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<td>Character:</td>
<td>Shane Madej, Ryan Bergara, Zach Kornfeld, Eugene Lee Yang, Ned Fulmer, Keith Habersberger, probably more idk, There's a character named Lucas whom I hate, Ariel Fulmer, Becky Miller, Umbria</td>
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<td>Soulmate AU, Romantic Soulmates, soulmates- warmth, tally marks, Shane fears love, for reasons explained later, Ryan can't wait for love, More tags to be added, blame discord, Dystopia, Soulmates are baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaadddddddddddddd, Lucas is baaaaaaaaaaddddd, Taking down the government and falling in love in the process, Keith's wife is not his soulmate, they meet later on, and everything get happier, There's a character named Umbria, She's a reference in disguise, If anyone can guess who she is, i will love you forever, Quinta Brunsen from the season 3 alien ep post mortem ets an honorable mention, She is incredible and I love her, There's some latin, but it's google translated, IF ANYONE SPEAKS LATIN PLEASE HMU SO I CAN FIX IT, Also it gets translated in the following chapter, There's an aroace boi, Aroace Eugene, Aro Eugene, Ace Eugene, Asexual Character, Aromantic Character, Ace character, aro character, aroace character, There's lesbians, (and two awesome bisexual women in a loving, committed relationship)</td>
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**Warmth**

by [AquaticTorch3163](http://archiveofourown.org/users/AquaticTorch3163)

**Summary**

Tally marks show you how often you fall in love.
Warmth shows you when you've met your soulmate.
Ryan has tons of tally marks and can't wait to feel that warmth.
Shane has two and prefers to be cold.

**Notes**
first fic send help
“Maybe your soulmate just thinks you’re an asshole.”

“Maybe you just give him the cold shoulder.”

“Maybe I haven’t met them yet, so all I can give is the cold shoulder.”

It had only been five minutes of this conversation, and Shane was already beyond tired of it. Soulmates, in his opinion, were ridiculous. Soulmates were nothing more than a predetermined idea that some outside, mystical, all-knowing force could determine who you were most compatible with, an idea that that person, and only that specific person could be the one you were always meant to be with. Who cares about the Tally marks on people’s arms that proved there was romantic love outside of your soulmate? Who cares if you’ve put months or even years into a relationship with someone you truly love? According to their twisted, ridiculous society, none of that mattered. If you met your soulmate, you were supposed to leave that long-standing relationship to be with said soulmate.

Soulmates were stupid. Shane didn’t understand why so many people wanted one so badly.

When his friends found out about Shane’s stance on soulmates, they treated him like it was sad. God forbid he value commitment over ‘love at first sight.’ For all he knew, his soulmate was some kind of always-moving player who only cared how many people’s pants he could get into. What if his soulmate was someone intolerable?

What if his soulmate was a drunk?

What if his soulmate was racist?

What if his soulmate was a dick?

Or worse…

What if his soulmate was vegan?

What if his soulmate wasn’t a he? God, how awkward would that be…

Oh wow! You’re my soulmate!

Oh...actually...I’m gay…

“Okay, so there are a few minor flaws in the soulmate system,” His friend admitted awkwardly, “but as a whole, it’s flawless! So many people have lived happily ever after because of this, Shane!”

“And just as many people have lived happily ever after without it.” Shane pointed out, “You’ve seen how many people have red tally marks and are still just as cold as they were before they entered that relationship. The soulmate system isn’t necessary to be happy.” He leaned back in his chair and glanced across the aisle at his friend, closing his laptop for the day, “And minor flaws? Alice is a trans lesbian and her ‘soulmate’ was a cis straight transphobic man. How is that a minor flaw?”

His friend, Frank, made a sour face, spinning slightly in his swivel chair, “Okay, so they’re major flaws, but it’s not like those happen everyday. They’re not even common. As a whole, the Soulmate System is incredible, and I really don’t understand why you don’t want one.” Frank began packing his items, preparing to leave for the night, “My soulmate and I have been happy for years because of it!”
Shane groaned, “Oh god, please don’t turn into some kind of infomercial for this thing.” Frank was a known System-supporter. Shane, on the other hand, was all for total anarchy. “Don’t push your government-regulated love on me.”

