, nose smashed sideways into the back of his best friend…

…Or, rather, his angel.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

TW: Mentions of drug abuse, ambiguous implication of death

OCTOBER 04, 201X

Link was surprised to wake up alone that morning, tucked within Rhett’s blanket under patches of glaring sunlight.

The floor beneath him had finally gained heat, though the trend of colder weather was only progressing towards the possibility of snow. The morning was warmer than the previous night had been, though, that much was certain. In spite of the night’s plummeting temperatures, however, Link was cloaked in a layer of sweat that he quickly deduced couldn’t have possibly been his – chills had run down his body, frequently awaking him throughout the course of the night, and continued even still as he lay encapsulated on the tile. He figured it must have been Rhett’s, seeing as the man had garnered quite a reputation for sweating – perhaps not typically to such a degree, but even when all was taken into equation, the concept hardly fazed Link. In all likelihood, it wasn’t much of a drastic situation. There was simply too much to worry about for such a minute detail to be inspected.

Rhett was nowhere to be seen – not beside Link on the tile, not perched atop the counter, not hiding in the mess of racks and fallen machines – and for that reason, Link was concerned. With as much haste as his frail arms would allow, he pushed himself away from the ground and rose to his knees. After a few seconds’ calibration, he hoisted himself into the air, managing to land perfectly on his heels – but not without a shock to the ankles, which had received the brunt of the impact. Link sucked it up, however, and ambled ever so cautiously to the building’s entrance in search of his best friend.

From there, Rhett wasn’t too difficult to find – a continuous trail of ash-debossed footprints led Link to the right side of the building, where he discovered the man lying against the block. He was surrounded by wrappers and baggies, and in the sunlight his body shook softly. He wore a sweatshirt which appeared to have been absolutely drenched in sweat – and at his feet he’d discarded the hoodie he’d worn the night before in the same condition. Link’s stomach dropped at the sight of it all – but at the same time, situations like these were inevitable. Sometimes they would have sick days for no other reason than the ruthlessness of the environment – the illness that followed shock, or the various pains that blossomed and wreaked havoc in their cores… but other times, the environment was innocent. More often than not, though, Mother Nature was at fault for the men’s complications, and Link was left to speculate what exactly she’d done to his companion this time around. Based on his expression, Rhett was ridden with fretfulness.

Upon his short examination of the man, Link hustled to his side and knelt to his height against the wall. He brushed the soaked hair from his forehead and gripped his hand – greasy with sweat and riddled with salt –, placing it against Rhett’s chest. Stale, off-white crumbs studded his lips, reminding Link of a child who’d been eating sweets from behind the back of a disciplinary mother. In that sense, Link had caught him red-handed – but that was hardly the reason he worried for the poor man, his tired eyes drilling into Rhett’s solemn ones. He looked empty in every sense of the word.
“What’s wrong?” Link’s voice was quiet but demanding – he’d learned long ago that yelling his own anxieties only increased the tension between them and thus vowed to remain as calm as he could be.

Hesitant, Rhett broke eye contact and batted his eyelids a few times before giving a half-hearted shrug.

Link cocked his head to the side – the worry had rapidly begun to consume him with Rhett’s lack of response, and so his nerves got the best of him. “You need to talk to me, baby, okay?” he implored, squeezing Rhett’s shaken hand with a grounding firmness. “Can you do that? Can you talk to me?”

Rhett inhaled a sharp gasp – but it was followed by an emphatic shake of the head, eyes clenched shut.

By then, Link’s hand was sopping atop his brother’s pool of sweat – to think his body was shivering in such a condition was nearly preposterous. By instinct, Link swiftly tossed his arms around Rhett’s back and pulled the man against his own body, refusing to let go until he promised he felt better. “Rhett,” the brunet vehemently whispered, “I don’t know what’s going on, dear. But if one thing’s for damn sure, I’m staying right here until you’re okay. You understand?”

A weak nod brushed against Link’s neck.

The small man swept his hand up and down Rhett’s back and expelled a watery, heavy-hearted laugh. “Good, good,” Link managed, staving off a woeful stream of tears. “You’re okay, brother. You’re always okay. Take a deep breath. One step at a time.”

With his torso pressed against Rhett’s, Link felt their hearts beating as one – but it wasn’t long before the speed of Rhett’s surpassed his altogether and created a rhythm that thumped through his skin with the strength of a coursing river. The hunkered man cried silently out, his lips parted outside of Link’s collarbone. The wind caressed their bodies one at a time, and it ruffled Link’s jacket with calming ripples – but for Rhett, the breeze was too forceful. He became instantly tense, back reduced to bones as Link’s hand intimately stroked down the soaking column. With each new discovery, his eyes beaded with tears.

Once he gathered his own composure, Link released Rhett from his clutch and lay him gently against the wall. The color was flushed from Rhett’s face, and his eyes were an empty shade of grey. By some innate force, Link thrust his fingers beneath the other’s chin and guided his voided gaze into his own. Violet bags adorned his eyes, likely mimicking the same feature of Link’s – he hadn’t seen his reflection in ages, nor did he care to, for he feared the shock alone would strike him dead. It had become an admirable piece of Rhett’s appearance, however – the man had always been bug-eyed, and while the shaded area beneath aged him like nothing else on his body, it was perceived by Link as a sign of endurance. It remained true that Rhett was the strongest man he’d ever met, among a tidal wave of other reverent superlatives. Heart-wrenching as it was to see him chronically ill, Link harbored a faith that his best friend had everything it took to make it through.

Even if Rhett himself was unable to see that.

So he grabbed the blond by the hand once more and coaxed it into the sleeve of his sweatshirt. There, he tossed his hand inside and pulled Rhett’s arm so it met undivided with his thigh, all the while he stared hopelessly at Link. The smaller man could only fake a smile as he ripped the garment away from his friend, which immediately triggered an onset of tremors – and almost understandably so, as it was rather chilly outside, but not nearly to such a severe degree. Link used the drier bits of the shirt to dab as much sweat from Rhett’s torso as he could, but before his
skin was relieved of moisture, the shirt lost its ability to sponge up the sweat, and Link was forced to make do with the middling success he’d achieved. By then, Rhett had squished himself into a stiff, cadaverous ball, completely submitted to his companion.

Link analyzed Rhett’s body with as much precision as he could muster – there was a lustrous sheen on his back that glossed the mountains and caverns of scars, eventually leading up to the drenched cloth splint that held his back together. Link’s stomach twisted at the indication of injury, but by that point he’d no option but to grow accustomed to it. Thorns pricked his heart like daggers, digging into the flesh and drawing an endless supply of blood in the process. His hand traveled soothingly down Rhett’s spine.

“S’your back doing any better?” Link tried again. It was the fourth or fifth time he’d attempted to pry an answer from Rhett, subconsciously aware that the task was in vain. When his friend inevitably didn’t respond, Link carefully began rubbing circles into his trembling body. “We don’t have to go anywhere today, you know,” he softly reminded. “God, you poor thing… It’s okay. It’s okay. We got ahead yesterday.”

Rhett shrugged.

Oblivious as to how else he could help, Link simply lay against the wall with him. It was cathartic, existing at the side of his best friend – their bodies generated heat as they pressed against one another, which was rather depleting for Link, but he knew it must have been comforting for the trembling man at his hip. Rhett’s head lay heavy against Link’s shoulder, his eyes shut behind the burdensome exhaustion that swallowed him. In spite of it all, Link’s face glowed with hints of vitality and strength – his hope wasn’t disposable, and it remained valiant in thick and thin. The fact of the matter was that the two had survived a hundred percent of their life’s tribulations, which left a sweet taste in Link’s mouth – but that wasn’t to say his subconscious anxieties didn’t plague him like a whip snapping his skin. With contentment in his mind and apprehension in his heart, Link gathered the larger man and pulled him into his chest. Submissive and trusting, Rhett nodded off in his arms…

Link’s lips were soft as they pressed involuntarily into his brother’s temple, not so much as a note of insecurity in the gesture. Instead, a smile curled upon his face – and Rhett fitted his narrow shoulders into closer proximity of the other man’s body. There, his forehead met Link’s chin, and before either knew it, their bodies were intertwined.

“Is there anything I can do for you, brother?” Link pleaded in a whisper. “Can I – can I help you get up? Can I help you inside?”

Silence – and then slowly, Rhett shook his head.

Not willing to give up just yet, Link persisted. “Okay. It’s okay. I understand. You’re probably hurting like all hell and not saying a thing about it, huh?” he hypothesized aloud. “Can I get you anything? Something to eat, maybe? Or – is your splint okay, do you need me to adjust it?”

Questions spewed from his mouth as soon as they entered his mind – it was one of the beauties of his personality, as it truly exemplified his altruistic willingness and the lengths he would go to provide for his best friend.

But again, as though the window of communication had closed completely shut, Rhett shook his head.

Link frowned, eyes watering as his options began to dwindle. Suddenly, a lump was cast in his throat – and weakness fell immediately thereafter, pushing his face gently into the top of Rhett’s hair. “I just don’t know what to do,” he confessed as a sob fled from his lungs. “I can tell you’re not okay, baby, it’s as plain as day. But I don’t know how to help you. Not if you don’t talk to me.
The words were inarticulate and garbled, and Link knew it to be true – he could hardly understand himself, much less be understood by a man whose mind was buried in haunting thoughts that likely deflected his message altogether. Even so, Link vowed it to be the final thing he’d say, as it was made relatively obvious that none of his words were permeating even the surface of Rhett’s mind. He realized how ineffective his love-driven deliverances had been – and similarly how dire his brother’s condition had become in even the past couple of minutes, his silence burdening the longer it continued. Finally, Link pulled his free hand away from Rhett’s side and pressed it delicately into his chest. “How can I fix this?” he whispered to himself, knowing that speaking any louder would only send his pleas back into the void from whence they sprung. There, in the disquietude of his own thoughts, Link lost his composure entirely – and he felt his spirit burn along with the tears that singed his face, his hand withdrawing on Rhett’s fabric splint. Without the accompaniment of his companion’s smile, Link was absolutely alone.

…And it wasn’t until he felt a light touch on his hand that the man was yanked out of his dolorous trance.

Link’s eyes batted open from atop Rhett’s head. The scent that wafted into his nose was deep-seated and earthy, much like the gritty landscape displayed before him. With all the strength in his body, he managed to stave off an oncoming sob, his breathing entirely halted as Rhett’s shaken hand clapsed feebly around his own. There was something supernatural in the manner with which their bodies were able to communicate with one another. Something ethereal. Their fingers interlocked as naturally as they always had…

“Stay,” Rhett’s muted lips pushed out at last. It was hardly a whisper – but at the same time, the lone syllable was absolutely thunderous as it boomed from his throat.

And Link, who had never in his life been one to stray from his loyal disposition, obeyed the man’s request without a second thought. He was unable to swallow the emotion that followed Rhett’s plea, and so he stopped trying and allowed his mind’s dam to burst as the pressure crumbled it to bits. Link ripped his hand away from his brother’s and clutched his back with a hot passion, and with that, their foreheads and noses were pressed together. By then, tears were hurtling down Link’s face – and his stomach was sick with worry and guilt. Somehow, though, he mustered the ability to speak:

“Darling,” he began softly, unprepared for the implacable tsunami that followed and flowed down his cheeks. “You have my word.”

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In an effort to preserve what remained of Rhett’s energy, Link persuaded him to bed an hour before nightfall.

The day was virtually fruitless, as Rhett’s condition had kept the both of them at the 7 Eleven – and, it seemed, he’d not improved a bit. Only one word evaded his lips that day, and no amount of Link’s coercion could draw another… but damn it, did he try. He craved the sound of his voice, no matter how gravelly or ill it may have sounded – Link could have listened to him talk all day, and all night, and for weeks on end. He desired to hear even the silliest of things upon Rhett’s mind. If only he would just say something.
The reality, however, was that Rhett’s muteness was not of his own volition, but rather it stemmed from the evident weakness that weighed down his body. By midday, he was unable to sit up on his own – although on the bright side, his appetite remained insatiable to contrast with the symptom. With Rhett’s body parallel to his own, Link fed him everything within his reach, which luckily was a lot, seeing as the taller man’s bag was perched against the wall. “Are you hungry?” Link would ask, and Rhett would nod – and Link would become puzzled as to why his illness was consistent with what he’d experienced in the past, but with greater severity and a complete absence of nausea. Even so, he would oblige with a smile. If Rhett was eating, he took it as a good sign, no matter how he rolled the dice.

With the man finally bundled up in blankets within the store, Link took it upon himself to lie down on the asphalt outside and gaze at the sky. The stars were beyond alluring, constructed by divinity and hung perfectly with care – each shone brightly enough to convey a symbol of hope, but not one glowed ostentatiously, and with their relative dimness, Link’s anxieties were soothed. Even something so infinitely vast as the universe was simple – it was an ebony curtain pricked with millions of miniscule lights. It was the darkness that swallowed the earth at night and was mysteriously pulled away by morning. It was filled with magic, it was endlessly spacious, it was the inventor of time and conductor of law – it was absolutely everything.

…but it wasn’t.

There were times that Link had sat outside and watched the stars pan across the planet wondering, on an existential level, if earth itself was truly as negligent as the hundreds of potential suns implied. Of all the stars in all the galaxies in all of the universe (of all the universes), it wasn’t even a question. There were planets orbiting the stars, many of which must have been in the stars’ Goldilocks zone – a term he’d picked up from Rhett –, so probability alone could prove life on other planets… right?

Facts were facts, and Link refused to contend with them at such an hour. It was far too late for such conjecture, he reasoned, shushing his mind’s hungering curiosity when it pleaded for intrapersonal debate. The beauty of humanity, Link found, was the concept of relativity – all things were subjective, even the concept of the universe. Rhett had a definition centered around logic, no doubt – but Link’s idea of the universe was more… sensitive.

Everything in existence, concrete or abstract, possessed and obsession for orbit – all things were pulled towards a center. All things craved revolution. Electrons orbited nuclei. Objects were bound to earth by gravity. Planets revolved around the sun. Solar systems were yanked around by one another, and stars circled black holes to create galaxies…

Rhett’s interpretation of the universe would be defined with these phenomena interacting on an even larger scale, and in greater quantities, spanning the entire circumference of the cosmos. Physics, chemistry, astronomy, mathematics. Facts and logic. Rhett McLaughlin thought with rationale.

Link’s interpretation of the universe was the polar opposite. Sure, it wasn’t a factual definition – rather, it was a connotation. Link could see the stars and the black abyss that surrounded them – hell, he was staring right at it – but in his closed off view, was it really more than just a blanket of faraway constellations? Was it more than just calming scenery, and were the pinpricks of light as full of purpose as Rhett made them out to be? The universe was a broad and infinite term – in fact, it wasn’t until first grade that Link understood even the simplest strings of its complexity…

…and who would have taught him of such a concept other than Rhett himself?

Link was calm as the memory, like a gentle tide, washed over him:
“What’re you huggin’ me for?!” Link giggled, bound in his seven-year-old friend’s gangly arms. “I ain’t been gone but two days!”

Rhett only squeezed harder. “’Cause I missed you, silly! Two days is an awful long time to be without a sidekick.”

“I’m not your sidekick!” Link yelled jokingly. “I missed you too, Rhett. I hate bein’ sick. I ain’t allowed to play with nobody when I’m sick.”

Rhett released him.

“Yeah, I know. Your mom’s a real stickler. I’m glad you’re better, though. I’ve been lonesome,” he smiled. “You’re my bestest friend in the whole wide universe!”

Link’s brow furrowed at the word – he’d heard it a few times before, but it was the first time he’d ever heard Rhett say it. “What’s a universe?” he asked innocently.

Rhett laughed.

“The universe?” he repeated. “Well... It’s ever’thing. Anything you can think of, it’s in the universe.”

To Link, the concept of something so vast was imponderable. He pouted for a moment, then looked at his friend with a curious gleam in his eye. “Is Buies Creek in the universe?”

Timelessly, the apples of Rhett’s cheeks were pushed up with a smile. “Yeah, Link. All o’ North Carolina’s in the universe. So’s America, and the oceans, and the world, and the sun, and the moon, and Mars, and –”

“What about dragons?!” Link interrupted, completely mesmerized. “Is there dragons in the universe?”

Rhett’s eyes rolled towards the sky in thought. “I’ono,” he finally settled. “Maybe.”

“But Rhett, you said it was anything I can think of!”

The taller boy chuckled. “Yeah, I guess I did. I reckon there must dragons somewhere.”

Link was satisfied with the answer. “’n’ all this time my mama’s been sayin’ they’re mythical! I can’t wait to tell ’er what you said.” Excitement coursed through the young boy’s veins at the thought – but, oddly, his friend didn’t reciprocate. A few moments of silence passed before Link glanced up to Rhett, whose eyes were squinted.

“What’s ‘mythical’ mean?” Rhett asked.

It was rare that Link was able to teach the older boy something new, as his knowledge and wisdom seemed so vast at the time, and so he smiled with the opportunity. “Well...” he stalled for a moment, pursing his lips. “It’s magic. It’s stuff that ain’t real. Y’know, like ghosts ‘n’ things – it’s make believe.”

Rhett cocked his head to the side. “Well I don’t believe in make believe,” he asserted. “Think about it. Anything you can think of’s in the universe somewhere. So long as it obeys the Lozzafizix, that is.”

Another peculiar term. “What in the heck’s a Lozzafizix?”
“Oh, Link,” Rhett spoke, his tone wise and condescending. “The Lozzafizix is what separates the possible from the impossible. If you can’t do somethin’, it’s ‘cause the Lozzafizix won’t allow it.”

It was a vague description – but somehow, Link knew exactly what his friend meant. “Is the Lozzafizix the reason I can’t reach the cookie jar when my mama puts it on the top shelf?” he asked.

“Yes,” Rhett said.

Petulant, Link crinkled his nose. “Well where is he?! I’m gonna give him a piece o’ my mind!”

Rhett shrugged. “I reckon he’s out rulin’ the universe. I imagine he’s a lot busier than you ‘n’ me are.”

“Yeah,” the smaller boy agreed, taking everything his best friend said as fact.

Just like he always had, and just like he always would.

When the morning bell rang, Link turned on his heel to walk into the building without closure – but he was caught on the shoulder just in the nick of time. He craned his head back and stopped dead in his tracks, knowing it was Rhett’s hand that had clasped him so firmly. When their eyes met, both boys smiled – and Rhett caught up with his friend, just to hug him once again.

Link’s heart began to beat faster – it was fear, unfortunately, that motivated it. “Rhett,” he whispered, his body tense. “We’re the only two boys who hug at school. You ever noticed that?”

With that, Rhett only squeezed tighter. “I know it,” he confessed. “Don’t you think nothin’ of it, either. People can say whatever they want to. We hug ‘cause we’re best friends.”

Link smiled; the words had calmed him down significantly. “You’re right,” he commended, finally wrapping his arms around the other boy’s waist. “And if it means anything, I’d hug you even if the Lozzafizix wouldn’t let me.”

A pause – but Link felt Rhett’s giggling in the embrace.

“I know you would,” he said, finally pulling away from Link. “You’re always doin’ the impossible. ‘Least in my eyes.”

That made Link feel special.

“You know what I think?” Rhett continued. “I think there’s universes in people, too. But only the real special ones,” he winked. “You’re one of ‘em, Link. Ain’t no doubt about it.”

The grin on Link’s face was priceless with the remark. He swore he would never forget those words, never ever ever for as long as he lived…

And it was true that he remembered them always. In his mind, he would replay the scene from time to time, just to recall Rhett’s endless love for him when the poor man was unable to remind him himself. Sometimes, the past was all Link had – and he clutched onto his memories for dear life, knowing with certainty that they wouldn’t be pristine forever. Nights like this were bittersweet.

Link’s reverie was interrupted when the growling in his stomach became unbearable – he couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten, but it had evidently been quite a while judging by the pangs that shot through his body. Despite the pleas of his back, he lifted himself into an upright position and pinched the bridge of his nose with a final, conclusive thought. When he made it to his knees,
he began to notice that his body wasn’t nearly what it used to be – his joints shouted at him as his
dreadfully miniscule weight pressed down upon them, and his muscles were nearly unable to push
him away from the ground. Eventually, he gave up trying to stand altogether and opted to crawl
back to the side of the store – it was a sign of defeat and regression, neither of which Link was
proud of, but the feeling was subordinate to the violent hunger that surged through him. His wrists
ached as they carried him single-handedly to the concrete building.

His own bag was inside, but Link didn’t have the energy the feat of making it into the store
required. Instead, he leaned himself against the block and tore open his companion’s bag in an
attempt to scavenge any remaining food. Hand guided by moonlight, he filed thoroughly through
the contents, his hand running across empty wrappers and boxes, and to no avail – so, Link zipped
the pocket closed and tried for another. There’s no way in hell he ate everything in this bag, Link
reasoned with himself, knowing it couldn’t have logically been so – but with each vacant pocket,
the expectation dwindled. He ripped the front zipper open as his last resort, which was where he’d
placed first aid items like aspirin and bandages and Robin’s vitamin blend. Perhaps something had
gotten lost in there – a pack of crackers or something – but unfortunately, Link’s hope was
exhausted when his fingers brushed only hard plastic bottles and the rigid surface of a matchbox.
He was simply too weak to retrieve his own bag from within the store, and so he arrived at the last
option his blurred mind could process – he would pop a Tylenol in an effort to quash the pain in
his bones and pray his stomach would leave him alone for the night. It wasn’t a promising plan by
any means, but it was the best he could come up with. Rubbing his temples, Link bent over his
knees – a headache was approaching. His eyes begged him for sleep, though, and with
determination his hand shot into the bag and yanked the bottle out by the corrugated lid.

But no rattling sounded when the bottle was lifted.

For a moment, Link was only puzzled – he lifted the bottle to his vision and observed with his
own eyes that there were, in fact, no pills left therein. He could’ve sworn it was half full just a few
days ago – in fact, he knew it to be true, for he’d taken one the morning they left the house…

…And just like that, the dots began to connect.

Like a map of constellations, pictures formed and unraveled in Link’s mind to tell the bottle’s
story. It wasn’t an innocent tale by any means – and if he were being honest, it was a tragedy.
Tears beaded in his eyes and fell to the ground along with his heart, beating like a drum as it all
but flew out of his chest. There were questions he couldn’t answer, but he knew one thing for
sure: Rhett had swallowed each and every pill, and that was undoubtedly what had taken such a
horrific toll on his body. With all his might, Link threw the bottle onto the ground, its hollow
sound deafening.

And shit, was he scared.

That night was, without question, the worst of them all. Link knew he was stranded outside, a
soundproof wall between himself and his brother – his soulmate –, not knowing whether or not
the man was dead or alive. It was an agonizing game of Schrodinger’s best friend – and with
poison-dipped claws, reality and all its probabilities were injected into Link’s heart, ripping him to
shreds. It was a situation that would affect him psychologically for a lifetime, no matter what the
outcome was. Link tried his damnedest to rise to his feet and save Rhett, he truly did – but not
even adrenaline was on his side that night… and so, he was left to cope alone.

With nothing to do but endure the painstaking wait for morning, Link hunched towards the
ground so his elbows rested on his knees – and there, with his hands cupping his face, he cried
with so much force that the wind was knocked out of him.
OCTOBER 05, 201X

It was somewhere around five in the morning before Link finally passed out that night, which followed the longest and most excruciating period of wakefulness he’d ever experienced in his life.

As though the sandman himself had barged into the small town and personally knocked him out cold, Link collapsed onto the ground in the midst of thought. His head spun as if by drunkenness, but it was purely exhaustion that transported him into a comatose realm – it was the combination of his wiry mind, a general state of discomfort, and the freezing atmosphere that projected him inevitably into a nightmare, where he spent the remainder of his unconsciousness. In the back of his mind, the pain was somehow just as strong – but it wasn’t long before the dream stole the feeling away and replaced it with a sense of fear. Like everything he wished his world to be, it began as nothing – a black and empty void wherein all was silent, vacant, endless…

And to Link’s misfortune, he’d always been afraid of the dark.

Link’s chest grew tighter and tighter with each second that passed, for he knew all too well that the lightless abyss was only temporary. Fear kept him at a standstill for several minutes, which felt like centuries – but as the darkness became more daunting, or perhaps just boring, he made a split-second decision to break through the anxiety. Irrationally, he lifted his foot in the dream and placed it a few inches in front of the other – and there, the first indication of light was divulged. It was only a star, directly overhead and shining so incredibly dim that it was almost unnoticeable. Another step produced the same – a yellow dot, directly across the sky from the first. Link found that with each step, a new star became visible – and the faster he walked, the brighter they became. Desperate to see something materialistic – anything – he sped up to a jog, and in seconds began to run as quickly as his feet could carry him. Soon, the sky was littered with stars…

And Link found himself with his neck craned upwards and his eyes fixed superstitiously upon them, never daring to flick his vision to the newly lit world around him. It was intuition that begged him not to look down – a gut feeling that was more like the barrel of a gun pressed against his skin than it was an internal warning. The temptation, however, only escalated in strength. It was almost as though someone had connected a rein to his vision and begun yanking his eyes towards the ground – and Link fought the coercion as best he knew how, he truly did, but a lifetime of deferring to his best friend for answers was enough to prove that curiosity was his kryptonite. Perhaps unfortunately, he capitulated to the voracious force.

An acute weight was lifted from his head when his eyes fell downward, but the significance of what filled in his vision was a mystery. Link scrunched his brow, wondering – for displayed before him was the sandy ground he’d begun to know all too well. The sand and grit were as plain as day beneath the stars – and he hovered an inch or so above it, deeming him an invasive and supernatural being. But, because he so saliently discovered he did not belong in this universe, he found that he was confined to a pivot point at his feet.
Clarity settled shortly thereafter, and it was made obvious to Link that the ground he stood on was none other than that of the house in which his life had almost ended. The road was faint but detectable in the distance, and upon further induction, the setting was perfectly executed down to the rocks and divots of the plain. The immaculacy was borderline horrifying – in reality, Link was purely unable to remember such minor details as these, yet he recognized them instantaneously…

…And his stomach dropped to the ground, knowing it may as well have been their gravesite.

At once, the symbolism struck Link like a bolt of lightning. There he stood, the apparition of his feet planted icily in the rocks from which Robin had lifted his body to safety – his toes were numb, and the bitter grains filled the spaces between them. Link’s ankles were shackled, as were his wrists, as was his heart. Though an insatiable fire burned through his body begging him to cry out in fear, only a gentle, compliant countenance was displayed from his expression. In his unconsciousness, he couldn’t quite put his finger on as to why – but it didn’t take a genius to know that his vivacity for life had diminished altogether. Something foundational to Link’s steadfast nature had gone missing – something that was absolutely necessary for him to continue. But what on earth could it have been?

The flames engulfed his soul faster and faster, Link’s eyes cold and glazed as the burns traveled through his core. The shackles became instantly tighter, and they snapped his wrists and ankles in a swift maneuver – metal and rust dug into his skin and drew blood, to which he responded by gritting his teeth. Link’s stomach lurched at the sight of the vermillion spindles trickling down his thumbs, but he somehow remained stoic in his frightless rebellion. To whom his charade entertained, perhaps he would never know – but he harbored a vast satisfaction knowing that his emotional trickery went unappreciated to the forces that so tortured him. In a manner, he’d won the intangible battle.

Just when a triumphant smirk dared to grace his lips, Link was visited by a blinding storm, torrents of wind scourging his skin and whipping sand into his eyes. Before he could even react, he felt each of his shoulders crushing between a brutal clamp – and his eyelids were forced open to endure the piercing grains. It wasn’t much longer before Link’s fear escalated to terror and flight had embedded itself into his conscience. Between his pulverized bones and shredded skin, he was only able to throw himself towards the ground – but as he tried, he found the effort was to no avail, for he was caught by a blunt rod that met firm with his ribs. The impact knocked the air out of his lungs, leaving him collapsed just above the ground to gasp in the whirling ash. The grip on his shoulders grew tighter – and eventually, the skin and bone was pierced entirely, the victimizing fingers wriggling through the destruction. There, Link’s body snapped backwards so that his heels touched beneath his thighs, where he’d bent over into a fetal position. A set of brute fingers laced his hair and yanked him back to his feet…

And by the nape of the neck, he was dragged like a dog to the side of the house. The starlight was blaring as it illuminated the panels and shattered windows, the shadows beneath jagged and black. Link’s chest heaved for air, yet in the desperation he all but suffocated. The air was thinning before his eyes – it was the impossibly fine dusts of the storm that generated a film in his lungs. It was purely nauseating.

When the dragging ceased, Link expelled a sigh of relief. His heart pounded with the strength of panic, but with the rhythm of complacency. Perhaps he would be subjected to an incredible amount of pain – perhaps it would never end. But, perhaps, the encapsulating clutch of death would strangle his soul from misery. Only fate’s unyielding hand would tell.

Almost lovingly, the grip on his shoulders lessened and cupped the sides of his arms. For a moment, the frightened man was relieved.
But when he was pivoted to view the side of the house, the anxiety only increased tenfold.

It was the only piece of the setting that wasn’t exactly how Link recalled – just a few feet from the home’s leftmost wall was what his eyes first believed to be a mirage, but he quickly came to realize that the bottomless trench was no illusion. Instead, the glassy pond stared him right in the face, reflecting the stars and flowing beneath their grandeur. He’d no time to ponder how and when it was surfaced, though, as upon his glimpse, a forceful heft was strung around his neck, dragging him instantaneously to the ground. He was eye-level with the pond.

The ghosts of hands stroked his chin and left a haunting residue. Link’s eyes, which were wet with tears, were only partially able to focus on the object that had dragged him down – but once he made out the item, he was stricken with fear. The chain around his neck was tightened so that it crushed his throat, each end splayed across the ground and ultimately connected to a spotted, crumbling millstone. Foreseeing his fate, his arms became tense in an effort to free himself from the shackles…

And as if to offer a shred of mercy to the poor man, his reaper lifted the stone with one arm and aided Link to his feet with the other. His blood seemed to freeze in his veins – he stared down the pond like the barrel of a gun, its currents monstrous and uninviting. Link’s knees wobbled and gave in, but his weight was wholly supported – the brunet was suspended into the air by his assassin, a merciless grip beneath his arm. Deflections of starlight contrasted with the waters and forced the world to shine.

Link was lifted suddenly into the air, a sob managing to flee his throat before his doom – and at once, he was cast into the pond.

The water splashed coldly onto his skin and seeped into the wounds thereon. He shrieked out in pain – it was the same acidic water that had nearly killed his best friend. The stone sank quicker than Link’s body, so the chain dragged him down with force. For one reason or another, his mouth was ajar – and the liquid that entered tasted sour, just as the droplets that had once pummeled his body. Suffocation consumed his lungs within seconds – Link had never been adept at holding his breath, especially in situations where anxiety was high…

With only a moment’s consciousness to spare, Link’s eyes darted open in spite of the corrosive water. For the most part, the scene was murky and vacant – particles of dust and matter shone by starlight and wriggled through the pond’s depth, glimmering and ascending at once into disappearance. A quick scan of the floor surfaced to Link’s vision a shadowed amalgamation of rock and muddied ash. Only nearby objects could be made out with any degree of certainty – a jagged stone at his feet, a plastic bottle a few centimeters behind it. Link felt the burn of carbon dioxide in his lungs that begged him to breathe in – but instead, he opted to wait for the sharp blow of unconsciousness, for he reasoned that drowning in insentience was the better option.

And as his eyes grew closer to ejecting from his skull, Link’s vision intensified. Shadows became objects as blurred lines became crisp. He fell deeper into himself, eyes darting back and forth with a speed beyond his own control – but in the evaluation, he captured a still image that plagued his mind for the remainder of his truncated life…

Because there, on the other end of the ruggedness lay the very object for which the dream existed. The earth stopped spinning. The stars stopped shining. Time, as a concept, halted to a complete and utter stop.

For splayed across the rocks was the unidentifiable, bloated corpse of Rhett, his skin and bones beginning to dissolve into the pond.
“Please…”

The syllable was garbled and desperate. It landed on Link’s ear before he could even open his eyes – and only then did he find that his lungs had nearly shriveled up and collapsed into his ribcage, the fire of noxious gas begging to be replaced with oxygen. By instinct, Link gasped, sucking in more air than he could take – but when he bent over to cough, his chest was caught by a firm and loving grip that only a brother could provide. Tears streaking his cheeks, Link craned his neck and traced his vision along the arm that held him captive. Of course, the bony appendage belonged to Rhett, the man’s face terribly distraught as his eyes locked with the brunet’s.

But his countenance was quick to change. The large man shut his eyes and allowed his dam to burst, wrapping his arms immediately around Link upon his revival. His beard prickled intimately into the other’s neck. “Oh, Link!” he cried, fervent. “My God, I thought I’d lost you, baby doll…”

Link squinted with the words. Wooziness clouded his head.

Rhett sniffled into his shoulder and arose, relieved in his mind but physically trembling. He grabbed the smaller man by the wrist and coaxed him into looking up, to which Link lazily complied, his eyes shining. Like always, Rhett was gentle and sweet, allowing his thumb to travel the expanse of his brother’s hand before leaning down once more to plant a kiss on his hairline. It seemed to be the only gesture that could force him to smile.

Chin quivering, Rhett cocked his head to the side and took the conversation by the reins. “What’s the matter, huh?” he cut to the chase. “Don’t try and hide nothin’, now, you hear me?”

Link nodded. Between the dream and the authentic surprise of seeing his best friend alive, he figured it would be a long conversation. The brunet exhaled a deep, labored breath in preparation.

“I had a nightmare,” he whispered at once, eyes darting to Rhett’s chest.

A warm aura followed the confession from Rhett’s end. His grip with Link’s wrist intensified – and the small man could see his brow furrowed in his periphery. Rhett made an effort to regain Link’s eye contact, but to no avail – he was simply too fraught to reciprocate. Even so, the taller man’s head dipped so Link could see it if he so chose.

“I’m sorry,” were the first words to escape Rhett’s lips, seemingly out of bemusement. “I don’t know if it’ll make you feel any better, but I can assure you it’s all over now. This is real life. As unfortunate as it may be,” he gestured to the world, “I promise. You’re okay now, love.”

Link batted the tears from his eyes in utter disbelief. How, he wondered, had it come to the point that his best friend held him so closely when just hours before he could have sworn he was dead? It didn’t add up – none of it did. Link should have been the one crying atop Rhett’s ragged body. Link should have been the one embracing him like there was no tomorrow, whispering sweet assurances into his ear. It was truly the most abhorrent switching of roles he’d ever lain eyes on.

“How are you alive?” Link bade suddenly, his voice laced with tears.

Only when Rhett smiled was Link able to see the unforgiving exhaustion in his eyes – the shadows beneath them had never been darker. “How am I alive?” he parroted incredulously. “I don’t – Link, don’t worry about me, okay, dear? Let’s focus on getting you taken care of,” he implored, shaking his head.

Link’s eyes narrowed to analytical slits as Rhett lay a hand on his forehead and swept the stringy
hair towards the blacktop. Did his memories deceive him? Just the day before, Rhett had been so ill he couldn’t even sit up on his own, let alone care for another – and it was evidenced that the causation was the emptied bottle of pills he’d found within the man’s bag. The concept of Rhett surviving the night in and of itself was phenomenal. To see him in good health was impossible.

And Link was wise enough to know with assurance that was the case.

So, with all of the focus he could rally within his rattled mind, Link batted Rhett’s arm away and jabbed the balls of his wrists into the asphalt. There, he was able to hoist himself up with a decent amount of speed – but not without a striking pain to the abdomen, which he did his damnedest to ignore. Of course, he couldn’t hide it from Rhett – the larger man’s grip immediately fell onto his shoulders and pleaded him to lie back down. Again, Link refused to comply and shook him off. His eyes burned with tears.

“Link, please –”

“Get off me!” he hissed, his blood boiling. “Don’t you dare play games with me, Rhett. Not about this.”

There, a bout of silence swallowed the men and allowed them to physically gravitate towards one another as though they were the only two objects in the universe. Before he knew it, Link was pressed into his brother’s side – the bones of his ribs were softer than they had been, but still harsh. They were so close, in fact, that Link was able to feel the confusion in Rhett’s expression.

The bigger man rubbed circles into Link’s side. “I’m not ‘playing games’,” he slowly contended, his voice low and raspy. “I genuinely don’t know why you’re mad at me. You do things like that, you know? You get upset and pouty before we even have the chance to talk. You’re mad before I can even offer defense. And I’m not trying to put you down, alright? I’m just saying things are tough now. Things are serious. We don’t have time to be this petty. You’ve got to talk to me, babe.”

Link crossed his arms. “For God’s sake, Rhett,” he began in a whisper, which rapidly escalated into lividity. “How the hell are you gonna tell me I’m the one that needs to communicate?! How have you the nerve?!! My standard of communication should be the last thing on your mind, let me tell you that right now. You ought to practice what you preach before you go around cracking a whip on me –”

“What are you talking about?!” Rhett yelled, thrusting Link from his arms. He opened his mouth defensively, but was shortly interrupted before so much as a syllable was uttered.

“See?! You are playing games!” Link pointed recklessly. “I can’t believe you’re making me spell this out to you, Rhett – I absolutely can’t believe you right now –” he paused, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You were so sick yesterday I honestly thought you were gonna die. That was something that was looming over my head very prevalently. I came outside after I put you to bed – damn it, I should’ve stayed with you... – but no, I went outside and I looked at the stars, and I thought about our lives. I had to get away, just to think. You were on my mind every second. You were everything, Rhett... My heart was broken by fear. It was incinerated by the prospect of walking back through that door and finding you dead. I’m not exaggerating – I literally didn’t expect you to make it through the night...” He stopped to collect his composure, to which Rhett responded by approaching him once more and gathering Link into a side hug. His chin rested easily on his shoulder.

“Shh,” Rhett hushed with intensity. “I’m right here. I’m right here.”

By then, the tears that fell from Link’s eyes couldn’t be masked, so he allowed them to drop
freely. “I saw everything…” he elaborated.

Rhett’s brow crinkled with the statement. He raised his thumb and dabbed the salty rivers from Link’s cheeks, coaxing the man to look at him in the process. The gravity of Rhett’s expression couldn’t hide the guilt buried therein – Link could see the fear of confrontation in the wrinkles of his face, in the emptiness of his irises…

He’d been caught red-handed.

“I saw it all,” Link reiterated, knowing the other man was frozen. “It’s like everything else wasn’t enough, Rhett. The fact that you couldn’t eat for days and you suddenly eat everything in plain sight. I still have that image of you branded into my mind – when I found you drenched in your own sweat outside this building, trembling, unable to support yourself, so you just pressed your body into mine. All that was just icing on the cake, you know? But guess what, Rhett? That communication bullshit you just spewed at me evidently doesn’t mean a damn thing to you. I found that empty plastic bottle in your bag. I found it. I thank God you’re still alive, brother, I do. It’s… It’s genuinely the greatest relief I’ve ever been given in my life. But along with that, Rhett… it’s the first time in our entire friendship that you’ve betrayed me. Do you understand what you’ve done? Do you understand that you’ve nullified all those years – those decades of unadulterated trust between us? Trust was never something we had to work on. It was something that was always there by nature. Trust was… it was a constant. It was concrete. But it was also fragile,” he cried. “And now it’s just some abstract concept that I’m no longer able to feel for anyone but myself.”

The air seemed to chill immediately, sending shivers down their spines and forcing them to huddle together despite the context of their circumstance. Even if Link had lost trust and respect from his companion, he was still more than happy to wallow into the warmth of his body – his living, breathing body – and he would forever be grateful for the fact he’d pulled through. This wasn’t about their incredible connection. In fact, it was nothing to do with it. It was simply the loss of a component that was once so vast, but had now become a source of Link’s anxiety.

As Rhett’s empathetic nature would have it, he spiraled into a breakdown and hugged his brother close as he cried softly against him. The dampness that followed and seeped onto Link’s skin caused his heart to sink to his stomach – but he stayed right where he was in spite of it. His love for Rhett was still as sacrificial and whole as it had always been. Just as it always would.

“Link,” the blond choked out desperately, clinging to his friend’s shirt. “It’s not what you think. It’s not what you think, I swear –” he pleaded. “I didn’t – I didn’t mean to do what I did, it just happened, I promise. I just… Oh, God, Link, I’d never leave you to fend for yourself. N-Not if I could help it –”

“Calm down, Rhett,” Link tried, saddened by his friend’s reaction. His hand swept up and down his back in an effort to console him, hitting the bump of his bandages each time he approached his neck. “Calm down, brother. You’re okay.”

Rhett lifted a hand to his mouth and shut his eyes for a moment’s deliberation. “I didn’t mean to hurt you,” he whispered. “I didn’t even mean to hurt myself. It was actually the opposite of my intention. I… I’ve been in a lot of pain, buddyroll. I can’t even convey to you how much. It just got so bad after the rain incident that I honestly couldn’t move without doubling over and bawling my eyes out. From there it was just one pill after another until I’d lost count and eventually exhausted the entire bottle. Really, it was all beyond my control. I had to do something, okay? If it means anything, I’d have just lain down and let nature run its course right then and there had it not been for you. I’ve said it a thousand times, Link, but I’m serious. I wouldn’t have even made it out of Los Angeles without my best friend.”
Link immediately gathered the broken man in his arms and hugged him close. “Rhett James McLaughlin, I love you so much more than I could ever begin to describe,” he choked out with resolution. “You’ve made it absolutely clear to me that you’re able to make it through just about anything life throws at you, you know that? You’re a born risk taker. But you’ve got to be careful, yeah?”

The surrounding air chilled their bones – and with a quiver in his voice, Rhett capitulated to acquiescence. “I know it,” he whispered, a layer of guilt to his tone. “We didn’t get halfway through Utah to give up ninety miles from victory. If nothing else, brother, we’ll make it out by pride alone.”

Link nodded slowly in agreement. It was absolutely miraculous – how Rhett hadn’t died of an overdose was phenomenal in and of itself, but for the man to demonstrate as flawless of a recovery as he did was outside the realm of possibility. But at the same time, Link wasn’t terribly surprised – his best friend had performed miracles his entire life. He was the first man Link ever loved. He was the only man he’d devoted his life to, and the most profound man to have ever walked the earth. Rhett was astronomically incredible, from his head to his toes, from his mind to his heart. He was someone Link had never really deserved.

But with the infinite potential and boundless willpower that Rhett so naturally harvested, there stood only one priority – the only thing on the planet that could take him by the reins and lead him blindly, faithfully, in any direction it pleased. It was something so blaring and stark, yet it was meek and lowly. The loyalty from whence it blossomed had somehow managed to create the most beautiful contrast between men that the world had ever seen – and only he was able to condense the storm of Rhett’s adamancy. Only he could grab Rhett by the collar and convince him of anything. Only he could crush the massive man’s stubbornness and his ego and transform it into a visible depiction of love.

Only Link.

It was times like these that Link would convince himself his brother was invincible, for he’d made it so obvious in his quickness to rebound from illness – but as Rhett’s shaking hands snaked around his own, it was evident that he couldn’t be further from the truth. When their fingers interlocked, Link could feel the lump building in his throat.

"Of all the people I’ve ever met, I’m convinced that you’re the strongest.”

The statement was uttered from the man who had no right to say such a thing. Link stared blankly at the blond, then shook his head. “What on earth makes you say that?” he contended.