Frank laughed lightly, “Government-regulated? You know this is about compatibility and not even created by the government, right?”

“Creepy-ass government-regulated love.”

A sigh escaped Frank, but it quickly led into a laugh, “Fine, Go on thinking it’s creepy and government-regulated, just don’t forget to come to the new guy’s welcome party tomorrow! Eugene will have your ass on a platter if you miss it.”

“If he wants it, he can have it. It’s not being used for much else, anyway.”

“Come on, Shane, you can’t hide in that apartment of yours forever.”

“Watch me.”

“Shane, just this once. I swear, if you don’t have fun, I won’t make you come to any other party ever again.”

“That’s what you said last time.”

“And you had fun.”

Shane stood and grabbed his laptop bag, then turned to Frank, “Tell Eugene I’ll be there, but specifically not because of you.”

Frank broke into a grin, “See ya tomorrow!”

And with that, their exchange was over. As Shane was headed out the door, he couldn’t help but wonder whether or not the new guy would be a skeptic, like Shane, or a believer, like Frank. Or maybe, just maybe, he would be the rare skeptic-believer.

In Shane’s mind, a skeptic-believer was someone who was able to moderate the arguments the skeptics and believers had, since they were both hesitant to accept the Soulmate System as gospel, but also willing to accept that there was definitely something to it. They would usually give the Soulmate System a chance if they met their soulmate, but they wouldn’t destroy any previous relationships for it. Skeptic-believers could differentiate between love and infatuation. Skeptic-believers were usually either the best people you would ever meet, or the worst people you would ever have the misfortune to have encountered- it all depended on what point in their life you met them.

Skeptic-believers were usually fine until they met their soulmates. After they met their soulmates, skeptic-believers usually fell on one side of the fence or the other- and they usually fell hard. If their experience with their soulmate was bad, then all who blindly believed in the Soulmate System were the most unthinking, unbelievable people in history. If their experience was positive, then all skeptics were idiots who must have been hurt at some point in their lives to not believe a soulmate was someone perfect for you.

Of course, skeptic-believers sometimes had neutral experiences with their soulmates, and these skeptic-believers were typically the ones you could never tell about. Hell, if it weren’t for the tally marks or the ring, you couldn’t even tell if they had loved or been loved by a partner before. The neutral skeptic-believers were the most interesting of the people. Shane appreciated them.
Shane supposed he’d have to wait and see where the new guy stood on these things. Who was the new guy, anyway? He thought he remembered Frank saying his name was something like Ryan Iceberg Prada.

Shane knew the last name was wrong, but he wanted to avoid thinking about it all costs.

The Soulmate System was based largely on the people’s feelings and body heat. Before a person met their soulmate, they were cold. Always cold. Borderline freezing. When a person met their soulmate, they could finally feel warmth, and the warmth was the kind that burned. It drew you in, it was a heat that some people largely welcomed after feeling as cold as they had throughout their lives, a heat that some people tried desperately to avoid, and a heat that would leave you colder than you ever were before if you lose it.

When Frank told Shane the name of the new guy, a sudden hint of warmth brushed over him. It was amazing. It was a warmth Shane had never felt before in his life. It was amazing, it was incredible, and Shane welcomed it.

And then reality hit. It connected what that hint, that miniscule amount of warmth meant. It connected what that warmth meant the new guy was to him.

Shane had a good idea of what that meant for him. He’d stared at the two scars on his arm over the area two black tally marks had once been. Two times he’d been in love. Two times he’d been in relationship hell. Two times he’d been hurt. Two times he’d wanted to forget.

And now, with a faint red tally mark beginning to appear on his arm, Shane found himself terrified.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Gosh, thank you all so much! I'm so happy you like this! I'm hoping to update this story every Friday, but I just really wanted to post this chapter now :)

How had he managed to swing this? This of all things? This was incredible! This was unbelievable! This was, well, the best job possible. In their current society, that is.

If they were in a different time, the best possible job would be something like a doctor or a musician, even a high-ranking government official. These jobs were still there, of course, they were just so far below where this was that it wasn’t even funny to make a joke about anymore. Musicians were still in an unstable career, doctors were still well-paid and brutally torn by having to go from a child dying to a middle-aged person complaining for opioids, and high-ranking government officials were still completely there- Ryan just outranked them.

Ryan was entering a job in one of the most high-paying, powerful positions of all times. He was going to be able to make people happy or completely tear them apart. He was going to make the future happier or more terrifying. He was going to make or break the nation’s people.

He was going to be one of the people who would determine people’s soulmates.

The company was called Heartfeed, which some people considered dumb at first glance, but once you learned why it was called that... it was still dumb. Ryan didn’t know why the hell they chose and kept that name, but here it was. Choosing people’s soulmates and draining babies’ bodies of warmth almost the second they’re born.

Not that those babies wouldn’t ever feel warmth again, it’s just that they’d have to meet their soulmates in order to get it back! It wasn’t as sinister as it sounded! At all! It was just stealing heat from children!

...Maybe it was sinister. It was definitely sinister. It was the society they lived in, though, and they had no choice but to accept it. If he didn’t do this, someone else would, and that someone else could be irresponsible and just not assign someone a soulmate, then stealing warmth from babies would be more sinister than before. Ryan thought of himself as relatively responsible, and he loved the idea of helping people find love, so this was right up his alley. He wanted to make sure that the babies, now adults, would find their soulmates, thereby returning their warmth and cancelling out the sinister stealing of before. The warmth would tell them they were supposed to find love. He hoped that everyone here would be just as enthusiastic about finding their soulmate as he was- they did all work in the soulmate factory, after all.

When he was hired at Heartfeed, he had been introduced to exactly four people (excluding the person he was hired by)- Eugene, Zach, Ned, and Keith. Immediately, Ryan was checking their arms to see how many tally marks they each had, if they had any blue ones, and whether or not they had their red one. Each tally mark was important, and each different color had a different meaning in their society.
Regular black tally marks just show how many times the person had fallen in love. Crushes and passing ‘I’d date them’s didn’t count for tally marks. Black tally marks could only appear if someone genuinely felt they could and were willing to spend their entire life with another person. Ryan has 32 of these. Ryan was a man on a quest for love, and he didn’t care how many black tally marks would litter his arm if it meant he would find it.

The blue tally marks were how many times you were someone’s black tally mark. The blue tally marks show how many times someone had fallen for you. Typically, people who were in relations that weren’t with their soulmates would have one black tally mark and one blue tally mark, one for falling for the person, and one for the person falling for them. Ryan had exactly half as many blue tally marks as black ones. He knew he had a tendency to fall for people who couldn’t or wouldn’t love him back, and that was perfectly okay to him. It just meant he had a much more open heart than most people.

Ryan’s favorite tally marks, though, were the red ones. The red tally mark was your soulmate. If you had met your soulmate, you would have one. If you hadn’t, you wouldn’t. The red tally marks were what gave people hope. They gave ryan hope that he would find his soulmate, whoever they may be. If this person, if these people, could find their soulmates, surely he could too.

Eugene had tons of blue marks, but the black marks were few and far between. He didn’t have a red mark. Yet.

Ned’s marks were a few black and a few blue, but they all stopped after the red mark. The ring on his finger told Ryan things went well for him.

Zach had a few black and one or two blue, but the latest one appeared to be the red one. No ring made it uncertain whether things went well for him or not. He felt a bit warmer than Eugene, though, so maybe it was a good thing?

Keith, like Ryan, had black and blue marks aplenty. Unlike Ryan, though, Keith had managed to find his red mark. What confused Ryan was that there were more black and blue marks after it, even a ring on his finger. What did that mean about him? Was the problem with him or his soulmate?

Ryan didn’t get a chance to ask about it, unfortunately, as Eugene was already proposing a welcome party. His proposal was met with a mix of groans and grins.

Zach was the first to speak after that, “There’s really no point in denying Eugene’s parties. He’s going to bug us until we give in. He’s like Todd from Bojack Horseman.”

“No doubt about that,” Keith nodded, “Let’s just let him throw a party and get free booze. Maybe he’ll tire himself out.”

Eugene gasped jokingly, hands over his heart in the most dramatic way he could possibly manage, “Are you guys actually agreeing to let me throw a party? And you’ll all attend?”

“I never said that.” Ned said quickly, “My wife and I have dinner plans tonight!”

"So we just don’t throw it tonight.” Eugene rolled his eyes, “New guy- Sorry, what’s your name again?”