Rhett snickered. “As arrogant as you used to be, it’s hard for me to believe you can’t see it for yourself;” he joked in an effort to lighten the mood, “but I’ll just go ahead and say it. You’ve been living in ambiguity for months. Especially last night, Link. I know you wake up every morning knowing there’s a chance I’m dead – ‘cause honestly, it’s always a possibility. We both know it, and I’m not gonna sugar coat it. I’d imagine that’s hard on anybody who’s depending on their best friend to make it through the bloody apocalypse,” he diverged, “let alone someone as anxious as you are. But let me tell you, you’re doing an incredible job of holding yourself together, love. I’ve never been more proud of you.”

Link could only smile at the sentiment, his eyes welling up once again. It was a blessing to have a friend like Rhett – for the man to go out of his way to make his friend feel better, just for the sake of making sure he knew he was loved, was rarely expected in such desolate circumstances. But, it seemed, Rhett thrived on Link’s happiness – he was like the big brother he’d never had, attentive upon all of his accomplishments, no matter how small or futile. There were some days that Link swore his best friend lived to praise him… and ultimately, it made him feel warm, so he never
complained about it.

The guilt only kicked in when he realized Rhett was infinitely more worthy of love than he would ever be.

But never would Link express the thought aloud, for it would only result in an eternal spiral of compliments and aggrandizements that he didn’t deserve – so instead, he opted to do the next best thing and verbalize his gratitude:

“Thank you, Rhett,” he combatted the pain in his throat. “I’m proud of me, too.”
Chapter 22

OCTOBER 06, 201X

Link had no memory of falling asleep in the arrangement he awoke in, his arms slung over Rhett’s shoulders and their bodies pressed together at the chest.

The entirety of the previous day had been a blur if he were being honest – he could only recall the morning, and his waning skepticism of Rhett’s condition. The fact that he’d been essentially immobilized just two days ago yet somehow managed to convince Link that he was abled enough to walk upwards of ninety more miles was suspicious in and of itself, yet it seemed the conversation was never had. It was a mystery as to whether or not the man was truly improving – he could be so, terribly persuasive…

Rhett had always been relatively adept at hiding pain. Despite having a back he quite literally could have filed disability for, he never complained of it unless asked. Likewise did he never make mention of his bad knee, or of his psoriasis, or even of emotional turmoil – never, unless it was vital. For that reason, there was an elephant in the room, standing on its tiptoes and waving its arms in the air to signify the violation of trust between the men. But Link had had this conversation with himself a thousand times and reasoned that no further information would surface, so he opted to let it go for the morning, relaxing within the arms of his sleeping companion.

Shortly thereafter, Link’s lips curled into a smile at the sight of his brother’s lashes batting open for the first time that morning. Rhett’s eyes were sleepy and moist, and they conveyed a genuine contentment – nothing more, nothing less. Not so much as a hint of discomfort was written in his expression, and for that, Link thanked God. Their lives, admittedly, had been a rollercoaster of hope and doubt – but today, Link was confident, would be a good day.

“Mornin’,” Link greeted adoringly, baring his teeth as he spoke.

“Mornin’, doll,” Rhett grinned, sleepiness in his voice. “We’re awful close together,” he noted. Their cheeks and noses were a matter of millimeters from touching – but that was just okay.

Link huffed a breath of laughter. “Can’t argue with that. It is quite an arrangement we’ve got here,” he granted, not removing himself from Rhett’s body.

“Don’t act like you don’t like it,” the bigger man quipped, almost flirtatiously. “Think of all the things we did for GMM, man. I mean, we’ve been attached pelvis to ass by duct tape. This is nothing.”

Link shrugged in the embrace. “You’ve got a point,” he admitted, reflecting upon Rhett’s ongoing description of their relationship as more reminiscent of the bond between an old married couple than it was a best friendship. It was true, though – awkwardness no longer existed, and if it did, it was embraced. Without a second thought, the brunet shut his eyes and maneuvered his head in such a way that it became wedged beneath Rhett’s chin – and there, his body curled closer to his brother’s, basking in the warmth he unearthed therein.

“Cold?” Rhett enunciated, his arms feebly encapsulating the other.

Link nodded.

A stifled giggle sounded from atop his head, followed by a slow friction that pressed into his back
and stroked up and down. The small man nuzzled into Rhett’s shoulder. “I don’t wanna get up,” he whined pettishly against his friend’s chest.

“I know,” Rhett compromised. “Neither do I, brother. But other than you being sleepy, I’d venture to say we’re in about as good a shape as we’re gonna get.” With an autocratic sigh, Rhett removed his hand from Link’s back and jammed his palm into the floor, where he attempted to hoist himself to his knees – but he was dragged down by a heft that yanked him to the ground, to which he first looked down in bemusement, and then with adoration. “Link,” was all he could say, defeated and acquiescent.

Link shut his eyes once more and clung insistently to the cloth of Rhett’s hoodie. “Five more minutes,” he petulantly implored.

And in spite of the joking nature of his remark, not a word more was uttered from his companion. Instead, Link was surprised by the reluctant rustling of Rhett’s clothes as he steadily neared the floor, and by the comforting heat of his body as his arms wrapped lovingly around him.

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At night, the stars shone for them.

It had been a wonderfully fruitful day – in decent health, they’d managed to travel twenty-two miles before settling down for the night. Because Rhett now had a map, planning their travel was much more practical than it had previously been simply winging it and praying for a nearby exit – in fact, it was decided that morning that their goal was to reach Santaquin, Exit 242, which they somehow accomplished in record time. Link surmised it was around seven o’clock, giving them ample time to relax for the first time in what seemed like a century. There was one downfall, however, that prevented the circumstance from paradise…

The daunting coldness.

But it was easily redeemable, as they were lucky enough to have stumbled across a village of sorts only a mile or so from the exit ramp. Link took the liberty of gathering whatever bits of firewood he could detach from the foundations of the battered homes while Rhett scavenged them for food and water – and together, they met at a cracked marble fire pit just beside the road. Link tossed an armload of kindling into the hole and struck a match with his teeth, leaving a phosphoric film on his lips, and cast it into the pit. The fire was a slow build – the smoke was reticent at first, but eventually the flames flitted and engulfed the splinterly boards, rising an orange hue in contrast with the navy sky. Link took a seat on the end of an uprooted tree and stared into the fire.

At the same time, Rhett stood to the side and kept his gaze fixed on the other man. Link’s eyes finally darted to meet him, almost puzzled – and there, the warmth of the fire seeped through to his heart. Rhett’s smile was unmistakable. His head dipped bashfully just below the wooded horizon, blush illuminated in the flames – and with that, he ambled swiftly to the fallen tree and sat mere inches from Link. A silent arm slung behind his waist and lightly cupped his hip. For a few moments, the men simply existed, listening to the crackling embers and snapping winds. Each time Link began to shiver or his teeth began to chatter, Rhett would tug him closer – and before long, they were huddled together with the fire as their only witness, limbs and souls entangled like twine.

“Hey, you hungry?” Rhett thoughtfully asked, his tone considerate. Keeping one arm around Link, he reached his other hand to the side and retrieved a green and white aluminum-coated bag, which he handed off to his friend. “I haven’t seen you eat in a couple days. I’m worried about
Link graciously accepted the bag, ripping it open like a present – and the familiar scent of salt and oregano blessed his nostrils, no matter how stale the contents may have been. They were Combos – without hesitation, Link thrust his hand into the bag and grabbed a handful of the snacks and tossed them into his mouth. The salt crystals melted on his tongue and made him salivate to the point his lips puckered, to which Rhett responded with a chuckle. Subsequently, Link elbowed him. “Shut up, man, I’m starving!” he defended playfully, chewing on a mouthful of pretzel.

Cringling his nose, Rhett complied and once again gathered his friend in his arms. “I know,” he confessed rather sadly. “It’ll all end here in a few days, love. Believe it or not, I think we may be entering something of an anarchist utopia.”

With the man’s choice of words, Link reared his head back. “‘Makes you say that?” he countered. Rhett shrugged. “I dunno, brother. I’ve just got this ongoing image in my head of me and you stumbling onto campus into this community hotspot hosting hundreds of people who want to nurse us back to health. Robin even said it was mostly doctors that got left behind… and if I’m being honest, if these people are even the slightest bit like Robin, I don’t see there being any trouble.”

Link pursed his lips for a moment, then nodded against his brother’s chest. “Robin does an incredible job of being a good person,” he agreed in his reverie. “I miss them. I miss them so much more than I ever imagined I would, Rhett. Robin had such a big heart, they just had so much to give – for God’s sake, the kid was more compassionate than I could dream of being. You usually imagine your role models being your elders, you know what I mean? But Robin’s just one of those special cases – wise far beyond their years. They were born old.”

A deep, brilliant laughter cascaded from Rhett’s lips and vibrated through his chest. “They’re just one of those people you can’t bring yourself to forget. You’re hard-pressed to find people who leave impressions like that on you, Link. Objectively speaking, I’m not sure anyone who meets Robin for an extended period of time ever forgets about them. But if they do, I reckon it’s their loss.”

“Mm,” Link hummed with finality – and aside from the snapping embers, all grew silent.

The fire was utterly mesmerizing. Yellow and orange sparks flicked from the foundation and emitted billows of smoke into the sky, masking the stars in thick, grey clouds. The scent of the ash brought forth waves of nostalgia and transported Link into a time of no worries – and as the fire grew taller, the memory became more pristine.

_He and Rhett were seven and eight years old respectively, attending a church lock-in during the autumn of Buies Creek. It was a relatively old church made of rustic brick, and behind it was a basketball court, ravaged with neon graffiti and torn baskets. To the right of the court was a fenced off area that contained livestock and reeked with the scent of a thousand cow patties – but living in rural North Carolina, it was far from the most repugnant stench Link could imagine. In fact, he’d grown accustomed to the earthy, grass-like scent of the dung, as the pastures had become his most common exploration. The processes of nature had never fazed him nor Rhett – the boys simply ignored them, opting to save their complaints for rainier days._

_This day, fortunately, proved to be quite the opposite. Link couldn’t remember a single soul at the lock-in except for his best friend, yet he recalled the festivities with immaculate amounts of detail. Before they were contained within the church’s overflow for the night, all the children were taken on a hike – God knew where – accompanied by enough adults to supervise a Colosseum of toddlers. As it was nearing nighttime, Link quickly tuckered out and asked one of the adults to_
carry him – and without question, he was projected into the air and sat upon the shoulders of someone he’d never met. Finally, he was able to see beyond the horizon as he’d known it from a height of three and a half feet. It was then that a quote he’d heard his mother say several times graced his mind – a quote he later discovered was Isaac Newton’s – “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” Though its meaning was technically lent to science and industrialization, Link’s seven-year-old mind found it to be exceedingly pertinent to the situation. His eyes gleamed with reflections of stars, mouth agape.

At around eight, they arrived back at the church and were sent to the overflow for dinner. The tables were white and peppered with black specks, like rectangular slabs of ranch placed side by side in an L-formation. Link sat in the corner with Rhett to his right – and when all the other children were seated, the pastor blessed the food. The prayer ended with “And all of God’s children said…”

Followed by the collective chant: “Amen!”

“Amen,” the pastor concluded – and all the children kicked their chairs behind them and swarmed uncharitably for the feast at the front of the room.

“C’mon, Link!” Rhett insisted, grabbing the younger boy’s hand and yanking him out of his seat. “I heard Mrs. Summers makes a mean chocolate pie!”

Before he had the chance to object, Link was led to the serving table. Rhett handed a paper plate to him and proceeded to speed down the table without him, helping himself to cookies and chips, and asking an elderly woman behind the table to prepare for him a hot dog – but Link was much more shy, and so he placed his plate back onto the stack where Rhett had found it. Instead, the small boy ambled to the end of the table and retrieved a Styrofoam cup, which he jammed beneath a drink dispenser and filled halfway with apple cider.

Rhett stood gawking at the nearby dessert bar, where Mrs. Summers herself took authority over the dozens of cakes and pies, her silver hair pinned back into a neat bun. An awkward bout of silence followed, but it was broken surely by her sweet voice: “Can I get you something, Rhett?” she helpfully asked.

The blond boy’s eyes traveled slowly up her body and met her own. “Yes’m!” he blurted excitedly. “I’d like a piece of your chocolate pie, please!”

“Coming right up!” she winced, then transferred a colossal slab of the pudding pie onto his already monstrous plate. “Let me know if it’s any good, you hear?”

“Oh, I will – Thank you, Mrs. Summers!” Rhett spoke robotically. He then trotted off to find Link, who was fairly easy to locate given he’d watched their entire exchange with his half cupful of cider. The taller boy’s eyes widened as he scanned Link for a moment, puzzled. “Where’s your plate?” he asked, concerned.

The brunet looked to the ground and shrugged. “I ain’t hungry,” he lied.

Silence followed the statement. For the first time, Link watched his best friend’s brow furrow with disbelief. “You sure?” Rhett offered.

Link clutched his drink to his chest, nodding without looking at Rhett.

Rhett’s mouth twitched at first – but reluctantly, he complied. Together, the boys walked back to their designated seats, while Link listened to his companion talk intermittently between bites. The brunet kept his nose buried in his cup for the duration of their dinner, as he wanted to look
preoccupied so as not to warrant Rhett’s attention. But little did he know that his friend had been attentive and empathetic from the womb, and consequently took note of each and every move Link took. Those qualities only grew stronger and more loving as they aged – and every day, Link was grateful.

For their final hurrah of the evening, the children were rallied from the fellowship hall to the space beside the pasture, where a pre-lit bonfire raged against the sky. Link’s stomach growled resentfully at him for refusing to eat, but for a while it was easily ignored. He sat with Rhett on the edge of a log and they huddled for warmth – the fire could only do a mediocre job of providing heat since it was so far away, but its beauty was more than enough to compensate. Link never forgot the allure of his first bonfire, for the details were simply too numerous. There was a moment in which an older man stood before the boys, arms akimbo, and lightly scolded them, as it was apparently common knowledge that “little boys aren’t to snuggle so closely” – but the man himself was soon reprimanded by his wife, who’d overheard his senseless criticism. He scoffed with disapproval, but obeyed the woman he’d committed his life to nonetheless and followed her to the other side of the fire.

A few moments later, Link turned to discover a horde of twenty-somethings rustling through the weeded pasture with grins on their faces and supplies in their arms. Some of them carried blankets and others plastic bags – and upon their nearing, the small boy nudged Rhett, who craned his neck to view them. Before long, they approached the fire and handed a blanket and a bag to every child, each responding with a muffled word of thanks. Link could see through their feigned excitement but accepted their gifts anyway. Rhett pushed his best friend away upon receiving his blanket, cloaking it around his shoulders as Link did the same with his. In each bag were two halves of a graham cracker, a marshmallow, and three squares of Hershey’s chocolate – and Link was certain he’d never seen the other boy so excited.

“Link, s’mores!” he yelled into the night, the fire illuminating his features and causing his eyes to shine. “You ever ate a s’more before?”

Link scrunched his brow at the unfamiliar word and the foreign amalgamation of ingredients in his hand. “I don’t rightfully think so,” he said, scanning the bag and wondering how in the world any of it could possibly taste good together.

Rhett’s eyes widened. “Really?!” he shouted with disbelief. He then grabbed Link’s hand and rose insistently to his feet, abandoning the blanket on the log. “Well c’mon and I’ll show you how it’s done!”

With his head cocked to the side, Link was tugged first behind the log and then into the grass, Rhett guiding him through the weeds by starlight. Anxiety thumped through Link’s heart, but he didn’t say anything – he never did, as the world had always derided him for it, which must have meant that Rhett would, too. Eventually, Rhett stopped running and let loose of Link’s hand. They were both out of breath, Link slightly more so – but Rhett was focused on the task at hand. The blond observed the landscape for all it was worth, and then proceeded to bend over next to an ancient chestnut tree and grab a stick that must have been six feet long. He could only pick it up for so long before his arms tired out, and so he was left to drag it most of the way back to the fire. Link followed loyally behind.

They returned to the pasture unscathed, Link’s fist clutching the other’s shirt as they stalked through the grass beneath the thousands of stars. Fortunately, they hadn’t been caught – had Rhett’s dad known they’d been left unsupervised, he’d have skinned the poor boy alive and encouraged Link’s mother to do the same. But Link’s mom had a heart of gold and would have never done such a thing to her only child, not for money or for pride. Perhaps she was soft in her parenting, but she was also fair – and Link loved her a million times over. In fact, he even felt a
pang of guilt for leaving the bonfire, if only for a few minutes – but in retrospect, he reasoned it was okay, for a memory he cherished of his best friend was worth more than any punishment he could have ever received.

Before Link knew it, Rhett had ripped open his friend’s bag and jammed a marshmallow onto the end of the stick. “Take this,” he urged, handing the limb off to a bemused Link, whose expression indicated he had no idea what to do with it. Rhett scanned the younger boy’s face and caught on to his confusion rather quickly, however, and so he opted to clarify. “Go on, stick it in the fire! But not too long, now – just ‘til it gets black and crispy. And don’t stick it too far or else it’ll catch on fire.”

Still, Link was puzzled. Instead of following Rhett’s advice, he thrust the other end of the stick into the ground and pressed his cheek against it, his eyes trailing downwards.

Immediately, Rhett straightened up and walked over to him. “Let me help you,” he said with wisdom in his voice. There, he wrapped his hands around the base of the stick and flicked his tongue out in a moment of concentration. When the marshmallow was in optimal position, he slowly let go and allowed Link’s hands to take over – “Just a few seconds’ll do,” he warned, grinning at the fact he was able to teach his friend. When the marshmallow gained a charcoal shell, the blond directed Link to pull it away from the fire, and with that he prepared the base of graham cracker and chocolate. “Just slide it on,” he instructed – and when Link did, he capped the marshmallow with yet another graham cracker and pulled the finished s’more from the stick. Link tossed the stick to the ground and ogled at his creation – the cohesive, white center of the marshmallow split through its ashen exterior and pushed chocolate out the sides of the sandwich. Rhett thrust the masterpiece into Link’s face with a cheerful grin. “Now you’re s’posed to eat it,” he hinted.

Link stared back at him, mouth closed – and instead of irrationally denying the food, he lifted his hands and enclosed his dainty fingers around it. “Thank you,” he bashfully responded, a blush forming on his cheeks having accepted a gift from his friend.

“Naw, you made it, brother!” he easily deflected. “You wanna watch me make mine?”

Mouth full, Link nodded ecstatically. Rhett pulled a marshmallow out of his bag and stuck it on the end of the stick, repeating the same process and rotating it for even heating – or, more or less, to impress Link. The small boy granted his undivided attention to Rhett’s perfect roast as well as the assembly of the s’more, which admittedly turned out much prettier than his. Finally, he placed the top graham cracker onto the marshmallow and squished it down so that the innards gushed out the sides. Mesmerized, Link licked the chocolate that had dripped onto his fingers and paid careful attention to the detail with which Rhett’s s’more shone. “Wow,” he wordlessly commended. “How’d you get so good at that?”

The statement was one to fuel Rhett’s pride, but he remained outwardly modest. “Practice, I reckon,” he shrugged. After a moment’s silence of staring past the sandwich, he glanced over to Link – and then, he did what no other eight-year-old boy on earth would have done, and pushed it closer to his friend’s chest. “You can have it,” he genuinely offered.

Link’s mouth gaped open, mostly out of the concept of Rhett McLaughlin possessing the will to hand over an item of food that rightfully belonged to him – so at first, he instantly denied: “No way! You made it, remember?” he parroted.

Again, Rhett shrugged. “Think of it like a Christmas present or somethin’, except for Halloween,” he suggested, smiling. “I’m not just tryin’ to be nice. I want you to have it.”

At first he was hesitant, but Link quickly learned that his friend’s offer was authentic. He grabbed
the s’more from his fingers and received the ‘present’, which was more a gift of friendship than it was of the perishable food in his palm. “Thank you, Rhett,” he said again, followed by an immediate thrusting of his arms around the taller boy, squeezing his skinny body with all the love in his own. Rhett slapped him softly on the back in return.

They sat back down just in time for the church’s music leader – a peaceable man by the name of Clyde Evans – to rally all the children around the fire for a final few minutes of activity. He first spoke of God’s love and began picking at a Taylor guitar to accompany the words, his fingers fluid but strong as they gripped the frets. When his spiel began to unravel, a few seconds of nothing but the acoustic harmony pervaded the air – and at last, he cleared his throat and began to sing.

All the children joined in after the first line, including Rhett and Link – but among all the memories he so vividly recalled from the night, the song itself was a mystery. He remembered it being a particularly beautiful song – but for the love of God, he couldn’t recite so much as the first word. The lyrics the children sang were foreign, yet at the same time they were so familiar…

How, Link wondered, could a song he couldn’t even remember be so vibrant in his mind? The power of music had an incredible way of affecting people years down the road, and from a psychological standpoint it was puzzling. It was so unnervingly on the tip of his tongue that the memory gained a certain dullness, snapping him back into reality – and just like that, the bonfire of 1985…

…became the towering flames of 201X.

Just as they’d been arranged in the memory, Link was engulfed by Rhett’s embrace. Given that he’d physically jerked himself out of his trance, Rhett’s grip tightened at his arm and offered an adoring stroke when Link’s head crashed against his chest.

“You okay?” the bigger man asked, bowing his head to see his brother’s expression.

Link sighed. “Yeah,” he assured with a forced smile. “I was just… thinking, I guess.”

Rhett chuckled at his response. “I reckon,” his low voice rumbled. “You haven’t said a word in twenty minutes. What’s on your mind?”

The fire before them was much taller and much closer than the one in the memory – it did an adequate job of warming the men, but still, Link insisted upon remaining nestled against Rhett’s side. “Ehh,” he trailed off, nuzzling the other man’s shoulder. “Rhett, do you remember the first lock-in we went to together?”

Rhett’s tone instantly lightened. “Yeah, man, of course. The fall of second grade.”

“Yes,” Link whispered affirmatively. There, he arose from his home in Rhett’s arms and scooted just far enough away that he was able to clearly see his face. “And you remember the bonfire? And the s’mores?”

The apples of Rhett’s cheeks lifted above a smile. “How could I forget?” he wondered, nostalgia laced in his voice.

Almost embarrassed to ask, Link’s gaze trailed to the tree they sat upon – another parallel – and swallowed the lump in his throat. “When Mr. Evans pulled out his guitar and started singing, and we all joined in…” he stopped.

“Yeah?” Rhett urged.
A timid sigh escaped Link’s lips – but at last, he spat it out. “What was that first song, Rhett?” his voice trembled, saddened by the fact he’d forgotten.

But instead of disparaging the smaller man for his faulty memory, Rhett conveyed to him the same smile he always did when he was given an opportunity to teach something to his best friend. Never did he tell Link answers, out of the fact he’d simply forget them once again – no, he made sure the man would remember for the rest of time. This time was no different.

So he took Link by the hand and squeezed with enough pressure to obtain his attention – and once their eyes met, Rhett cleared his throat, and he sang for the first time in months:

“I heard there was a secret chord
That David played, and it pleased the Lord…”

And there it was, the finale as told by the most angelic voice the brunet had ever witnessed. Suddenly, the song in its entirety emerged from decades of nebulosity and poured each and every lyric into Link’s mind – and with that, the memory of the bonfire was complete. Eyes damp, he rejoined: “But you don’t really care for music, do ya?”

Rhett grinned. Together, they sang:

“Well it goes like this:
The fourth, the fifth,
The minor fall, the major lift,
The baffled king composing hallelujah…

Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah…”

As if by instinct, Rhett stroked his fingers through Link’s hair and tilted his head slowly towards his lips, where he pressed a kiss into the raven locks. “I love you,” he whispered innocently.

“I love you, too.”

Satisfied with the response, Rhett’s lips curled into a smile, and he pulled away from the man whose heart he had filled. He tugged his hand through the muss of hair and allowed it to travel down Link’s shoulder – and there, Rhett began the second verse on his own, eyes fixed on his brother, who expressed nothing but love in his star filled eyes.

“Well your faith was strong, but you needed proof
You saw her bathing on the roof

Her beauty and the moonlight overthrew ya

She tied you to the kitchen chair

And she broke your throne and she cut your hair

And from your lips she drew the hallelujah…

Hallelujah

Hallelujah

Hallelujah

Hallelujah…

But baby I've been here before

I've seen this room and I've walked this floor

You know I used to live alone before I knew ya

And I've seen your flag on the marble arch

And love is not a victory march

It's a cold and it's a broken hallelujah…

Hallelujah

Hallelujah

Hallelujah

Hallelujah…

Maybe there's a God above

But all I ever learned from love

Was how to shoot somebody who outdrew ya

And it's not a cry that you hear at night

It's not somebody who's seen the light

It's a cold and it's a broken hallelujah…
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah…”
“You ready?”

With the wagon’s handle in his palm and their replenished bags tossed within, Link nodded affirmatively. It was the second good morning in a row – what seemed to be a record – but the brunet tried to convince himself to view it as a light at the end of the tunnel as opposed to a pyramid of grandeur that would soon shatter like glass. But even Rhett demonstrated an air of positivity that day, and so Link was compelled to ride the wave while he was at the crest. Of course there was the possibility that everything would come crashing down at his feet, but if he were being honest the thought didn’t even cross his mind. Finally, everything seemed to have turned out for the better – and he owed it all to the man whose silvery eyes stared back at him with more contentment than either of them could have fathomed just days ago. The circles beneath his eyes were much lighter than they’d been previously.

“Alright, let’s go!” Rhett spoke with an almost sickening level of enthusiasm – but at the same time, Link was grateful for its swift return. “If we make it to Provo by nightfall, we’ll be doing exceptionally well – but let’s just shoot for Spanish Fork tonight, yeah?” His eyes were glued to the state map in his hands, cities they’d already traversed marked off in ash. Link’s expression lightened as the mild taste of victory coated the tip of his tongue. Finally, it appeared that survival was attainable – and it was theirs for the taking.

“Sounds like a plan, Rhett,” Link merely whispered. His back was somewhat sore that morning, but he mused it was nothing compared to what the other man was enduring, and so the complaint never left his lips. Determination in their spirits, the brothers set off for Provo with a glimpse of hope on the horizon. Perhaps, despite the endless despair they’d been pummeled with, they’d make it after all.

***

The highlight of the day’s travels sprung around five in the afternoon.

Even within the fifteen or so odd miles they’d trod, Link began to notice an incredible increase in the planet’s livelihood – the scenery alone had managed such a sharp contrast to that of the desolation that lay south, yet there was an uncertainty as to why. Of course, Link knew that the bombing hotspots were the most populated cities on the map, so it went without saying that Los Angeles had gotten the worst of it – but as they approached Salt Lake City, it appeared as though things were only getting… better.

Though ‘good’ may have been an overstatement, there was no denying that the university was a shining beacon. The closer they got, the more normal things became – what had been for hundreds of miles a barren wasteland was then silt and greenery and freshness… even the air had a different consistency, it seemed, filtering easily through Link’s lungs as he breathed.

In previous days, his tattered sandals scraped reluctantly across plains of dirt – but today, his feet were relieved to sink in the soil.
For a stretch of time, the broken road forced them to travel in the median, revived with viridian grass that neither man had seen for months. How, Link wondered, had the blades survived the catastrophe? It wasn’t the bombs that destroyed the vegetation, as he remembered too vividly the lush ruins of Los Angeles as he and Rhett bolted past the gardens in July – instead, it was the lack of rain following the disaster, and its dreadful acidity when it did pummel the earth. There must have been something special about Salt Lake City – perhaps something magical – and it was only more incentive to persevere.

When his legs grew tired, Link grabbed his tireless friend by the arm and pulled him back, wordlessly indicating that he needed a break. Together, they met a compromise and squatted to their knees with difficulty – especially the smaller man, whose labored breaths were so intense that they caused his ribs to ache. In return, Rhett gave him a few careful slaps on the back and began stroking his spine.

Blowing a chunk of hair away from his mouth, Link exhaled a final sigh. “Shew,” he remarked with a difficult smile. “Sorry, man. I feel like I’ve been running around in a pool of molasses all day.”

Silently, the apples of the bigger man’s cheeks rose to his eyes. “You’re fine, babe,” he assured. “Take all the time you need.”

Link nodded. He’d noticed an increase in pet names over the past couple of days, and how Rhett so casually tossed them into conversation – and while he likely would have complained of them just a few months prior, Link appreciated them then for all they were worth. To know he was loved by someone – anyone – in such a drastic situation was phenomenal, let alone the man he’d elected to walk through his entire life together with. His heart swelled upon hearing his brother call him “dear” and “love”, and it came as no surprise – after all, words of affirmation was his love language…

And Rhett continuously pandered to it.

“Ah,” he finally sputtered, flustered by the enigma of his thoughts. “Looks like you’re feeling better, huh? Not only were you able to catch up with me, but you’d have pretty well left me in the dust had I not yanked you out of your trance,” he lovingly teased.

“Oh hush,” Rhett deflected, imperious – but he quickly adopted a more serious tone. “Yeah, Link… I’m better. A lot better. I think my back’s pretty well straightened out which is one hell of a blessing – but for God’s sake, this road is never-ending.”

“Tell me about it,” Link confirmed with a sigh. “But I’ll tell you one thing – it looks like we’re headed in the right direction. I haven’t seen a plant in ages,” he gestured to the environment that lay before them, lush with grain they would have once considered fruitless, but now contained hopeful bits of life that shone in the sun.

Rhett nodded. “It’s still – I mean it’s pretty sad,” he granted. “But I agree, it’s definitely indicative of hope. Seems to me like the university’s the centerpiece of the western United States, you know what I’m saying? It kind of makes me wonder why that place in particular became something of a post-apocalyptic melting pot. Plus, it’s like this super random place – I guess it makes sense for people to gather at a university, but Utah? Who even cares about Utah?”

Link could only shrug. “I dunno, Rhett,” he replied, looking up to the man who sat before him. “Salt Lake may have been the lucky town out, I s’pose. The one that got away, if you will. No bombing, no spraying –”

“Now that wouldn’t make sense,” Rhett interrupted matter-of-factly. “Why would the government
just forget about the most populous city in the entire state of Utah? LA got its ass whooped. So did every other major city in America – at least I assume. Not to mention half of Robin’s recording was based on the implication that Salt Lake was pretty well destroyed. That’s why PARO was formed.”

Link blushed, embarrassed by his incompetence with theories despite the blond’s lack of criticism. “True,” he whispered, biting his tongue in thought. The cooling wind brushed against his skin and caused a clump of his stringy hair to fall onto his forehead, bringing forth a trail of shivers that shot down his spine. In response, Rhett inched closer to him and allowed the warmth of his body to encapsulate the smaller man – his stealthy arms snaked around Link’s torso and entrapped his shoulders.

“Ah, I’m sure we’ll get the scoop once we hit the city,” he wound down, speaking softly into his brother’s hair. “I guess the bottom line is that we’ve made it. Our safety’s no longer compromised – and in the grand scheme of things, that’s all that really matters.”

The knowledge, while true, sat amiss with Link. Perhaps it was because safety was such a foreign concept to him – he’d collapsed to the bottom tier of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs so quickly that the idea of being able to feel something beyond the fulfillment of his basic needs was utterly bizarre. But even beyond security, he was able to feel love and belonging – and that was because of Rhett, who’d constantly gone out of his way to make sure the poor man was doing okay. Link owed him a thousand words of thanks, but for now his tongue wouldn’t budge, as his gratitude was far too flustered for the moment. Instead, he opted to lift his head away from the other’s shoulder and blink lovingly in his direction, the persistent tiredness of his eyes weighing his face down like bags of sand.

But Rhett couldn’t help himself – he quickly craned his neck to Link’s level and stole a kiss from his temple, catching a few dark hairs in his lips as he pulled away. His subsequent smile was unmistakable. “You’re a doll, you know that?” he whispered, proud. “Come whatever may, I’m confident the outcome is worth everything we’ve put into this mess – and that’s because I’ve got my best friend.”

The words caused Link’s cheeks to flush, and he pressed his forehead into Rhett’s shoulder with a contented sigh. “You’re my best friend,” he stated, perhaps repetitively – but he didn’t regret it, for the other’s reaction was too pure. He felt the warmth of Rhett’s breath as it cascaded onto his scalp from a smile so much bigger and brighter than he could probably conceive. The large man, of course, concluded his loving spiel with a valiant and succinct statement, though it was nothing to Link’s surprise:

“The suffrage was worth all the victories we’ve achieved – greatest of which is your life.”

***

Provo’s exit sign was collapsed and battered to illegibility, but the off-ramp was as clear as the stars above shone.

It was a longer walk than Link anticipated to get to the city itself – though perhaps it was his aching legs that made it seem so burdensome. In every sense of the word, he was exhausted – but he didn’t complain of it, as he knew Rhett was in the exact same position, and nothing but positivity had fled his lips that day. There was a grimace on his face that couldn’t be missed, however, which Link attributed to the draining, three-month quotidian they’d come to know all
too well. Sometimes, it seemed, he was only able to see Rhett’s true expression beneath the soft
glow of moonlight – and Link felt guilty knowing that during the day, he cloaked his emotion
behind a façade. He whispered a silent prayer for the man, and despite the striking pain in his
thighs, trudged onward to Provo with determination in his eye.

It was Rhett who began slowing first, his squinted eyes indicating distress. With a hand perched
on his hip, his teeth sank into the flesh of his lip and muffled a guttural grunt from the blond – but
the dimness could never hide sound, and so Link’s theory was confirmed. Brow furrowed, he
batted his eyes up to his companion. “You alright?”

A half-hearted shrug. “Eh,” the bigger man muttered. “Stomach’s hurtin’. It'll quit by morning.”

“Oh,” Link quietly sulked, his toes growing numb from the cold. “You need anything? We can
stop and rest for a minute if you want,” he suggested insistently.

Rhett only shook his head, his eyes fixed on the winding road at his feet. It was cause for concern
– but the smaller of the two was forced to shrug it off for the moment, knowing that his friend’s
stubbornness knew no bounds. There, they continued to walk – ankles aching, knees protesting –
but eventually, Link knew, their efforts would be worthwhile.

And he was right. The wagon’s wheels scraped willfully across the asphalt as Link tracked over
potholes and rocks – the men had become acclimated to its terrible noise ever since it became a
part of their travel, so it was no longer a bother to them, yet the brunet was relieved to finally drop
the handle to the dust. Provo, in all its destruction, was visible on the horizon – to the right stood a
chain of indomitable mountains, illuminated by the moon which shone just above. They’d been
walking on the shoulder of a meandering highway (University Avenue, according to Rhett) for
what seemed like an hour, almost nothing in sight for miles – but it was soon easy to see that the
nothingness was, in fact, the ruins of catastrophe. Shattered neon signs decorated vacant parking
lots and towers of tumbled brick all around, not to mention the road itself was absolutely
destroyed. Still, they dragged on, praying for a sign of shelter – a teepee made of cardboard, for all
Link cared. He was so tired by that point that he considered just lying down on the decimated
blacktop and willing his brother to do the same, but he figured better of it knowing it was
impossible to fare the night without protection from its bone-chilling ramifications.

Rhett’s breaths grew suddenly louder – they were sharp and long, and he made no effort to
conceal them. Without thinking, Link stroked a hand down his spinal column and urged him on.
“Hang in there, brother,” he whispered, mostly to himself. Rhett sighed.

Link had remained absentminded for the majority of the trek, his eyes hardly open as his feet
shuffled to the rhythm of his brother’s…but Rhett’s steps had become rigid and harsh and slow.
The small man’s gaze darted to meet the other’s, but only horror met his eye when he saw twilight
reflecting from the salty trails that donned his cheeks. The blond’s eyes were completely shut, and
his teeth all but bit his lip in two. Almost immediately, Link stopped to grab his arms and squeezed
the bony structures with both hands, awe and anxiety written in his expression.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” he stuttered as calmly as his trembling voice would allow.

“Get off,” Rhett mumbled defiantly. He tried to wriggle his way out of his friend’s grasp, but for
some reason was unable to shake him. “I’ll tell you later,” he whispered with tears laced in his
voice.

Link, however, was having none of it, and refused to set him free. “No, you’ll tell me now,” he
demanded. “Now c’mon, what’s the matter? Is it your stomach? What’s hurting you, babe?”

Again, Rhett attempted to fling him off – but to no avail. “I said I’ll tell you later,” he reiterated,
this time with an angrier undertone.

But instead of being compliant and acquiescing as he normally would, Link refused his friend’s order, sliding his hand swiftly into the man’s palm and digging his nails into the skin. With as much intimidation as he could rally, he thrust his chin into the air and lowered his brow with an air of power. “Yeah?” he countered, smirking in spite of the darkness that bathed him. “Well you know what? We’re not going anywhere until you spit it out.”

The wrinkles on Rhett’s face were much more pronounced in the soft light – the streams of tears didn’t do it much justice either, highlighting his cheeks with shimmering yellow specks. With the small range of motion he had, Rhett reached out to grab Link’s shirt, where he squeezed into a fist so tight his knuckles turned pale. Slowly, his entire weight was pressed onto the much smaller man – and although Link tried desperately to hold the both of them up, Rhett ended up collapsing to his knees and yelling helplessly to the stars. Instantly stricken with a mixture of panic and empathy, Link followed suit and fell to the ground himself – and in spite of their squabble, Rhett gravitated to his embrace for comfort. Link’s arms were welcoming, as Rhett’s body was home.

“Rhett—”

“My back…”

Of course.

A pang of guilt shot through Link’s heart and caused him to bleed out. He should’ve known better – what else could it have been? Truly, what else could drive the poor giant to tears in the midst of the world that crashed at their feet? Nothing, he scoffed to himself. Nothing but the chronic hell that’s troubled him for years.

And especially when it existed tenfold.

“Rhett…” Link repeated, beginning to cry himself – damn it, he was just too empathetic…

Convulsing, the hunkered man gasped for air. “It’s killing me!” he yelled into his shoulder. “I can’t breathe—”

“You need to calm down, sweetheart, please,” Link spoke, rubbing his spine in thick, careful circles. “In and out, Rhett. You can do it. In and out…”

And with that, Rhett caught his breath.

So many questions flew through Link’s head – why, he wondered, had his best friend lied to him again? Why had he once again betrayed Link’s trust when it had already been on the brink as it was? Could he truly, honestly make it to Salt Lake City in this condition? Unfortunately, the small man doubted it – he’d broken down so many times for the same damn reason...

Since the initial episode, Rhett had thrived on the presence of painkillers. One after another, both in Link’s sight and in secret – but it appeared that the dose that had poisoned him finally seemed to be wearing off. His poor back was going to be the death of him, its relentless nature incapacitating him and strangling his lungs with tears. Rhett’s arms were weak as they dangled around the other man’s waist.

A litany of expletives evaded the injured man’s lips with each breath out – but Link could hardly blame him. He combed through Rhett’s hair with his fingers and massaged the aged locks with the pad of his hand. Naturally, fear coursed through his veins and threatened to burst his heart wide open, but Link remained as stoic as he possibly could – though his voice was visibly shaken. “Shhh,” he hushed with each of the man’s fitful outbursts. “I’m right here, love. I’m right here.”
Slowly but surely, Rhett began to relax.

The sobs were slow to evanesce, but eventually, they found their way to a halt. When he was finally able to speak coherently, Rhett preluded with a watery sigh – and his voice shook rampant beneath the weight of a girding torture. “I – Link, I’m sorry,” he pleaded into his brother’s shirt.

Link’s heart sank with the apology. On one hand, he loved Rhett with every fiber of his being, and he knew the man deserved forgiveness – but on the other hand, it was the second time he’d broken his promise to Link. Rhett had blown his second chance, and thus, trust no longer existed…

But right now, that didn’t matter. It was the least of Link’s concern if he were being honest. “Rhett,” he began, stern. “First thing’s first – are you okay?”

Rhett shrugged. “Enough to talk, sure,” his gritty voice resounded.

The lightness in Link’s eyes disappeared entirely – so without further ado, he addressed the conflict. “You lied to me again,” he dryly stated.

“I know,” the big man deflected immediately. “Nothing I say’s gonna fix it, either, yeah? I’ve compromised our trust. I’ve destroyed the honesty our friendship was founded upon. From this point on, you’ll take everything I say with a grain of salt, because I’ve proven to you just how inconsistent, unpredictable, and downright careless I can be. I can’t argue with you. You’re right.”

With his words, the darkness seemed to drift from the sky and drown the men entirely. Link grew immediately sullen, but forewent the path of forgiveness nevertheless. “You don’t think I’m strong enough to handle the truth, do you?” he managed to say – he refused to beat around the bush this time. Perhaps, he thought, it would piss Rhett off, but the discussion needed to be had now more than ever.

The shattered man in Link’s arms showed no sign of emotion in his body language, for he was simply too hurt to move – but in his voice shone the weight of a thousand regrets. “I’m sorry,” he sincerely repeated.

Link’s heart pounded and ached and begged him to tell Rhett that it was okay, that the trust between them could somehow be revived… but the fact of the matter was that the concept of forgiveness was too far gone. His hand stroked the cloth above his back, which sat atop the brace Link so graciously provided to hold the poor man together. Forty miles, he scoffed to himself. Forty miles to triumph, and here we are. He could only bite his lip in response to the apology.

Rhett lightly gripped the fabric of the brunet’s shirt and twisted it gently against his side. Expelling a sigh, the entirety of his weight rested against Link. “Listen,” he urged, changing the subject. “We can get personal later, alright? You can be pissed at me all you want. You’ve earned that privilege. But right now, the bottom line is that I can’t… I can’t get up.”

And though he’d heard the statement many times since their journey began, Link never grew accustomed to it, for he knew that eventually it may become the truth.

Lip quivering, the small man inhaled a shaken series of breaths. “We didn’t make it this far to give up in Provo. At this point, honest to God, I’d carry you to Salt Lake before I’d consider finding complacency in laying down and dying here. Maybe a hundred miles ago, Rhett – but not here. I swear to God we’ll make it. Either that or we’ll die trying…”

Even with Link’s smooth movements, Rhett yelped in response to the pain that struck his spine.
“I’m scared,” he admitted between breaths, his nostrils flared into an enduring expression.

With his brow immediately furrowed, the brunet turned his gaze to Rhett. “Scared?” he fretfully repeated. “What of, baby?”

Rhett sucked away the snot that had built up in his nose and inhaled a sharp breath. “Please don’t hurt me,” he wailed.

It was a string of words he’d never heard Rhett say before – and it just went to show how terrible the agony must have been. Suddenly, a smothering gravity filled Link’s lungs and dragged his heart to the fragmented pavement beneath his knees. “Oh, sweetheart,” he prefaced in a whisper, empathy cladding onto his throat to form an unswallovable lump. “I wouldn’t dream of it. But if I end up having to carry you – which I’m not joking about, by the way – I’ll do it without hesitation. I’m not listening to your protests. I’m not going to watch you die.”

Ever so carefully, Rhett shook his head in disbelief. “You don’t need me anymore – ” he tried, only to be interrupted once more by the galvanizing pain that seemed to surge through his body and crush his torso like a binding snake. Even so, the bigger man pressed on: “Just go, Link. You’ve got the supplies to make it. I’m just gonna weigh you down –”

“No,” was Link’s simple response. “God, Rhett, you’ll never get it through your head, will you? I can only attribute my success thus far to the fact that you’ve been with me every step of the way. It hurts that I can’t fix you. It hurts me to watch you suffer. But God’s honest truth, all you’re doing by refusing my help is impeding me – because guess what? We’re a package deal. You’re the only thing in my life that’s been constant since July, Rhett – and I’m begging you, please don’t let that change. I’d fall apart without you…” He hadn’t noticed, but in his spiel, he’d squeezed Rhett’s paper thin torso against his own – and it appeared to help the large man’s pain, however minutely.