"Ryan Bergara.” Ryan introduced himself with a smile, “Nice to officially meet you!”

Eugene nodded, “You too.” He turned back to the group, “Ryan isn’t starting tomorrow, Ned, and you are definitely coming.”
“I’m sure Ryan is starting soon, though,” Ah, Ned, poor, poor Ned. Keep trying, buddy, “And my wife and I have plans for the next few days.”

“I actually can’t start for another two weeks, so…” Ryan grinned, “I think there’s time for a party.”

“Great!” Eugene grinned, “Keith, make sure someone invites Shane. Shane has to get out of that house.”

“Shane isn’t a fan of parties, Eugene.”

“So? Neither is Ned, and we’re getting him out to this one.” Eugene pointed out, “We just need to Shane Madej to the party of the century for Ryan.”

There it was. A warmth. A warmth that Ryan had heard of so many times, but never once experienced. It wasn’t the full fire just yet, but god did it feel amazing. Ryan gasped lightly, checking his arm. He’d always heard that a pink tally mark would appear if you heard of your soulmate before you met them. Sure enough, it was there.

He made an excuse and left quickly, rushing home to make sure that really was a new tally mark and not just some kind of scratch or something. It sounded outlandish and unreasonable, but it had happened to Ryan before on numerous occasions- maybe because Ryan was always so eager to find his soulmate. At one point, he had fallen down an abandoned hill, scraped his leg, and showed it off to his friends as the soul mate tally mark. Ryan loved to believe things were proof, even when they weren’t. Ryan loved thinking of things, hoping they were real. Ryan was a believer. Not just any believer, though, Ryan was a true believer. Ryan had hope that his soulmate would be amazing. Ryan believed the Soulmate System was there for a reason.

And when Ryan discovered that the faint red tally mark really was a tally mark, his hope and belief only grew stronger.
I promise you that this new character will be important later on. I hate him.

Shane hated this. He hated it so much. He hated the red mark. He hated the warmth. He hated the concept of falling in love again. He hated this new tally mark. He hated the system. He hated his job. He hated having to match people up with people who so obviously didn’t love them. He hated soulmates. He hated Ryan Bridge Mufasa.

Of course, he didn’t hate Ryan Broken Salsa as a person, he couldn’t, but he hated the concept of him. He hated the concept of having a soulmate. After his last love, Shane had decided that love just wasn’t for him. He hoped every night that he would be one of the people who had slipped through the cracks of Soulmate Assignment, he’d tried to check if he had when he’d been hired, he even going so far as to pay Eugene to hack into the mainframe and remove his soulmate if he had one (This was a waste of time and money, Shane found out. Eugene had been joking when he said he had the hacking skills of god).

According to Lucas, this was Shane’s problem. Shane wouldn’t let people have a chance before deciding whether or not they were good or bad. Shane wished he had done that to Lucas. Lucas would’ve deserved it.

Shane felt dirty even thinking that, even if it was the truth. God, he hated that he thought poorly of Lucas, but that was what he was best at. According to Lucas, anyway. Lucas was a dick. Most Lucas’s were. If it were up to Shane, Lucas’s would be removed from the world, but that would just leave some other name tainted by idiots and assholes who just want to watch the world burn. Fuck Lucas’s.

“So, what, you think Lucas Grahm is a dick?” Eugene joked, “Because I though 7 Years was pretty good.”

Shane rolled his eyes, “Eugenie, you’re a dick. Maybe I’ll just make every soulmate related to Eugenes a Lucas.”

“Jesus Christ, don’t punish all Eugenes for that.” Eugene laughed, “You know they’re not all as perfect as I am.”

“You’re not even perfect. You have an overinflated ego.”

“God damn. What crawled up your ass and died?”

“My future.”

“Jesus christ. Edgelord.”

“Yes I am.”

That was the most awkward exchange in the history of his employment to Heartfeed, and God did he regret it. He was silent for the remainder of the day after that, trying to shake the feeling that someone
or something was going to make the day worse. It didn’t help that Lucas was in the back of his mind. Lucas. Lucas. Lucas Lucas Lucas.

Lucas, the one who insisted Shane couldn’t have a soulmate. Lucas, the one who swore he loved Shane. Lucas, the one who swore he was the closest thing to a soulmate Shane would ever have. Lucas. Lucas Lucas Lucas.