Expelling a series of alieved breaths, Rhett threw his head back so it rested on Link’s shoulder. “It’s not like I’ve made it my goal to give up, alright? If that was what I wanted, you know where I’d be? I’d be a rotten corpse in the studio bunker. I persevered not for myself, but for you. I’ve near killed myself about twenty times just to watch you succeed. If you want the truth, I couldn’t care less about my own well-being. It was always about making sure you were okay. Cliché? Maybe. But when I told you I’d die for you, Link, I wasn’t joking. Oh, I was far from it. But here I am, seventy percent dead as it is, bothering to live only to make sure my best friend is going to be okay. I’ve done my part. I’ve asked you for nothing in return. I’ve expended myself, brother. I can’t give you anything else. It’s gonna take a damn miracle to get me on my feet again – and I’m not looking for a miracle to trapse by any time soon. In my experience, they only come in the form of Tylenol and traveling doctors – and babe, I regret to say our luck’s run out.”

Truth be told, Link could only agree – paired with Rhett’s evaluation was the incessant chill of the night, which easily penetrated his hoodie and crystallized against his skin. The entire world, it seemed, had turned against him. Rhett was utterly helpless, it was true – but that didn’t mean he didn’t need him. Fortunately, Link had a drive like none other – he had optimism on his side, despite his best friend persistently swearing it was futile. Perhaps Rhett was right most of the time, and perhaps he could offer more wisdom and knowledge than Link could ever begin to fathom…

…but Link was never apt to give up.

A long night lay ahead of him. He would have to find kindling and a dry enough spot to start a fire. He would have to find water, for both men had long surpassed the state of dehydration. Ideally, he would find food – the hunger-induced nausea that had plagued him for days had officially reached its peak, clawing at his stomach and begging for nutrition. If worse came to worst, Rhett still had a bag of Robin’s vitamin brew – and God knew he needed it – it was at least
something to fall back on. Betwixt all of his body’s needs, however, Link’s heart hurt the worst. There was something of a motherly instinct that kicked in right then and there, an innate desire to protect and defend Rhett of all harm – and it was a role reversal if he’d ever seen one. With the injured man writhing in his arms, Link’s body was swallowed by adrenaline, and with cautious love, he squeezed Rhett against his body and lifted him six feet into the sky. Under typical circumstances, it was a near impossible feat – even now, Rhett still weighed much more than Link – but for survival, it was a must. For just a moment, Link reflected on how beautiful it was that human nature allowed fight or flight to extend to loved ones. His vision was red – not with anger, but with adamancy – and his spirit was heavy with trepidation, as he finally knew the responsibility associated with being a protector. How, he wondered, did Rhett get such a high from fulfilling this role in their relationship? It was his niche from the get-go – and somehow, it allowed their souls to collide like two puzzle pieces, which unlocked a world of unabated, resilient, and unmatchable love. Link couldn’t let him go if he wanted to.

Even with Rhett’s heft weighing down his body, Link felt as though nothing stood between himself and Salt Lake City. Eventually, he grew numb to the bloodcurdling screams of his brother, whose spine may as well have snapped in two – and behind him still, he dragged the same red wagon. With Rhett flung carefully over one shoulder, Link supported his bottom and allowed his legs to dangle vulnerably towards the ground. He could feel tears and snot sloshing onto his bare neck – but for that, Rhett was forgiven. The blond protested until his throat became raw, and he was shortly forced to give in. He sighed defeatedly, burying his nose into Link’s hoodie. “You’ve lost your damn marbles,” he whispered in lieu of talking, the rasp of his voice evident. “You’re putting us both through hell for nothing – you’re gonna get yourself killed if you keep this shit up!”

Link only sighed. “From hell rises miracles,” he wisely responded, reflecting on their introduction to Robin, who’d saved their lives and pulled them both back onto their feet from the lowest point of their journey.

Rhett, of course, scoffed with the illogical statement. “No,” he corrected matter-of-factly, then attempted to raise his voice, “from life rises coincidence. All that’s been with us so far is chance. That’s objective, Link – the universe relies on probability. Miracles don’t crop up because we need them. Miracles don’t exist.”

With that, Link bit his tongue. He, for one, did believe in miracles – and damn it if he wasn’t tired of being denigrated by Rhett and his staunch belief in objectivity. He refused to fight with him, though, especially during the condition in which he strove to save his life…

So instead, he held Rhett even tighter. The larger man’s arms were draped over each of Link’s shoulders, presumably clasped at the hands and flowing freely with the man’s steps. It was difficult to remain positive when Rhett spoke each and every criticism that entered his mind, but Link was intelligent enough to figure that it was the pain talking. On one hand, the fact was comforting – but on the other, it struck with reality, as Link knew that words spoken in struggle were more truthful than words spoken in joviality. But whatever the case, it didn’t matter – Link could only attest to the fact that he loved Rhett with every atom of his being, and that from his standpoint, that would never change. So, in an effort to assert himself, Link shielded his voice in a layer of sweetness, speaking the name of his brother so softly that the air between their faces turned to velvet: “Rhett?”

“Yeah?” he answered in a whisper, slow and gravelly.

“You can say what you will about chance, but I will always believe that you’re my miracle.”
Chapter 24

OCTOBER 08, 201X

The fire was meager, but it got them through the night.

The only way with which Rhett was able to sleep was with Link’s arms bound tightly around his upper back – it was a tiring stance to maintain, but to comfort his deteriorating brother, the small man was willing to do just about anything. That night was perhaps one of the most draining Link had endured up to that point – in fact, he calculated it to be around six in the morning before he finally fell asleep, and even at that, it was a result of energy failure rather than a conscious decision. Before the First Night, he’d always opted to save his problems for dreamland – but now, his days were sleepless, for fear perpetually consumed his being and shredded his soul to obscurity. Anxiety churned in his stomach, twisting with nausea and mayhem which bubbled therein…

The sun had barely risen by the time Link considered it morning. To his expectation, he’d not slept much – but he prayed that just maybe Rhett had gotten a fair amount of shuteye for himself. Between his morning vision and fogged glasses, Link was unable to see at first – he could only make out the shadows and wisps of dreary clouds which billowed above a dying fire, its flames reddening as it neared the end of its lifespan. The air around his cheeks was mysteriously cold.

So he cleaned his glasses and batted his eyes open and shut several times, and at last he was able to make out the world that surrounded him. There, he observed beauty in its purest form. At the base of the fire lay an area of patchy grass, just as the men had left it the night before – but at the edge of its circumference, there began a slope of ever-deepening snow, its surface glittering like incinerated glass beneath the sun. Lavender, emerald, vivacious peach refractions – hues Link forgotten had even existed – all flashed into his irises with a violent bang. Indeed, it was a sight to see – for a moment he even considered awaking his friend, but thought better of it and instead allowed him to sleep in. After all, Link reasoned, he was unable to feel the pain of reality when he was unconscious…

At least he hoped so.

With caution, Link slid his arm out from under Rhett and jammed his palm into the frosty ground beside him. Fortunately, the broken man wasn’t awoken during the process, to which Link prided himself on his stealth. A terrorizing hunger rumbled deep within his stomach, but nevertheless, he proceeded to his feet and ignored the sickness that followed. He would spend the morning planning and preparing for their next bout of travel – with Rhett’s worsening condition, he knew their record breaking distances of twenty-some miles per day would likely come to an end, and so he deemed it necessary to raid the city of Provo for all it had before setting off on their next journey. From the looks of it, the town couldn’t offer much to even the most modest of pillagers, as its destruction was the worst he’d seen since LA – but when all was said and done, it was worth a shot. Link spared one last glance at his sleeping companion, who was just warm enough in his cocoon of blankets not to awake, and then promptly began ransacking University Avenue.

All that remained of the highway’s traffic were the vague shells of vehicles and their underlying frames, demolished by fire and quenched by rust that had followed a recent downpour. Not even the snow dared to stick to the grime, for it was so acidic that the flakes immediately dissolved. In spite of the pitiful remains, though, Link picked through the metal shards and split leather in an effort to find whatever may have shone through the cracks – but to his dismay, he turned up almost nothing. After a half hour’s worth of breaking open doors and trunks (a much easier task
than the man had originally imagined), Link eventually became fed up with the process and threw in the towel. “May as well just bend over and eat the bloody gravel,” he muttered to himself. “Actually sounds pretty appetizing at this point.”

He returned to Rhett with two half-bottles of stagnant spring water and a fun-sized pack of Reese’s Pieces – a fruitless thievery indeed. To cure his dehydration, Link downed one of the bottles in a single go, ignoring the filthy taste of iron as it slid down his throat. By then, the fire had reduced to crimson embers and smoke. Rhett remained fast asleep.

Though it was only water – and putrid water at that – Link was satisfied to have *something* in his stomach. It was queasiness he was most grateful to rid his body of – he never dreamed that nausea could be as troublesome as it had become, but as it turned out, his battered body surprised him each and every day. It was never hunger that bothered him, it was the sickness that valiantly followed. Likewise, exhaustion never bothered him much, either – instead, it was more or less a desire to escape the world, where perhaps his imagination could contrive a more appealing circumstance…

So, he lowered himself to the ground and watched Rhett sleep. He both envied and pitied the big man, who was curled into a carefully crafted ball and snuggled before a fire. His socked feet poked out from under the blankets and graced the skirt of the snow. It was a wet snow, for most of the night had been towards the warmer end of its freezing point – and thus it was quick to melt and become one with the ground. That wasn’t to say the night wasn’t cold, however – without the fire, they would have surely frozen to death. Still, Rhett relished in its warmth, and Link prayed that it provided him with good dreams… because he damn sure deserved it.

Although it was early in the day, Link’s energy was already waning. All he wanted to do was huddle up behind Rhett and fall victim to his body’s pleas to just *sleep* – but his heart would only race with anticipation of the other man’s wakefulness, and so he was wedged in the dilemma of twiddling his thumbs and forcefully keeping his eyes pried open. Rhett, on the other hand, had slept through the majority of the night – and for that reason (perhaps unfortunately) Link deduced he would shortly return to the waking world.

With a muddled exhalation that Link instantly recognized to be the first groan of morning, Rhett stretched with the limited range of motion he possessed and extended his limbs towards the fire. Link was never able to wipe the grin off his face upon watching his friend wake up, for each moment without him, he desperately missed the man – but he also felt a pang of sorrow knowing that once again, the burdensome toils and tribulations of the real world had returned. In an effort to compensate, Link crawled to his side and lay a hand on his shoulder. “*Rise and shine,*” he spoke softly, taking note of Rhett’s expression as he scanned the length of his body. “How you feeling, brother?”

Rhett’s lungs were consumed by a series of heavy but slow breaths – but at last, he unearthed the gumption to respond. “Not gonna lie,” he prefaced, “I feel pretty rough.”

Link frowned. “*I’m sorry,*” he whispered with gravity and distress, not sure what other words he could offer.

“*It’s okay.*”

The curt responses did nothing to soothe Link’s mind – in fact, they only intensified his worry. Instead of dwelling on the issue, though, he attempted to shelf the anxiety as best he could and focus on bettering the situation. “I found some water,” he said, tossing the scant bottle in front of Rhett’s nose. “There’s not much to pilfer here, I’m afraid. Everything’s destroyed. I guess we could’ve figured that though – Provo was a pretty big place. Makes sense they’d wanna wreck it like L.A.”
Eyes glazed, Rhett deliberated over the information. “Hm,” he grunted tiredly and without surprise. He began to flick his gaze lazily around the scene, furrowing his brow in an expression of bemusement. “It snowed,” he observed.

“It did,” Link affirmed, petting his friend’s arm without realizing. “Remember when I’d go over to your house when we were kids, and we’d build snowmen in your backyard? And how when our noses turned pink your mom would call us inside – and I swear every time she’d make us chicken noodle soup, straight from the can. The sodium content in that stuff was astronomical, man – and Mama Di knew it, too.”

To Link’s surprise, Rhett smiled, presumably as a result of the memory of his mother. “I think my love for chicken noodle soup was soiled the day we bathed in it, brother,” he quipped with nostalgia. “I’ll tell you, though, I could eat ten cans of the stuff right now.”

“Oh, me too,” Link complained in return. “But hey, at least you’ve got another pouch of Robin’s vitamin gunk. Granted, it’s too disgusting for me to even look at – but it’s something, I guess.”

Halfheartedly, Rhett shrugged. Nothing else left his lips for the moment – Link figured he probably wasn’t feeling up to unnecessary conversation, which was completely understandable given his condition. So instead of forcing banter on the man, Link swept the stringy hair from his face and pressed a kiss into his temple. The apples of Rhett’s cheeks rose gleefully to his eyes upon contact, his golden beard concealing an ear-to-ear smile.

Link’s lips, too, furled upwards to mimic his friend’s. “Hey,” he quietly instigated, “how about you let me try and fix your brace? I can’t stand seeing you like this. I’m not gonna hurt you, dear,” he promised.

Puzzled, Rhett’s eyebrows folded. “Link, I – I wanna trust you, man, believe me, but how do you know you won’t hurt me?” he countered. “Even doctors can’t do that, you know. They have to ask if you’re okay every so often just to make sure they’re not hurting you.”

“But it’s different,” Link confidently spat. “I’ve known you a lot longer and a lot more personally than any doctor of yours ever has. Sure, babe, doctors are human experts – but I’m a Rhett expert. I know you better than anyone, inside and out.”

In what appeared to be utter disbelief, Rhett leered at the brunet. “Bloody hell, man, I think that water’s got to you,” he half-joked. “Look at me, alright? That’s bullshit and you know it. You know where I’d have gone had my back given out before the First Night? A chiropractor. Or a doctor. Maybe a physical therapist, all depending. Whatever the case, I can assure you I’d have gone to someone whose profession it was to fix me. In other words, it damn sure wouldn’t have been you.”

For whatever reason, the concluding sentence broke Link’s heart – yet, he remained kind in his response. “Rhett, we’re blood brothers –”

“And that gives you the license to be my personal doctor?” Rhett retorted, derision in full force. “Link, if that was the case, doctors wouldn’t have to exist, alright? We’d all just go to our best friend to fix us, free of charge –”

“Well what other options do you have?!” Link bellowed, tears beading onto his waterline and falling just as promptly down his cheeks. “I’m not gonna just sit here and watch you die. That’s completely out of the question. I know I’m not much, Rhett, but I’m all you’ve got. I never said I could fix you – I just said I wouldn’t hurt you. You know I wouldn’t say that if I didn’t know it was true. I know your body well enough not to hurt you, I promise. Why can’t you trust me?”
Incorrigible still, Rhett shut his eyes. He refused to reprove Link out of stubbornness alone.

But Link had a craving for justice that morning, so he grabbed the other man by the shoulder and lightly shook him to regain his attention. “Oh, would you listen to me for once!” he yelled again, abandoning his meekness in favor of a more assertive tone. “I don’t think you’re even scared, are you? You just want to fight. Tell me I’m wrong.”

This caught Rhett’s attention, of course – but he deflected the comment in the midst of anger rather than offering an actual response. “I think it’s interesting how you’ll pander to my every need when we’re on the same wavelength, but once I tell you no, you’re yelling at me, regardless of what kind of condition I’m in. You’re acting like a little kid, you know that? Not that I’m surprised, of course…”

“You avoided my question,” Link reminded through gritted teeth, trying his hardest to ignore the litany of insults that sputtered from his brother’s lips. He knew none of it was true – he knew it – but for whatever reason, the man had chosen to be unreasonably difficult that morning… and even so, it made Link’s heart hurt.

Rhett, on the other hand, could only sigh.

“So you are being stubborn,” Link deduced – and when he was not interrupted by the sound of Rhett’s admonition, his suspicions were confirmed. “I know it’s because you’re in pain and you don’t want to deal with me right now, okay? I know it hurts, I know. I’m just asking you to let me help you. I won’t hurt you, Rhett, I swear on my life. I’d never forgive myself.”

With that, Rhett bit his lip with consideration. He’d been caught red-handed in a pigheaded charade – but his eyes softened as he let down his guard. “You’re a believer in tough love,” he remarked. “Look, I’m sorry. I wish you could just leave me here and get to the city on your own, ’cause God knows I’d rather give up than walk another step. But your heart won’t let you… and that’s actually pretty beautiful. I love you in a way that makes me just want to watch you succeed, brother – truly, that’s all I could ever ask for. Your love for me, though… it’s different. It’s a more dependent love. And you know, I can almost understand it, Link – I see it in you every single day. I’m so thankful for the diligence and the loyalty you’ve shown me – well, for the entirety of our lives, but especially since the First Night. You’ve truly shown me what it’s like to have a friend who sticks closer than a brother… gosh, I’m just droning on now, ain’t I? I guess my point is this – you mean a whole lot more to me than I let on. But all that being said, love…” he paused. “I trust you.”

Tears continued dripping down Link’s nose with his best friend’s sudden change of heart. All he really needed was the admission that Rhett trusted him – but his response provided so much more that he hadn’t known he’d desperately needed to hear. Link’s lip quivered – and in his periphery, he noticed that the fire had burned out.

“You trust me,” Link reiterated, eyes gleaming. That’s all I can say. Although less vibrant, Rhett donned a smile to match – it was covered by a forest of grey and blond hair, the texture of straw yet smooth as it could be. The big man’s hands were clasped innocently at the side of his head, just waiting for Link to drop down to his side and keep him warm in place of the deceased fire…

And before he knew it, Link had obliged and entrapped Rhett in the sweetest hug he could offer – and not once did the man expel an utterance of pain.

***
Rhett was still unable to walk on his own, but Link was successful in aiding his pain – or so he said.

No longer did the blond inexplicably yell out into the skies, which was at least some proof that perhaps he was feeling a little better. He could walk short distances with a great amount of Link’s assistance, too – but truthfully, it was in vain. In this condition, perhaps he could make it to the university in a year’s time, but at any rate, forty miles would be an absolutely daunting distance. Rhett was now entirely incapable of independence.

But his best friend was immovable, and he harbored a limitless drive.

As badly as Rhett probably needed it, Link knew they couldn’t take a day off – eventually, the midnight snowstorms would grow indomitably brutal, putting out any fires the men tried to build. They’d be lucky to survive another two or three days outside of the city, he reasoned – therefore, rest was not an option. In a minimum of forty-eight hours, Link would have to pull the weight of two men to Salt Lake City – at least twenty miles per day, he would somehow have to traverse with the physical burden of his dearest friend on his hip. Knowing these things, he worried. Adrenaline could only push him so far…

Around eight or so, Link found himself wandering around the remnants of what must have once been an auto shop – he’d instructed Rhett to stay put as he diverged from the highway and explored the city itself, which had been maimed by bombs and littered with casualties. There was almost no road beyond the highway, and the entirety of downtown Provo had seemingly been consumed by a sinkhole. The horizon was dreary and grey – if any scene he’d ever lain eyes on could be described as ‘apocalyptic’, this was the one. Even the sun was timid to shine on the meandering trails of disaster.

The oil and muck of the floor stained his shoes with the forgiveness of red wine, and the faint odor of spray paint hung in the air. Split cans decorated the mess at his feet along with rubber belts and rusted chains. Nothing, it appeared, was salvageable – yet, he continued to search for items that could be of any use, whether it be food or aspirin or perhaps even a bar of soap. Whatever Link could get his hands on, he would guiltlessly filch, for both he and Rhett were in desperate need – of what, precisely, he wasn’t sure – but he figured there must be something lying amongst the mountains of filth that could aid the men in their final stretch. Anything, Link prayed, just give us something.

But his wishes were direly unfulfilled, as the only items he ran across over the course of the hour were a bottle of dish soap and a can of WD-40.

With the sun offset to the east, Link surmised it to be somewhere near nine in the morning. He’d traversed quite a way into the city, though the majority of his efforts were worthless – so, instead of carrying on with his modest search, he turned on his heel and headed once more for the highway. Wading through the catastrophe was a hassle, having to tiptoe through the crumbling brick and hunks of corrugated roof that had somehow found their way to the ground. For several minutes he stumbled through the clutter – it was similar to the photos he’d seen of what was left behind after Hurricane Katrina, but with ash rather than wood since the bombs had instigated weeks of wildfire, which had burned down the city. Link imagined how beautiful – and perhaps macabre – the flames that had annihilated Provo must have been. Reds, oranges, yellows, engulfing the city without a second thought, feeding on the bounteous oxygen and billowing black smoke into the atmosphere…

In the midst of these thoughts, Link found himself trekking uphill – and there, he noticed that the highway was in view. Rhett’s silhouette was tiny and thin, even as he lay on his side and shivered...
next to a pile of soot and cinders. The smaller man’s knees ached beneath the burden of his weight – how he would ever get his friend to safety was beyond him – but all he knew was that it was vital that he didn’t give in. Items in hand, Link jogged quickly to his side and made his return known.

“I’m back,” he stated the obvious, then placed the pathetic loot in Rhett’s vision. “I couldn’t find much of anything, man. But we really need to go. I’m really sorry…”

“Aw, c’mon now,” Rhett consoled as he flipped carefully onto his back. “It’s okay. I know you did everything you could do. I’m just proud of you for trying.”

Link smiled with the affirmative words – once again, his friend had chosen to appeal to his love language. Rhett’s body shook lightly from beneath the layers of clothing and blankets that encapsulated him, which on one hand was cause for concern, but at the same time Link could relate. Landing a soft pat on the back of his shoulder, the brunet squeezed the mound of fabric beneath his palm. “Let’s dress you up nice and warm, okay? Can you sit up?” he asked, offering a hand to Rhett, who grabbed it and pulled himself up with a grimace. Link draped his arm around the man as his breathing began to slow. “You’re doing fine,” he encouraged.

Rhett was eventually able to relax in the position, much to Link’s relief – and so, ever so slowly, he removed himself from Rhett and struggled to his feet. The wagon was only a few yards away, and it contained both bags, which carried enough clothing for the two of them. Upon reaching the wagon, Link zipped them both open and retrieved the warmest garments he could find from each. His stomach grumbled desperately for food, but he did his best to hide his hunger from Rhett – he’d learned to expand his abdominal muscles rather than clench them inwardly, as it was much easier to conceal the unwarranted noises that way. His philosophy at the juncture was that Rhett needn’t worry about anything but himself – after all, Link was relatively certain that at least he himself would be okay. His best friend, on the other hand, lived in ambiguity. At least for now, Link felt obligated to ignore any inkling of discomfort in his body and focus solely on his brother, refusing to give him anything less than what he needed. He knew he’d be expending quite a bit of energy and attention over the next couple of days, but that was just okay. In fact, he was happy to give that to Rhett – he was simply anxious that his sacrificial providences wouldn’t be enough to save him.

He returned to Rhett, arms filled with winter apparel, only to find that his nose had turned a shade of pink – it was absolutely endearing, and it forced Link into a saccharine grin. His best friend was just too damn cute. “Raise your arms,” Link laughed, his soul somehow merry in spite of the repugnancy of his surroundings.

And Rhett complied – but not without biting his tongue, as the movement inherently hurt his back. Link stripped him only of the blankets, leaving him to shiver within the warmth of the blue hoodie he’d been wearing. Rhett appeared to be groggy – but that didn’t stop Link from nabbing him by the arms and wrapping him up in his olive cargo jacket, which now miraculously sagged from the man’s tiny frame. With that, he slipped a wool glove onto each hand, followed by two pairs of socks and a maroon scarf. Each item of clothing was horribly mismatched, clashing like oil and water – but none of that mattered to Link, because at long last, his friend had achieved comfort. As soon as he’d finished, Rhett reached out to hug him around the neck, just to express the overflowing surge of gratitude that poured from his heart. Even in calamity, he was the most giving man Link had ever known…

As badly as Link wished to stay in the position indefinitely, his heart throbbed with a vast anxiety with each second that passed. “You mean the world to me,” he whispered conclusively, waiting a few seconds before pushing Rhett away. He stroked his palm down the man’s heavily clothed arm and locked his gaze into Rhett’s. “We’re gonna have to get a move on,” he pushed, “it’s gonna be
a long day. God knows we’ll need every minute of it to get where we’re going.”

Rhett nodded. “Guess we’re Lehi bound,” he announced, not a twinge of wistfulness in his voice for Provo as he notified his friend of their next destination — and rightfully so, Link added in thought, empathetic of how the universe had chosen to treat him.

So, rising to his feet, the small man grabbed his crummy findings from the asphalt and tossed them carelessly into the wagon. It was a job just getting Rhett to stand — Link didn’t even want to think about the trouble they’d face in his efforts to traverse forty miles of the horrid terrain in a span of two days — but, of course, it was an unalterable factor of their situation that neither man could do anything to help. As per usual, Link hoped and prayed for luck, which had proved to be their enemy in certain fashions and their greatest physician in others. For now, Rhett walked slowly and with a noticeable limp — and even then, he’d begun to press the majority of his weight into his exhausted companion. Deep down, Link knew the system would never work. They would certainly both collapse before the day’s end, and together they would perish in the winter, hypothermia plunging their bodies into a deep sleep by nightfall…

But that was a scary thought. Or rather a frightening reality, Link’s thoughts hissed, causing his heartbeat to escalate. Whatever the case, he chose not to dwell on it for too long, so long as the sheer anxiety didn’t get to him — and luckily, by some divine grace, it seemed, he was able to calm down just enough that his vitals remained at a reasonable normalcy. Surely, Rhett noticed their dilemma… right? Was he actually dense enough to believe their lives weren’t in danger, or was he just blatantly ignoring the fact for the sake of Link’s nerves? A lump formed in Link’s throat at the concept. Optimism, his conscious mind blared. Optimism, optimism.

By the time they journeyed back onto the interstate, a fresh and gentle snowfall had begun. Link wasn’t prepared.

***

Around four miles in, Rhett requested they stop to rest.

His eyes had grown noticeably bleak — they were a silvery blue, reminiscent of the clouds that hung above their heads and spat snowflakes onto the scene. He didn’t dare look Link in the face — it was far too early in the day to consider breaking down, so instead he kept his gaze fixed on the ground. It glistened with the wet residue left behind from the melted flakes — and with that, he opted for a simplistic conversation:

“You learn to appreciate things in a different way out here, you know?” he began. “Snow’s a beautiful thing, especially up close. I’d kill to see those microscopic images of snowflakes again — you know what I’m talking about? The ones Snowflake Bentley did. Those photos were gorgeous.”

With the unfamiliar name, Link’s ears perked up as his brow creased. “Snowflake Bentley?” he ignorantly sputtered.

As the opportunity to spread his knowledge arose, Rhett’s eyes glowed above a pair of rosy cheeks that gave away his smile. “You don’t know Snowflake Bentley?” he asked with disbelief, directing his gaze to his friend. Rhett was perched at the edge of the wagon, legs crossed, and Link stood beside him and looked down to meet his eyes for the first time in his life.
The small man shook his head.

“Oh!” Rhett quietly beamed, unable to conceal his excitement. “Well, Link… to start off, his birth name wasn’t Snowflake – it was Wilson. He wasn’t like, predestined to study the microscopy of snow because of his birthright or anything, just to preface.”

Link blew a huff of laughter through the slit of his lips. “Wilson Bentley…” he murmured, thoroughly impressed by his brother’s fountain of knowledge.

“Yeah,” Rhett continued, “he was a cool dude. Anyway, he was one of the first guys to figure out the structure of snowflakes with real scientific observation – and by ‘real scientific observation’ I’m talking about photographs. People had seen the intricate details of snowflakes before him, but there were a couple problems associated with their proofs. I mean, before Bentley they could really only observe snowflakes with microscopes – and that’s cool and all, but they didn’t have cameras with speedy enough exposure times, so they couldn’t take pictures. And they obviously couldn’t draw them with much precision since snow tends to melt pretty daggone fast, and no two snowflakes are exactly alike so it’s not like you could just smack another one on there and pick up where you left off. What Snowflake Bentley did was pretty genius, honestly – he’d capture snowflakes on black velvet, which was smart because it showed enough contrast that it made the images pop, and after that he’d transfer the sample to a slide, put the slide in the microscope, and capture a photo through the lens. This all happened around the turn of the nineteenth century by the way, so it’s nothing too ancient. I just find it pretty captivating. He did some beautiful work, Link, I’m telling you – I wish I could show you, man.”

Completely blown away by the sea of random facts that seemed to be wedged within the confines of Rhett’s mind, Link’s mouth fell agape. “If you know so much about this guy, why’s he never come up in conversation? You sound like you could write a novel about him and here I was virtually clueless about the fact he even existed,” he commented with a slight undertone of envy for Rhett’s ability to retain information. “I’ve spent almost every day of my life with you since 1984 and you continue to surprise me, brother. I love that.”

Rhett blushed. “You too, Link,” he reciprocated, his voice soft. Snow continued to pepper down from the clouds, eventually settling atop Rhett’s head and dusting his hair in white. For quite some time, the men relished in the silence – especially Rhett, whose weary bones tended to give out much more frequently than Link’s, despite the fact he quite literally hadn’t been carrying his own weight. According to the road’s markers, they stood fifteen miles from Lehi – and Link was unable to tell if the progress thus far was good or not given he had no way of telling the time. The clouds swallowed the sun and propagated in grey mounds across the sky, leaving him absolutely clueless as to what hour it could have possibly been. All he knew was that it wasn’t night – but the day so far had seemed relatively short. He assumed it was two at the very latest.

But an assumption, he mused, was not concrete enough to base his reasoning upon.

Link stepped carefully towards the wagon and swept his palm through the powder that had accumulated on Rhett’s head. His hand slid down to meet with his spine, where he stroked up and down as a symbol of his desire to comfort his friend. “How’s your back?” he questioned, though he knew the answer.

Rhett blinked several times and shrugged his shoulders. “I’m at the point of no return,” he stated dismissively, “no sense in complaining about it anymore.”

Sympathetic, Link bit his lip. “Aw, c’mom now,” he coaxed – but very quickly, a blanket of doubt began to wash over him. Rhett really wasn’t himself in any sense, and Link had taken note of that – the only similarity to his former self was his instinct to laugh off his troubles, a deadly trait for anyone in their circumstance. Even the structure of his face had significantly changed as the
wrinkles and scars piled on – or perhaps that was simply Link’s imagination at work. Whatever the case, his level of unease skyrocketed for his brother’s well-being. “Think you can handle the rest of the day? Be honest with me.”

“Mm…” Rhett drew out, though his consideration was probably faux. “To tell you the truth, I, uh – I feel like I’ve just about expended myself, man. I know we need to keep moving, Link – but something tells me I’m about to give out. I thought stopping might bring back some of my pep but it’s not really doing much for me if we’re being real. It’s absolutely draining for me to move and keep my body in such a position that I’m not… hurting myself. But hey, c’est la vie, right?”

C’est la vie?! Link indignantly brooded. Not knowing what else to do, he swiveled to the other side of Rhett and sat at the wagon’s center, his legs elevated and hanging off the edge. There, he encircled his arms around the blond. “Rhett,” he chastised. “I’m worried about you, babe. But listen, I’m gonna do everything I can do to get us to Salt Lake, alright? What do you need?”

Again, Rhett hummed in response – but it was shortly followed by the swift depth of his voice. “What I need is a break,” he vented, “but evidently that’s not attainable. So unless you have any bright ideas, I’m afraid there’s not much I can do to keep going. I can either wait it out and move at my own pace, or I can give up entirely. It’s up to you whether you want to keep going or not – you can do it without me, sweetheart, I promise –”

“Don’t start!” Link interjected, his arms flying away from the man as though he’d been poisoned. “We’ve made it too damn far. As far as I’m concerned, you’re gonna pull through no matter what hits the fan – and if you can’t do it on your own, then I will. Mark my word.”

Lethargy in his limbs, Rhett’s head dropped so that his beard brushed against his neck. “For God’s sake, man, I wish you’d open your eyes,” he muttered, almost to himself.

But Link, returning to his hardheaded nature, was compelled to alter the man’s thoughts once and for all. “You think?” he began, austere. “I’m not putting up with this today, Rhett. I’m not going to sit here and let you denigrate me because you have this arrogant little complex where you believe every little thing you think is objectively right. It’s one thing to be discouraged in your ability, but it’s another to pummel me with your doubts of mine. It’s one thing to have criticisms, but another to belittle someone who hasn’t left your side for decades. I’m willing to admit that you very well may be right – maybe you are too sick and tired to make it through the final stretch on your own. In fact, that’s probably true. What’s pissing me off is that you’re refusing my help – and on the basis of what? Can you answer me that? Why, Rhett, have you persistently implied to me that you would literally rather die than trust me with your life? Don’t you realize that’s hurtful to both of us? In case you didn’t know, you’re the greatest gift this universe has ever given me. Of all the people I’ve ever known, you’re the one I would be the most lost without. If you want my honest assessment, take it and run – yes, you are one of the smartest, wisest, most down to earth men I’ve ever met in my life. You’re my best friend. You’re my brother. But you’ve got a lot of learning to do.”

Just then, the bitter wind accelerated and whipped even more snow onto the scene. Link’s vision was momentarily blurred as water droplets began to accumulate on his glasses – but it didn’t stop him from watching the bigger man’s head fall gracelessly into his palms, followed by the unmistakable sound of his choppy breathing. Instinctively, Link found himself sliding closer to the man and pressing their bodies together – anything to comfort his poor, trying soul – but Link didn’t regret his words in the slightest. He was a lover and a fighter both, and at long last, it appeared that he’d gotten through to Rhett’s heart.

In and of itself, that was a milestone.

Steadily arising, Rhett crossed his arms above his thighs and stared into the opaque, foggy abyss
that lay in front of him. “You’re right,” he granted, “you’re absolutely right. I’m sorry I’ve been so
dismissive and that I’ve been downright disparaging you so much lately. You’re allowed to
express your feelings – and I shouldn’t stand in the way of that or shut you out. There’s really no
excuse, I know that. I just – Link, we’re running out of time. We’re running out of ideas. I just
don’t logically see anything that can make this work. I don’t want to give up – God, no, not after
listening to all your sappy speeches about how much I mean to you. I get it now, babe, believe
me. But I really, genuinely cannot think of any way we can stick together and both succeed before
we’re wiped out by the weather. I hate to say it, but the odds are against us, brother. And I’m
what’s holding us back. I just want you to get through this thing, okay? You’re more than
capable. If it means dragging me along, I’ll be more than happy to be there with you for the ride –
but baby, I can’t do it myself. I don’t know what else to say. I’m worn out.”

And that was the painful reality. Link folded his arms around Rhett’s tiny waist and cried silently
into his shoulder – there was a raincloud burdening his thoughts that he couldn’t expunge. “I’ll do
something,” he promised, “and if not, I’ll die trying.”

Rhett sighed. “I don’t want to tie you down, love…”

“I don’t care!” Link yelled in the midst of his crying fit, no longer bothering to hide his tears. “If I
had it in me, I’d carry you the entire way – but having to pull a wagon with one arm and
supporting a six-seven giant in my other arm is no easy task. Even if we abandoned the wagon
and it was just your weight, I’m not sure we’d get very far. You’re a big man, Rhett, and I’m just
not that strong…” As he sputtered the truth, the situation weighed down even more – and
eventually, Link found that he’d been pulled into Rhett’s consoling embrace, which was
miraculously softer than it had been in months…

“Cheer up, baby doll,” the taller man tried, his lips a matter of inches from Link’s ear. “I know
you have limitations. That’s okay. You’re okay.”

But with Rhett’s newfound kindness and understanding, Link cried even harder. “What am I
supposed to do?” he managed, though his words were borderline indecipherable.

Rhett, of course, understood him just fine. “We’ll figure something out, brother. I’m not too picky
as long as you’re happy, okay? For all I care you could toss me in the wagon and push me off a
cliff,” he quipped in an effort to lift Link’s spirits. “It’s all up to you. You’re top priority here, you
understand?”

Weak, Link nodded. As he took a much needed breather and reflected on what his brother had
just told him, a series of revelations exposed themselves – first was the realization that Rhett truly
wanted the best for him. It wasn’t that he simply desired death as a copout to the devastation that
surrounded him, but in fact, he genuinely cared for Link. There were moments in their past that
Rhett had insisted that, if it ever came down to it, he would die for his best friend – and although
Link didn’t necessarily perceive the statement as a joke, he was awestricken by the fact that his
brother had actually been granted an opportunity to fulfill his promise. Rhett had always been a
man of his word – but with such an unlikely concept, Link had tucked it into the back of his mind.
Never did he think it would come into play – yet, there he lay, engulfed by the embrace of the
person who was truly selfless enough to die for him with nothing but contentment in his decision.
Knowing he meant that much to someone – well, it was a two-sided coin. On one hand, he was
humbled, and it made Link’s heart glow like the ruby that Rhett swore composed it. On the other
hand, he was laden with guilt. No one should have ever loved him so much – not a mother, not a
child, not a spouse, and certainly not a friend… but for whatever reason, Rhett did.

And perhaps that was grounds to believe that, just maybe, they were something more.

The second realization was much simpler – the wagon. Rhett’s proposition was, of course, a joke
– but Link had to admit that the wagon could be of much more use to them than it had been. Link swept a hand through his matted hair and arose from his home in Rhett’s arms, softly backhanding him in the chest with his mouth vaguely ajar. He could feel the stars as they glowed in his eyes and reflected into Rhett’s.

“Baby,” he registered, “the wagon!”

But, having not been able to read Link’s thoughts, Rhett stared back at him with confusion and mockery. “Link, honey, that was a joke –”

“No, listen to me!” the small man beamed. “It’s not a bad idea. Wheels reduce friction, yeah? Meaning it would be a lot easier on me to pull you to the university than it would be carrying you or something.”

Still, Rhett’s brow was furrowed. “I don’t quite think you’ve taken everything into consideration,” he said, unimpressed. “For starters, I can’t fit into this tiny thing with two backpacks taking up half the room –”

“We’ll leave ‘em behind,” Link broke in. “It’s dead weight at this point. There’s no food left and we’re wearing all our clothes as it is.”

Finally, Rhett’s derision started to assuage – he’d begun to realize that Link was entirely sincere, and so, he sought to appease him. “Okay…” he acquiesced, “but no matter how good you think those wheels are, I’m a heavy guy. Once you start this, you’ll be sorry,” he warned.

“Nah,” Link brushed the argument off, “I’ll be okay. I seriously doubt you even weigh what I used to. And I’ll tell you one thing, it’ll be a hell of a lot easier than having you lean on my side for miles at a time. That’s brutal for both of us, man.”

“Yeah,” Rhett agreed. “Well… I guess my final complaint would be the wagon’s incessant squeaking, but that’s just being nitpicky. Hopefully it’s not indicative of damage – but I guess there’s not much we can do about that anyway.”

“Au contraire,” Link said, flitting his tongue against his teeth. “That can of WD-40 I found wasn’t just for show, brother. I picked it up in case the squeaking started to get to us – but now I guess it’s got a more industrial purpose.” His tone had gradually gone from distraught to amused, for he was filled with gladness and satisfaction as his plan began to unfurl.

So, without further ado, Link jabbed his dry palms into the rusty interior of the wagon and hoisted himself out and onto the ground. He then took Rhett’s hand with chivalry and helped him scoot his bottom into the wagon – indeed, he was much too big to fit inside with the company of their two worn bags, so they would have to be discarded for the remainder of their journey. What warriors you’ve been, Link appraised from within his thoughts. Singlehandedly, he grabbed them both by the strap and threw them onto the road. He then hugged Rhett against his body and helped him scoot back again – and with the displacement of the bags, he had plenty of room to move, which pleased Link indefinitely. “Comfy?” Link checked, making sure his gaze was soft and loving.

And Link could have sworn there were stars in Rhett’s eyes as he turned and said, “I am.”

So he let him be. For just a few seconds, Link took it upon himself to stop and smell the roses – or, rather, watch the snow float down and blanket on the ground. Some flakes peppered into Rhett’s hair and melted as they touched his scalp, while others coated the rusted iron and paint of the wagon. In a few moments, Link would have to meticulously spray each of the wagon’s wheels and presumably drag the beaten hunk of metal through a blizzard – but instead of dwelling on the
inevitable, for once, his heartbeat remained steady. It had been months since he’d been given an opportunity to indulge on one of life’s moments – and at long last, he was able to thank the barriers that had stood in his way. He was able to thank the snow, and the rain, and the winds, and the unforgiving sun – the torture, the pain, the starvation, the exhaustion, sickness and anxiety and the wringer of emotional turmoil…

He thanked them, sincerely, for allowing him to realize his strength – because now, he could taste triumph, and it was no longer just on the tip of his tongue. It coated his mouth and created a savor so strong he wondered if he would be better off spitting it out; perhaps his arrogance had gotten to him, he mused. There was something in his soul, though, that begged to differ:

A genuine thread of optimism coursed through his heart and filled his limbs with gold. Perhaps the weather was frightful, but the fire within his body convinced him that everything would objectively be just fine. He finally had faith. It was a rare artifact in those days – and thus its existence proved even more powerful. Everything had fallen perfectly into place…

Perhaps the trip to Lehi wouldn’t be so daunting after all.
Chapter 25

OCTOBER 09, 201X

The further they traveled north, the more unbearable the chill became.

They arrived in Lehi at dusk the previous day, but were both much too exhausted to carry on a very extensive search. After very little deliberation, the men collectively decided to set up camp as soon as they found kindling – which luckily didn’t take terribly long given that just off the interstate sat a construction site that by sheer luck contained almost nothing but lumber. The city had gone nearly untouched as far as demolition, and the fact sparked a wave of hopeful suspicion in Link’s mind – but the scene was vacant of life nonetheless. Intact, unsuspecting bodies littered the sidewalks and streets, as well as within the cars that had crashed into guardrails and buildings. Having had so much exposure to these situations, the fear associated with death no longer fazed Link. He did acknowledge, however, that this scene especially was peculiar – these people had dropped dead seemingly without warning, almost as though the entire population collectively and simultaneously experienced flatline of the heart. But Link didn’t speak of it that night – he swore by that point it may have very well been a hallucination, and in the case that it was, he chose to stay hush for Rhett’s sake. The poor guy was simply too ill to bear another man’s troubles.

So instead, Link threw a match into the boards. He then wrapped a blanket around his shivering companion and lay down with him against the fire, their limbs entangled like twine before a body of soothing, orange light.

***

Link felt especially optimistic that morning.

It was the final day they would spend on the move to a temporary destination – Midvale was only fifteen miles away, a distance that was entirely doable for the men. If they traveled straightaway and without break, they could perhaps make it in a matter of four hours – and there, they would spend the night, and at last begin walking the final stretch to the University of Utah. Everything, it appeared, was falling perfectly into place. The crippling weight of anxiety had been lifted from Link’s shoulders once and for all.

The two awoke at sunrise, shivering at the side of a dying fire. Link subconsciously rubbed circles into Rhett’s chest and cuddled as close as he could for warmth – but he found it to be a fruitless endeavor. The embers expelled their final bits of smoke into the atmosphere and decomposed to black bits of charcoal, fat snowflakes swallowing the heat as they compiled atop the ashes. Rhett’s teeth chattered, his cheeks crimson with the blood that pooled beneath his skin. Frost had overtaken his eyes.