“Whoa, hey, Shane, you okay?” Ned asked worriedly, concern painted over his expression as he blocked Shane’s path to the mainframe. He’d never seen Shane like that before. Nobody had.

Shane had a relatively unchanging tone when compared to most of Heartfeed’s employees, but the tone of his“I’m fine.” was even more deadpan than normal. It was unsettling.

Ned didn’t buy it, “You sure? You look like you’re completely zoned out, man.”

Lucas used to say that to him, mostly right before they broke up. He told Shane that he couldn’t be with someone who always ignored him, but Lucas wasn’t the best listener, either. Lucas didn’t listen when Shane said he wanted to break up before. It had to be on Lucas’s terms. Lucas’s terms. Not Shane’s. Never Shane’s. Only Lucas’s. Lucas. Lucas Lucas Lucas.

“Look, I’m fine. I’m good. I swear.”

Ned was hesitant, but let him pass. If only Lucas had let Shane pass like that. He never had. He made sure Shane couldn’t. Shane was supposed to let Lucas do whatever, though. Lucas made sure Shane knew that. Lucas. Lucas. Lucas Lucas Lucas.

Shane ran into Zach at the copier. Zach was copying his final report for the day, preparing for the end of his night shift. Zach was Shane’s friend, and had been for several years, but he wasn’t good at listening. Like Shane. Maybe that’s why they got along.

“Oh, hey Shane!” Zach greeted with a smile. Zach and Shane were usually able to hold some...interesting...conversations. Today was an exception.

“Hi.” Shane used the copier the moment Zach was out of the way.

“You look tired. You okay?” Zach placed a hand on Shane’s Shoulder.

“Yeah.” Shane was short with him.

He shouldn’t be short with Zach. He was short with Lucas. Lucas got mad about that. Lucas was always mad. Lucas. Lucas. Lucas Lucas Lucas.

Zach listened this time. Zach was better than Shane.

Keith didn’t listen, though. Keith asked about Lucas. Shane admitted he’d been on his mind.

“Shane,” Keith said quietly, “You know you need help with that, right? He was shit to you and shit for you.”

Maybe Keith was right. Maybe Lucas was a bad person.

...No. No, it had to be Shane. Lucas was just a person. Lucas didn’t intend for this to happen. Shane was just being a little shit. Like Lucas always said. Lucas. Lucas. Lucas Lucas Lucas Lucas Lucas.

“Shane, talk to someone about this. You’re not okay. Please tell someone about this.”
Shane pressed down into the second Tally mark on his arm. Keith pulled his hand off of it, “Shane. I’m fucking serious. Stop this.”

It took a month and a half, but he finally did. Things got better for him after that, even if it did take a while. Everyone was unbelievably happy to have Shane back. The real Shane. Their friend Shane. Not the Shane Lucas had left them with.

Things were going well until Ryan Breaking Bada Bing Bada Boom was introduced. After that, Lucas was on his mind again, and he hated it. He hated the idea of love, and he hated the concept of soulmates. God he hated it.

But if Ryan really was supposed to be his soulmate, he was going to give it a chance- even being the skeptic he is. If nothing else, it would be to spite Lucas. Lucas. Lucas Lucas Lucas.
And on this day, Ryan had only one objective: Learn about Shane Madej. Shane Madej, the person whose last name was almost as poorly-pronounced as his own, making them the perfect odd-surnamed-soulmates, was, from what Ryan had discovered through quick google and Heartfeed searches, a huge fucking dork. A great tragedy from Illinois, Shane Mayday Parade, as Ryan had lovingly and jokingly deemed him, had a sharp tongue and a sharper style. And he was tall. Holy fuck this dude was tall. Think of the world’s tallest tree. He was probably taller. He probably had to have custom cars made for him so that he didn’t hit his head on the roof.

Ryan was in no way a short man, but just from the pictures, he knew he would look like one of the seven dwarves beside Shane Mayday Parade. He was also not prepared for that.