Link’s lip jutted out in sympathy. “You’re cold,” he whispered – and as if to embolden the statement, his breath crystallized and floated away before it could even hit his friend’s face.

Rhett could only nod. Over the months, his body had grown so small and fragile that the frigid temperatures took a more extensive toll on him than ever before – but in many ways, Link knew, he was also stronger than ever before, and there was not a doubt in his mind that his best friend was capable of handling it. Link wouldn’t let him fight it alone, though – he flopped against Rhett
and hugged him close, continuing to violently rub the layers of clothing into his skin in an effort to create friction. It was an act of love rather than necessity – for once, his heart didn’t pound with the anxiety of a deadline, and his conscience didn’t hiss its typical catalog of threats. For just a moment’s time, the small man strove to pamper Rhett, just to make sure he knew that in spite of their doom-laden circumstance, there was somebody out there who thought the world of him. With these thoughts, Link was able to lay peacefully on the cold, hard ground – and peaceful he was, for the warmth of his sweet friend was more than enough to compensate. He even dozed off for a few tender moments…

But the gentle sound of his name shortly caught his attention.

“Link,” the voice sounded, like breeze against his ear – Rhett’s intonation was notorious for its kind and delicate echo, even in a whisper.

A charming smile crept upon Link’s lips as he lifted his head from his brother’s arm. “What, sweetheart?” he whispered back.

“I’m hungry…”

The small man empathetically crinkled his brow. “I know, babe…” he said, moving his free hand to massage Rhett’s side. It was rare of the blond to complain of such things unless the feelings were so intense that they absolutely consumed him – and for that reason, Link was especially concerned. His own bones ached with exhaustion and stagnancy, though, so in lieu of getting up just then, he jutted his chin into the other’s chest. “We’ll look around in a few minutes, okay?” he promised, tone laced with compassion.

“Okay.” Rhett shut his eyes and buried his nose against Link’s shoulder. Together, the men were able to achieve some level of warmth, though it was next to nothing compared to the fire. Rhett eventually stopped shivering – but only when the entirety of his body was pulled into Link’s arms were his tremors truly quelled. Too weak to control his vocal chords, a soft whine slipped from Rhett’s throat, which Link pretended not to hear in favor of the man’s comfort. The brunet dreamt of spring and sunshine, even when the frosty ground benumbed him.

When his body proved that its languidness wasn’t temporary, Link sighed with finality and combed his fingers through Rhett’s hair. The blond’s eyes flicked open with ease, wincing at the dull whiteness of their surroundings. His beard was streaked with grey. The stress of life’s uncertainty had significantly aged him – yet, Link observed strength rather than weakness in the silver locks. His own hair had yet to turn entirely grey, but there was no denying the salt-and-pepper stubble that clung to his face. Realizing he’d left his razor and the rest of their grooming supplies nineteen miles south, Link swore under his breath – the prospect of having to go just a single morning without shaving irked him to no end, let alone a matter of days. He would simply have to grow used to the scraggily mess of hair that he persistently tried to rid his face of. Curses, he thought, the itch of thousands of tiny hairs making his skin preemptively crawl.

Before he had much of a chance to dwell on the inconvenience, the small man blinked and returned to reality, his body hovering over Rhett’s wide-eyed expression. There, a quick but sharp pain struck him suddenly behind the eyes. “Oh,” he thoughtlessly groaned, doubling over to pinch the bridge of his nose. As soon as he showed sign of wariness, Rhett reached out to grab him – and in turn, he collected Link in his arms with a swift and gallant maneuver. Link’s forehead lay on the edge of his ribcage, only to return at his friend’s side in the same position from whence he’d arisen just seconds earlier – the coziness, Link discovered, was just too strong, and his body begged him for rest.

A firm but careful hand ruffled Link’s hair. “You alright?” Rhett asked by routine, his voice sincere and kind at the same time. His brow had furrowed in concern for his companion, fingers
tugging his scalp with a grounding resistance.

Link slung an arm around his friend’s tiny waist and let his cheek smoosh into Rhett’s ribs. “Just
tired,” he modestly assured – and it was the truth in several contexts.

A short bout of silence followed the complaint – but Rhett was fairly quick to take action. Slow
and steady, he craned his neck just enough that he was able to press a kiss onto Link’s hairline.
His lips curled into a smile before he even had the chance to pull away, his warm breath mingling
with the other’s scalp. When their eyes met, Link noticed a shine to Rhett’s – \textit{probably the bitter
cold}, he reasoned, though somehow his heart saw more. As if by defense, Rhett dismissed the
man’s concern by batting his lashes, then bit his tongue in the midst of a fawning grin. “Fifteen
miles to go, baby doll. We’re in no hurry today – relax as long as you want, alright?”

“Aw, I can’t do that, now,” Link contended. “It’s not the kind of tired that’s fixed with rest,
anyway. I could sleep all day if I wanted to, but it wouldn’t do a thing for me in the long run, you
know? Besides, we need to look around for something to eat – you’re probably starving, huh?”

Rhett stretched as far as his back would allow him to, eyes clenched shut as the movement irritated
his ever-worsening spinal column. His thin, skeletal hips peeked out from beneath his clothes
during the gesture, which was plenty evidence to affirm Link’s question – he was frankly sickened
by the horror of his best friend’s body and how he seemed to be wasting away with every breath.
Naturally, he ran a benevolent hand across Rhett’s tiny belly, tracing along the sharp bones as his
fingers grazed them…

Link couldn’t handle the soul-plaguing empathy any longer, so he consequently jammed his palm
into the ground and pushed himself up so that he was once again looking down upon his best
friend. He shifted to his knees, grabbing Rhett’s hand and thus his attention. “\textit{I can’t look at you
like this anymore},” he confessed in a tone so low he wasn’t sure Rhett could hear him – which, if
he were honest, was probably for the best. “Let’s have a look around, yeah? I’ll help you up – just
grab onto me, brother. I’ll take care of you.”

And Rhett did. His grip was far from strong as he clased his fist around Link’s forearm, but it
was firm and trusting nonetheless. Link scooped his other arm behind Rhett’s back, one heel
against the ground for leverage, and fought the force of gravity as he pulled the man upright.
There, he hugged Rhett’s ribs – carefully, so as not to injure his back – and expelled a strained
breath as both of them rose to their feet. Of course, Rhett did everything he could to help – but as
he’d told Link many times, getting out of bed was often the hardest part of his day, let alone
pulling himself off the ground. Despite the sorrow and guilt that emanated from the taller man’s
body language, Link was unable to hold anything against him – as hurt and sick as he was, the
least he could offer was a world of praise.

They stood together for several seconds, Rhett’s chin jabbed into the top of the other man’s head.
Link supported his back with a strong embrace – and, because he was so much shorter, his face
was pressed into Rhett’s chest. Their voices were silent, but their hearts pounded with distress –
even though Rhett was lighter than he once was, it was difficult for the much smaller man to haul
him almost singlehandedly into a standing position. In spite of the strenuous series of actions,
Link’s support remained unfettered. Rhett began shivering almost instantly, to which Link
responded by tightening his grip. \textit{I’m right here, the gesture spoke, and I swear to God I’m never
letting go.}

Adjusting his head so he could see their surroundings, Link peeked out from under the thick heap
of garments at his nose. Just as he’d noted the night before, Lehi was the most average looking
city they’d run across in the three months they’d spent traveling – and average had become, in
Link’s eyes, a signal of danger. Of course, the myriads of liquefied and decomposed bodies rotting
at the roadside were enough to prove that the city’s residents weren’t let off the hook – \textit{something}
was amiss, but somehow, the environment hadn’t taken any of the brunt. Where was the aftermath of the bombs? Where were the incinerated buildings and broken roads? Lehi was far from a small town – yet it still stood in all its glory, a home for fifty thousand casualties to bake beneath the sun. Curiosity and enervation alike twisted Link’s stomach like a braid. Beads of nausea climbed up his throat.

“Rhett?” he finally managed, his voice shaky and dependent.

By his instinct to protect, the blond slid away from Link and bent down as quickly as his back would let him so that the men were eye level. A layer of concern shrouded his expression, his mouth hidden behind a furling mustache. “Yeah, what’s wrong?” he spoke, grave.

Link, still leaned against his lifelong companion, pushed an unsteady sigh past his lips. “Everything’s so… pristine. This city, man – not a scratch anywhere,” he said, scanning the buildings and the bodies and the still standing trees. “Why is that?”

Rhett furrowed his brow. With that, he took his eyes off Link and observed it for himself – and it wasn’t long before his mouth, too, fell open at the scene. “Oh!” he exclaimed, “My God!”

Indeed, the reaction was beyond strange for Rhett – and because of this, Link’s heart began to flutter. “Rhett –”

“IT’S A BLOODY SETUP!” he yelled into the distance – and with as much force as his battered bones would put forth, he grabbed Link’s shoulders and fixed within his eyes a severe gaze. “Listen to me, Link,” he warned, “don’t you take another step in the city’s direction, you understand? We have to go right now.” In an attempt to yank his friend back to the highway, Rhett encircled his hands around Link’s wrist – but the sharpness of the movement hurt him, and he was left to fall forward, burying his forehead in the man’s neck.

“Rhett…” Link repeated, his brother’s name the only comfort he was able to speak. “You’re being too vague. What’s going on, baby? You have to talk to me – please…”

“For God’s sake, is it not obvious?!” Rhett derisively cried. “We’re lucky as all hell we didn’t go any further than what we did, alright? We’re lucky we stopped where we stopped and just nibbled the bait. Only a fool would set foot in the city limits – just look at it, Link. It’s designed to attract people like us.”

Instead of allowing Rhett’s fear-fostered words to eat away at his self-esteem, Link pried at him for more information. “You’re not serious, sweetheart…” he challenged, mildly concerned that his friend had gone off the deep end.

But Rhett’s following reaction was more than sincere. “Are you even listening to me?!” he backhanded Link’s shoulder. “Look, I don’t know what the deal is specifically – all I can tell you is that whatever’s going on with this place isn’t something we need to get tangled up in. If I’ve learned anything from this damn journey, it’s that you don’t trust anything that’s normal. Maybe Lehi wasn’t bombed, but take a closer look – skeletons, corpses, bloated bodies… every stage of human decomposition represented in just the small window we have to the city. Bottom line, it looks to me like people walk into Lehi and never walk out. I’m not letting you another inch closer to that shit, you hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” Link winced. “But understand this, Rhett – maybe, just maybe, you’re being paranoid…”

“Don’t give me that!” he interrupted without remorse. “You know what? I may very well be wrong – but this isn’t a risk I’m willing to take. I hope you realize your life and your health mean
a lot more to me than that, Link. We don’t have time to beat around the bush. Now come on – let’s hit the road.” With haste, he grabbed Link’s wrist and coaxed him away from the city’s temptation – and although the small man was feisty and brimming with questions, he found himself becoming an enabler of Rhett’s paranoia. He followed his lead.

Perhaps, though, Rhett was right. Even with the dozens of arguments presenting themselves in his head, unfurling like an eternal scroll, Link couldn’t deny his intuition. In his stomach there sat a stony lump of unidentifiable origin – it wasn’t of sickness, or hunger, or even anxiety, he found – it was something quite different than anything he’d ever experienced. It was something that slapped him in the face and made itself as plain as day, but for whatever reason, he couldn’t put his finger on it. He instead opted to ignore the feeling and the subsequent foreboding that followed in his heart, putting his faith in Rhett just as he always had. Before his friend could drag him any further, Link knelt to the ground and snatched the wagon’s handle. Fifteen miles to Midvale – but his knees and ankles ached like all hell, even without the burden of Rhett’s heft weighing down the wagon. For Link, the final journey would be the most excruciating. He could only pray for enough strength to pull the weight of two men to victory – because truthfully, Link didn’t know if he could do it himself.

Upon reaching the interstate, Link reluctantly invited his injured companion back into the wagon – and Rhett, of course, obliged, for walking to Midvale himself was entirely unthinkable. “Thanks for all you do for me,” he muttered before leaving Link’s side. From there, it was an uphill battle – every step would be more of a struggle than the last, and his joints burned with preemptive disdain just thinking about it.

But for Rhett, the favor was the very least he could do. He’d have dragged him to the ends of the earth if the situation called for it.

After a couple minutes of tirelessly trudging along, Link found that he was out of breath – but instead of stopping altogether, he slowed his pace and began taking deeper breaths. Eventually, his steps began to match his breathing – in, left foot, out, right foot – and while it wasn’t as speedy as he’d have liked, it was the most efficient manner with which he could balance break time with walk time. Additionally, Rhett didn’t utter a word of complaint – he seemed to harbor only gratefulness for their triumph, despite being trapped within the confinement of a small, rusted wagon.

To the right of the highway stood Lehi, which for the most part was masked by mountains and miscellaneous debris at the roadside – but Link was able to catch a glimpse of the city as they passed through a rockless patch. At first, he could only see the canopies of the tallest buildings, still erected in brilliance and fortitude. As the shear of the road decreased, however, he was able to make out some of the smaller buildings and the roofs of certain homes – much like a car crash, Link couldn’t avert his eyes from the scene, as it reminded him of the ordinary world he’d previously inhabited. Lehi was just a normal town – for God’s sake, why was Rhett so, irrationally mortified of the lifestyle it offered? Had Rhett consented to following through with Link’s proposition, just for once in his stubborn life, perhaps their circumstance could have been alleviated, if only for a couple of moments. They could have lived out the rest of their days in the city, not another soul in sight – yet now, Link could only cringe at himself for walking past the town having not retrieved a single item from its bounty. Looking down the buildings, he arrived at a resentful conclusion – his decision to appease Rhett’s paranoia was objectively wrong. It would have been just fine.

Borderline irate, Link bit his lip and moved forward. In spite of the bitterness that consumed him, he didn’t want to snap at Rhett – so he fixed his gaze on the road rather than the city and dragged on. Tears dropped from his eyes as he felt another surge of hunger creep into his system, like a brawny fist squeezing the life out of his internal organs…
Damn it, Rhett.

Link’s knuckles were white as he clung to the rusted handle, the metal digging surely into the pad of his hand. His vision was washed out by a fog of tears – he prayed for safety and sanity alike, for he knew the both of them desperately needed it. With each step, Link’s joints ground against one another. He was tired. He was sick. He was hurt.

By physicality alone, Link was embittered. Having felt cheated by his friend, he pressed onward with a bit more tension in his step than was typical – perhaps it took a toll on his body, but he was never too adept at hiding his feelings at any rate, so he truthfully had nothing but his comfort to lose. Rhett could detect a belligerent attitude from a mile away, especially coming from his dearest friend – so it came as no surprise to Link when the man called him out:

“No need to be full of piss and vinegar, Link.”

At the sound of his name, his ears perked up – but that morning, the brunet was having none of Rhett’s mockery. “How about you stick a sock in it,” he hastily muttered, wrathful and bold.

“If you have one laundered, I’ll gladly oblige.”

Link leered at him over his shoulder. “You’re a lot more annoying when you’re not hauling ass, you know that?” he spat.

Rhett shrugged, cheeks rosy with the winds. “You’ve been awful serious lately,” he remarked, a bit more profoundly this time. “I know you feel like hell, man, but you’re driving me nuts –”

“Why are you so accusatory?!” Link yelled, slamming a domineering heel against the pavement. He then turned to face his injured friend, eyes welled up with tears. “Not just now, Rhett, but ever since I’ve known you. Nothing’s ever been your fault – it’s always mine. Always.”

Taken aback by Link’s rarely audacious tone, Rhett slipped quickly into a more apologetic guise. “Honey,” his brow wrinkled, “you know I don’t mean it like that. That’s completely beside the point. You’re sensitive today, sweetheart, what’s the matter with you?”

A simple question with a complex answer. Everything, he wanted to say, but the all-encompassing word didn’t flee his tongue as he knew it to be the least helpful response he could possibly utter. Instead, Link inhaled a sharp breath and collected himself – and all the while, Rhett watched him with unremitting patience. He was a good friend – anyone who could put up with Link’s irrational outbursts would just about have to be – but it wasn’t until several moments later that the small man felt guilt for his behavior. When he finally managed to reach a calmer state of mind, Link flicked his tongue between his lips and avoided his brother’s eyes.

“I’m stressed out,” he spilled, his heart heavy. “We could’ve stayed, man. There wasn’t a thing wrong with that city. You’re just so scared you can’t think straight. You’ve become so distant from normalcy that your mind associates it with danger. I didn’t walk out of Lehi because I agreed with you – I walked out because I wanted you to feel safe. But as much as your safety means to me, I – I just feel really bad, and it’s making me tetchy. I’m so hungry I’m sick, my whole body hurts, I’m exhausted… God, I just want to turn back. The city’s booming with opportunity and we’re out here walking into the eye of a blizzard. For heaven’s sake, Rhett, I’m telling you it was fine –”

“Link!” The tall man bellowed, as though he’d already spoken his name a thousand times. His eyes were rimmed with a pinkish red, an almost sickly color – and it outlined an iris of grey, which gleamed with moisture and daylight. There was a severity to his gaze that was almost impossible not to detect…
Link, of course, picked up on it very quickly.

With a dampened smile, Rhett reached for Link’s hand and nonchalantly stroked his palm. He then turned his head to view the roadside with an expression none other than pure resolution. “Take a look,” he yearned – not arrogant, but factual.

Hesitant, Link followed the man’s gaze. He’d mistakenly assumed by that point that they’d dragged past Lehi altogether, but upon further inspection he was able to see the city just a second’s glance behind him. At first he could only see what he’d previously observed – intact buildings, gorgeous homes, streets and roofs with not a shingle out of place. The wondrous beacon of hope they’d surpassed for Rhett’s sake…

But the longer he stared, the more prominent it became – at the floor of the city lay a pale but opaque cloud of yellow, hugging the ground and clinging to buildings as though to insist it were a permanent fixture of Lehi’s streets.

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Midvale was destroyed.

It only took around six hours total for Link to walk the fifteen miles, which was much faster than he’d predicted having taken his physical situation into account. Worse than anything were the body aches – a dull throb was one thing, but the tenacious pulsations that plagued his bones that night all but made him collapse to the ground. The squeaking of the wagon as it supported Rhett’s weight was a reminder, though, that it could always be worse – and because of this fact alone, the man was able to persist. Not once did he confide in Rhett as they wandered the northbound road, for he knew his pettish complaints would only paint a picture of his weakness.

But it didn’t stop the never-ending rivers of tears from piling down his face.

Downtown Midvale consisted of several layers of wreckage – splintered boards, busted concrete, metal, ash and cinders – and not a single building stood among the rubble. The only indication it was a town at all was a “CAFÉ” sign wedged between two piles of brick, beaten and eroded to obscurity. Upon entering the worst of the mess, Link felt the resistant jerk of the wagon as its wheels began to catch on various shards of debris. Frustrated, he would tug at the handle with all his might – but by that point he was so drained that his efforts were in vain. Out of defeat, he stopped dead in his tracks and loosened his fist. The sound of metal clanging on asphalt rang swiftly in his ears.

Link tossed his head into his hands, grabbing two fistfuls of hair and yanking the follicles from his scalp in exasperation. “DAMN IT!” he swore – and as if the universe strove to punish him for his choice of expression, a galvanizing pain struck deep within his core and caused him to drop at once to the asphalt. With that, he yelled out in agony – it was pain and distress alike that led him to the tantrum, merging with one another to form an incurable fit of debilitation. Something on the ground cut the palm of his hand and drew blood – even more reason for Link to continue in his downward spiral. It was as if he were in the midst of his soul being consumed by a vortex…

But as quickly as the episode began, it was put to a certain end, for he was snagged by the collar of his shirt and saved from drowning in his own agony. Rhett, of course, was the culprit – how he managed to sling the entirety of Link’s weight back like a bag of feathers, the man would never know – but he thanked God a million times over before questioning Rhett’s motives. Tears and
snot dribbled down his face, but it was nothing his best friend had never dealt with before. With a forlorn countenance, Rhett offered his hand – and Link graciously accepted it with a brotherly clap, managing to pull himself up to his knees and finally into the wagon. By nature, their bodies collided.

For one reason or another, Rhett avoided speaking altogether. Perhaps, Link reasoned, he felt his pain tenfold – which was hardly an assumption as much as it was fact, yet somehow, the blond always found it much easier to remain stoic. Link almost resented him for his comparably astronomical tolerance level – but he was also infinitely grateful for Rhett’s ability to cope with calamity, because without the trait, there was no doubt in his mind that they’d have never made it as far as they had. It was simple why Link harbored bitterness for Rhett’s endless capacity to remain strong – he was envious of the fact. He’d lost count of the times the tall man cradled him with a pair of stout, unmoving arms, even when Rhett himself felt a worsened form of the torture. This was true both before and after the First Night – Rhett’s endless patience and self-sacrifice were not simply byproducts of tribulation. Rather, it had been diffusing from his heart since 1977, each gesture fostered by love alone. To Link, his best friend was genuinely one of the most perfect men who had ever walked the earth…

His jealousy never lasted long, anyway. It was always trumped by an outside embrace of compassion.

So, he let himself cry. Within just a few seconds, his meltdown spiraled into full-fledged weeping – and he was only grounded by the touch of his brother’s hand, which softly rubbed his spine and coaxed him to lie down in his lap. “Shh,” he heard from above – but for the first time in months, the assurances did nothing to quell the broken man. Instead, he curled into the smallest ball his aching body would allow, gripping the leg of Rhett’s pants with two fists as he convulsed atop his scrawny thighs. Even so, the world continued spinning – snowflakes fell from the sky and stuck to the back of his obsidian hair, the heat of his body melting them instantly. As if his condition wasn’t enough, Link was taunted by the waning sunlight as it was eclipsed by a patch of sullen clouds. They moved across the sky with the rhythm of time – but Rhett remained still. If the universe couldn’t stop for Link, then Rhett damn sure would – and it was by far the most humbling gift that the small man had continuously been granted.

Minute after never-ending minute would pass, yet the sobbing never abated. Rhett had yet to ask his friend what was wrong, or if he was okay, or if he could do anything to help – probably, Link guessed, because he already knew the answer to all three questions. Everything was wrong, Link wasn’t okay, and not a thing within Rhett’s limited ability could do much to aid the situation. He couldn’t even help himself, let alone the burden of Link’s troubles – and for this reason alone, the brunet allowed his shattered soul to bleed out of his chest once and for all. He’d repressed a world of such severe despondency without even realizing it – and now, at long last, Rhett couldn’t do a thing about it. In certain ways he felt alone, but in others he was relieved – it felt nice to cry without the immediate intention of making himself stop. It felt nice to be comforted subtly, just for once…

…But Rhett’s obscure lack of action didn’t last long.

Only seven or eight minutes had gone by when the tall man once again lifted Link’s weight against gravity’s pull – but this time, he slung the man over his shoulder and pressed a solid palm against the small of his back. Completely absorbed by Rhett’s arms, Link reciprocated by embracing his neck and pulling himself up so that his chin met with his shoulder. The shock of being moved disturbed his breathing and caused his cries to cease, however slightly. He planned to continue in his breakdown, the only difference being pressed closer to his dearest friend for consolation – but he was startled to feel Rhett’s grip tighten drastically around his back…
And with an enormous amount of energy, the blond hoisted himself out of the wagon.

A grueling series of steps shuffled Link’s body around as though he were a ragdoll – but as concerned as he was, he just couldn’t bring himself to cry out for Rhett’s sake. *Put me down!* he wanted to yell, *You’re gonna hurt yourself!* – and although his chest sank with worry, the words never fled his lips. Deep down, Link knew the effort would have been in vain anyway, so he opted to not waste his breath. If Rhett did end up worsening his already injured state, their circumstance would hardly change – he would still be confined to the wagon, being helplessly dragged to the university. Link found his anxieties were of empathy rather than situation, though, and so his heartbeat raced on.

Before he knew it, Link found himself belly-up on the floor of a decimated establishment. The details were far from immaculate, for his vision was clouded with tears – but he couldn’t mistake the trail of goosebumps that shot down his spine when Rhett bent over and whispered in his ear:

“*I’ll take care of you tonight, love – and quite frankly, I don’t care if it kills me.*”
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Just a quick blurb before the chapter begins - my sincerest apologies for leaving this story without an update for upwards of ten months. I never intended to give up on it (and still don't have that intention in mind), but unfortunately when I started my second and third semesters of college, life started to get a lot more difficult and complex for me in several ways. I'm not quite as focused on the fandom as I used to be mostly because I haven't got much time for it anymore. In fact, this chapter was written over the summer and I've only just gotten around to revising it.

I'm now on winter break and hope to finish this story over the course of it. I'll make no promises because I know I won't be able to keep them, but I do want to make sure this story is completed before it's abandoned.

Thank you for your patience and support as I've written 201X though - it means the world and is the main reason I've continued writing. :) But anyway, hopefully this chapter was worth the wait. Enjoy!

OCTOBER 10, 201X

It was the day they’d been anticipating for months.

Link spent his morning on the move as his weary brother slept in next to a messily constructed bonfire. It was phenomenal what a good night’s sleep was able to do for his body, as the previous day’s pains had washed away with the stars – his knees and ankles were far from perfect, but it was a noteworthy improvement nonetheless. Link all but scampered through the city’s ruins in search of nonperishables to tide them over until the evening.

Because they would finally be deviating from the interstate, Link could only approximate the mileage (and thus the amount of time) it would take for them to hike to the university – but with careful precision, he deduced the quickest route to be somewhere in the neighborhood of fourteen miles. It would be a fairly quick trip, he mused – if they left by nine they’d arrive at five or six, giving them ample time to make it before nightfall. The distance was more than reasonable. Today was their day.

Thumbing through the rubble, Link’s only aim was to find something that could quash his hunger. He and Rhett had both eaten the previous night, but it was nowhere near enough to satisfy them – but Link knew that his companion did everything he could have possibly done and more, and he possessed nothing but gratitude for his endlessly fervent endeavors. Rhett had even set up camp just a few meters from what once was a gas station, which left Link at ease for finding supplies. After just a few seconds of displacing wooden boards and metal sheets, he’d discovered what was essentially a smorgasbord of wrapped and bagged snacks. He salivated at the mere sight. Some had ripped open and been consumed by olive-tinted mold, but others were perfectly preserved – and Link took advantage of this, snatching away every item he could carry in his arms and promptly reporting back to his brother.

The day was overcast. Snowfall was leisurely at best, but still it existed, and by the looks of things
it would only accumulate. Not a patch of blue sky shone through the sheets of clouds that concealed it – even the sun was shrouded in grey, which projected a muted undertone across the scene. The fire blazed orange against the horizon and illuminated everything that stood in its way. A sharp, domineering shadow was cast on Rhett’s back as a result – it danced with the movement of the flame, sometimes flickering to the ground, but having a clear pivot on his body. The observation was symbolic – and with it, Link could only be reminded of himself.

He felt warmth on his face as he crouched beside Rhett, laying the collection of food at his feet. Link dropped a single hand onto his body and stroked in a downward fashion, and with the movement he felt the fire tingling on his arm. He clutched the fabric at Rhett’s chest and shut his eyes…

And before he knew it, the man was awake.

Disoriented, Rhett winced at the achromatic world that surrounded him – apart from Link, whose eyes were yellow with fire, the setting was almost entirely devoid of color. “Oh,” he muttered at first, blinking away the sleep from his eyes – but a smile was quick to stretch upon his lips.

“Big day,” Link whispered adoringly. A tear threatened to form at his eye, but with a great deal of control, he managed to suppress it.

Rhett’s eyes were bright and cheerful as he gave a single nod in the other man’s direction. “Sure is,” he affirmed. “And you know what? I have every reason to believe that we’re going to be a hundred percent okay.”

“Me too,” Link smiled – and with that, he couldn’t fight his emotions any longer. A fat, spherical tear dropped suddenly from his waterline and rolled down his cheek…

In response, Rhett shot up like the wind and encased the brunet in a soft but passionate embrace. “Aw, c’mon now,” his rough voice rumbled against Link’s neck. “We’re unstoppable. You know that, Link? We made it from Burbank to Salt Lake City on foot – and as it stands, I truly believe we’re the only two men on earth who can say they’ve done something of that caliber. We’re pretty damn incredible.” His spiel was meant to be motivational, but Link found that it solely provided him with a blanket of comfort – there was absolutely no way they couldn’t traverse the fourteen or so miles to the university. There was no way that everything wouldn’t be entirely, perfectly fine.

And Link knew this to be fact. Still, he sought consolation in Rhett’s touch as their bodies pressed together into one flesh. His fingers prodded at the man’s hood, fidgeting with the cloth until he was pushed away from Rhett and once again sat upon his heels. The taller man was leaned back with a palm jammed into the asphalt – and his eyes, too, watered with love and intent.

Biting his lip in an effort to remain stoic, Link wrung his hands and occupied his vision by flicking his eyes around the scene. To his left were the crinkly packages and tattered boxes of well-preserved foods – Lays chips, stale frosted cakes, Cosmic Brownies, cherry Pop Tarts, and even a couple of single-serving fruit pies. Link’s mouth watered – his stomach cramped silently with the nothingness that clawed within, and he could only imagine how Rhett must have felt. He grabbed an apple pie from the pile and began toying with the packaging – and when his tremulous fingers finally managed to tear it open, he thrust the food towards Rhett. The blond graciously obliged and snatched the thick-skinned pastry from Link’s fingers, instantly tossing the stale end into his mouth and sinking his incisors through to the filling. Perplexed, Link observed the man – because he was smart, he ate slowly, but at the same time it was easy for the brunet to see that his friend was ravenous. Rhett’s body language rarely gave him away, but in times as trying as these, it seemed he’d no interest in bothering to hide it. Link ran a hand down the outside of the man’s thigh – cloth on bone, but doubtlessly improving.
Grabbing the Pop Tarts for himself, the small man adjusted his body so that his legs were crossed to mirror Rhett’s. Their knees touched, which instilled an even stronger connection between them – for the very first time, Link felt invincible, and it was unity alone that forced him into such optimism. His best friend harbored a warmth that surpassed the blazing fire to his right – he was the single brightest object in the universe, and Link just couldn’t take his eyes off of him. His overgrown hair, his silvery eyes, his golden profile and tremendous soul – and most of all, the lovesick manner with which he stared back at Link, as if to convey that the feeling was mutual. As if to convey that yes, *Link, there are things this tongue has yet to confess.*

Perhaps the longevity of these feelings…

…and the fact that they began far before necessity dragged them out on the First Night.

But that was all in Link’s head.

He couldn’t even say that the thoughts were hopeful – if anything, they were only intrusive. After all, he knew that Rhett loved him more than anything else in the world, so what would elaboration on the standard do for him anyway? Perhaps, Link just wanted to know if the man had a limit – if there was anything he could do or say that would cause Rhett to discard him in Midvale and hobble to Salt Lake alone if he were able. Of course, Link knew this would never happen. Rhett had known his heart for decades – their relationship had reached the point in which hurtful words and actions yielded concern rather than anger, for they knew each other well enough to know that, in an optimal state of mind, they would never have the intention of hurting one another. The fact in and of itself was enough to prove that their friendship – if that’s all it was – was one of the deepest and most loving ever contrived. They were a perfect match. They were soulmates.

Even if Rhett’s logic-based nature prevented him from admitting it.

So, they ate in silence. It wasn’t until Link reached for a bag of chips that he realized the fire was quickly dying – indeed, even the greatest of fires could only withstand so much moisture, and with the rapidity with which the snow pummeled from the sky it came as no surprise. He flashed a desperate look at Rhett, who responded with a comforting smile that instantly began to quell Link’s anxiety. “It’s okay,” he lowly assured. “Make the best of the warmth while we have it.”

And that quote, while succinct and unintentional, turned out to be some of the best advice Link had ever taken.

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Just as Link had suspected, the meager snowfall spiraled into a full-blown blizzard.

They’d made it to the final stretch of the interstate – a road that split from the main highway known as I-215, which would ultimately lead them to the off-ramp of Foothill Drive, and finally to the university itself. According to the map, they were already within the city limits of Salt Lake, which was a celebratory milestone – Rhett cried with joy, his teeth bared in a jovial smile as he stared at the blank sky. Link lugged him along.

Their pacing was excellent. Though the sun was hidden by whipping clouds and billions of snowflakes, his internal clock gleaned that it was within an hour of one o’clock – and at the rate they were traveling, he expected to be there in just a couple of hours. Their one setback, however, was the unrelenting weather – it was only worsening, leaving the road signs (at least what remained of them) almost impossible to read. But Link was headstrong that day and opted to simply follow the contour of the road, although the task was rather difficult when considering the
tactic could lead him to a diverging exit if he weren’t careful. He could hardly see two feet in front of him.

Tiredness soon got the best of him, though – and he’d learned his lesson from overworking himself the day before and thus took a break before exhaustion ensued. Pivoting on his heel, he turned to Rhett and took a step towards the wagon, where he coaxed his friend into scooting over. The frightful weather sent shivers down Link’s spine, causing him to curl into the smallest ball he could manage upon throwing himself against Rhett. He felt his rosy cheeks stinging with the chill, yielding a hug from the bigger man, who graciously pulled him close and encircled his arms around Link’s shoulders. At least, the brunet figured, their hearts could be warm – even when the biting cold froze their bones.

“How you holding up?” Rhett breathed into his brother’s hair.

Shivering, Link glanced to the sky, only to be pummeled by snowflakes and wind. “I’m cold,” he admitted, tone laced with defeat. “How about you?”

“I’m alright, babe,” the taller assured. “You ever seen an October like this? A couple weeks ago it was over a hundred degrees. This world’s all kinds of messed up.”

Link could only flatten his lips with the statement. It was true – granted, they’d been traveling north at a fairly quick rate, but even so, a snowstorm in early October was unthinkable anywhere in the United States. Perhaps mid-October, but never much earlier than that, for Link had never seen snowfall before Christmas in the south…

But wait a second.

It was still the first week of the month, right?

It was much easier for the man to lose track of time than it used to be, and so the question lingered in Link’s head. To affirm it, his mind rattled off the series of annihilated towns they’d traversed since the beginning of the month – Fillmore, Scipio, Levan, rest day, rest day, Nephi, Santaquin, Provo, Lehi, Midvale, Salt Lake City…

Eight towns, ten days…

It was the tenth.

Link’s eyes widened with the epiphany. Not only was it much later in the month than he’d anticipated – but he was very quick to note that the very next day was Rhett’s birthday. Goosebumps pricked the surface of his skin, forcing him into a spasm that eventually led him into an upright position as he met his brother’s eyes. Rhett cocked his head to the side with focus in his expression – he was quick to act, clasping a fist around Link’s forearm in an effort to brace him. Their gazes never wandered, Link’s brimming with surprise and Rhett’s with concern – but the smaller of the two held his breath for a moment, simply out of shock.

As per usual, however, he was relieved of stupefaction – but being Link, he began to second guess himself. “Rhett,” he whispered, catching himself in the midst of a grin. “What’s today’s date?”

As if Link had asked a forbidden question, the blond bit his lip and flung his head to face the edge of the road. For a moment it appeared as though he weren’t going to respond, but eventually, he blurted a muffled, “I’ono, Link.” – a blatant lie, and he knew it.

Link, of course, picked up on this instantly – and his toothy smile gave him away. “Tomorrow’s your birthday, isn’t it?” he softly reprehended, loosing his arm from Rhett’s hold and proceeding
to rub circles into his back. Comfort, it seemed, had always been his strategy for interrogation – as long as it worked, he was more than happy to provide.

Unsurprisingly, Rhett came back around. His eyes were solemn and without anger – perhaps a subtle regret washed over his face, but he at least harbored an attitude of tolerance for the moment. His lips even curled into a smile, as if to commend Link on his ability to remember…

But, he didn’t speak.

“Oh, c’mon, brother,” Link pressed. “I want you to do something for me, alright? I want you to think real hard for a second, and I want you to tell me something you’d like me to do for you. Forget the world. Forget everything. Just think about yourself – for once in your life, think selfishly. Can you do that for me, Rhett?”

There was a blush to Rhett’s face much deeper than that caused by the snow, and it matched perfectly with his golden soul. *Selfish* was a foreign word to the larger man – it ignited in his eyes a curiosity, but also a fear, for he’d never seemed to cross the line in which his thoughts corresponded with his *own* wants and needs. Instead, his life revolved around others – and now that the rest of the world had disappeared like a candle in the wind, that meant Link.

So, his response was ambiguous. “What do I want?” he incredulously replied, a trace of humor in his tone. “I’m afraid I can’t definitively answer that, sweetheart. I’m not in a place where I can think outside of necessity, you know what I mean? Look, I appreciate you wanting to do something for me, you’re an incredible friend, but there’s genuinely nothing coming to mind. All I really want is for both of us to reach safety, okay? It’s all I’ve got my mind on, Link – and trust me,” he paused, pressing his chapped lips into Link’s muss of hair and pulling away, “that would be the best birthday present I could ever receive.”

Link could feel the sheen of tears glistening over his eyes, but he hid his face from Rhett in a sudden maneuver. Pressing his cheek against the other’s chest, he hugged him from the side and nuzzled against his cotton hoodie. Having slid his hand around to trap Rhett’s arm at his side, Link massaged his antsy fingers into the fabric, sighing with a sudden bout of relief. For a moment he considered pouring the contents of his heart onto his best friend, but decided against it in favor of ending their talk with enough time to make it to the university by daylight. He took every measure he could to prevent himself from crying, yet somehow, there was a catch to his voice:

“I’d give you the universe if I could,” Link insisted through chattering teeth – and he meant it with utmost sincerity.

Rhett huffed an awkward but affectionate laugh through his nose. “You’ve already done that, *love*,” he whispered back, a radiant smile shining through the words.

And it was there that Link swore his spirit ascended from his body and entered nirvana, only to discover that the euphoria he felt was a result of Rhett’s boundless devotion to him. He was so, eternally thankful that luck had been on their side long enough that he was able to bring safety and peace to a man as giving as his best friend. There was a reason Rhett had pulled through – and it wasn’t chance alone, though he himself would argue it to the grave…

Instead, Link believed it to be purpose. If the world took Rhett’s life, it took Link’s too. They’d lived together, worked together, fought together, survived together – so it was imminent, in Link’s mind, that the men would draw their last breaths together. The day would come, perhaps even soon – but it was one of the only things of which Link was certain. Knowing that he would never have to live without Rhett gave him peace, even though the thought was macabre. There was absolutely nothing he loved more than the man bound in his arms – he couldn’t go on without him, for they were attached at the soul by a silver cord, that when cut would sever them both from
their bodies…

But for now, Link chose not to dwell on the hypothesis. He put his swarming thoughts to an end by focusing on the blazing light at the end of the tunnel – he felt it illuminating his heart in white, washing him clean from the inside out and creating for the men a new beginning. Life as they knew it was about to change. They would finally reach civilization and be healed. The concept was glorious – and it was just a few miles up the road.

It truly was the best and worst of times.

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It wasn’t until they reached Foothill Drive that the storm reached its climax.

Thankfully, they were close enough to the university that they could feel their way through and approximate its location if worse came to worst – but it was a sketchy idea nonetheless. Out of pure frustration, Link stopped in his tracks and crossed his arms. He pinched the bridge of his nose – a headache was surfacing, slowly but surely, and the blinding snow did nothing to quash it. Rhett, of course, was quick to spring to his aid, giving no warning when he grabbed the man by the shoulders and pulled him into a hug. Link accepted the gesture without a second thought, clasping his hands at Rhett’s waist with a gentle squeeze.

“You’re doing fine,” the larger man offered, rocking left to right as he held Link in his arms. “Take a break, okay? It’s an avalanche out here. We’ll get everything figured out when it blows over –”

“But that could take all night!” Link irrationally blurted. “I’m exhausted, Rhett. I can’t take this anymore. My body’s killing me…”

There, Rhett stroked an empathetic hand down his spine. “I’m sorry, dear,” he spoke, low and sweet. “But listen to me for a second, yeah? You toughed through God knows how many miles between LA and Salt Lake. You can’t quit now. That’s like reading a novel and stopping before the last chapter – it doesn’t make any sense. Don’t be discouraged by a bump in the road, brother. You’re stronger than that… and I love you.”

With tears dropping down his cheeks, the brunet pressed his salt-ridden face into Rhett’s chest. “I love you too,” he replied despondently. Despite their proximity to the university, Link had lost so much enthusiasm by that point that he swore he’d have given up if his brother’s life wasn’t at stake. Perhaps what lay ahead wasn’t even worth it – for all he knew, Salt Lake may have been reduced to a couple of makeshift shacks built upon campus remains. Perhaps Robin had lied about the entire ordeal. So many doubts and disconnects pinged around his head like a rogue boomerang – but it wasn’t long before he gave into the bigger man’s touch, becoming clay in his hands. He felt Rhett’s breath as it fell warmly on his scalp, and he instantly realized that capitulating to the blizzard was totally out of the question. Hug it out, he told himself. He’s there for you.

…And all he wants is for you to succeed.

So, Link melted in his arms. Rhett had a way of snagging his problems and making them disappear within seconds of encasing the small man in his embrace – in many ways he was more of a security blanket than anything, and Link was grateful for that. He’d always needed something to cling to – something familiar and constant – and that something had always been Rhett.
Nothing, he was convinced, could ever change the affectionate nature of his closest friend. Even in the midst of his own personal tragedy, he was a protector. *A selfless, loving protector.*

Suddenly, though, Rhett’s muscles grew tense – and his body quickly began to shelter the brunet…

“*Shh!*” he curtly demanded, so quiet that Link wondered if the sound was inadvertent. Nonetheless, he followed the order and said nothing in return. Having placed his trust in Rhett so many years ago, there was a doubtless pang of anxiety that coursed through his veins as a result of his behavior. Link’s eyes widened with concern and fear – and although he could see nothing between himself and the storm, his ears swiftly tuned in to a peculiar sound that caused the hair on the back of his neck to stand.

Soft, ever-slowing footsteps approached the men, growing louder and more precise as they inched closer. Link’s heart all but pounded out of his chest – yet he managed to have one eye peeping in the direction of the noise, even with Rhett’s inescapable grip pulling his head beneath his chin. A nebulous, grey figure began to form at long last, its head hunched over in an almost defensive stance. Without being discreet, Rhett pushed his companion away and transferred him quickly so that his own body was in front of Link’s, and by proxy would shield him of initial harm. In doing this, though, the fog-shrouded silhouette became alarmed and jumped forward so that it – or, rather, *she* – was in plain view. Link was hidden well enough between Rhett and the snow that she was unable to see him – but still, he clung to his best friend’s waist in fear as he observed the woman from above Rhett’s shoulder.

The image was enough to turn his soul to ice. She was a bitter looking woman, her skin a shade of black and her textured hair twisted into a pair of loose braids. Her eyes showed age as they were adorned with crow’s feet – but her wrinkles didn’t stop there. They trailed across her forehead and down her cheeks, bound tightly around an expression of pure dominance. Her teeth were bared at Rhett with a furrowed brow to match. Both arms extended above her head, she kept one eye shut – and it wasn’t until Link followed his gaze to her hands that he realized why.

In her clasp sat a pistol, an unforgiving shade of silver that may as well have blinded Rhett as he stared down its barrel. There wasn’t a star in the sky, but it somehow gleamed like metal in the sun.

“*HANDS UP!*” she bellowed without remorse, causing Rhett to jump backwards and spiral into shock. With the threat, there was no argument to be had – and so, the blond made the only smart move he could have made.

He obeyed.

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