The more Ryan found about The Great Illinois Tragedy, the more he fell for the guy. From his jokes about the ‘death’ or ‘disappearance’ of a coworker who had simply changed jobs (named Brent, although Shane mostly referred to him as misspellings of his name- Bront, Brant, Bradly, Braxton, Deadnt), to his ability to make light of any given situation, regardless of how bad it was, Ryan knew Shane was going to be incredible. If nothing else, he would be fun and funny, easy to love, and all-around perfect. The issue he quickly found, though, was that Shane was a Skeptic. And that struck a nerve with Ryan.

The most interesting and worrisome thing, though, was the amount of tally marks Shane had. Two. Two black tally marks. That was absolutely nothing. That meant that Shane had only loved twice, but where were the blue marks? Where was the evidence that he had been loved? Just...something that could show that someone, anyone, had cared about him? It wasn’t like Shane was unlovable, either, far from it, so there had to be at least one. Someone on Earth had to have fallen for this huge ass dork with a weird sense of humor, Skeptic or not. Shane was at least partially everybody’s type-he was tall, dorky, funny, handsome-both conventionally and unconventionally, interesting, pretty much everything anyone could want in a person. How had nobody fallen for this guy yet? Where were the blue tally marks?

Ryan closed his laptop, looking out the window of his small, one-bedroom apartment to the dog park across the street as a smile crept onto his face. Everything about that dog park was a blessing (Was that something people say? It’s something he’d heard people say, and he hoped he had used it correctly, but he was completely unsure.) in his opinion. The day couples and families stopped going to that dog park was the day Ryan didn’t want to live on the Earth anymore. That was the day life had no purpose. If families stopped attending, that meant something bad had happened to everyone on Earth.

Most likely a bear had proven to be the apex predator and attacked their civilization in the form of a ferocious bear army, targeting those who considered sharks better predators first. Bears exacting their revenge on those who questioned their rightful place in nature as the perfect predator would be the only time Ryan would be okay with the dog park becoming abandoned. Poor pups, but also dumb
fucks. Believe in the god damned bears, and they won’t feel the need to prove themselves. Idiots. You brought this upon yourselves. Theoretically.

Anything outside of that, though, Ryan knew would be the end of his world. He loved people watching, seeing just how happy people could be with or without their soulmates, caring for dogs, just...existing. For a while, Ryan could pretend life really was that simple, just taking care of a pet with someone you care about. For just a moment, he could think that maybe, just maybe, all it would take to win his soulmate over was a simple, adorable, lovable, fluffy puppy.

Of course, life made it clear that simplicity was not on the agenda. First of all, his soulmate was a skeptic- a skeptic of all things, not even a Skeptic-Believer- and second, his soulmate had the lowest number of tally marks he’d ever seen- two. Fucking two. He hoped his soulmate was okay for a minute, then hoped he wasn’t one of the people who just despised every aspect of love, then hoped his soulmate would agree that bears were the apex predator, and finally landed on the realization that he would have to impress his skeptic soulmate to even get him to give him the time of day.

He sat by the window, dialing a number that was fairly new to him. Okay, he’d give this a shot.

Three rings and a too-loud hello later, Ryan was making a plan with Eugene to make Ryan look like the perfect soulmate for Shane. And Eugene was laughing.

“You’re pretty desperate to make Shane like you, huh?” Eugene chuckled, a grin evident in his tone, “Why? You realize he’s not big on the whole soulmate thing, right?”

“I’ve guessed as much from his Heartfeed profile-”

“Dude, you’re not going to win any man over, least of all Shane, by checking his online profiles.”

Ryan shrugged, “What, is trying to get to know someone before you meet them a crime?”

“No, it’s just weird.” He laughed lightly, “Listen, I would love to help you win over the man of your dreams, but I don’t do weird, dumb shit for free. You’re not going to tell me why you need my help so badly, and that’s fine, but I’m definitely going to call on you for a favor later. Alright?”

“You sound like a fucking movie spy,” Ryan laughed softly, “But sure, fine, if I can get the best-dressed guy at Heartfeed’s help with clothes for a simple favor, I’ll take it.”

Ryan thought he heard Eugene clap his hands on the other end of the phone, “Alright, Rynosaur! What time should we meet up?”

“What time is it now?”

“Like 6 PM, I think? Check your phone, man, I’m busy talking to some idiot on mine.”

Ryan pulled the phone away from his face just long enough to check the time and laugh quietly, “This idiot just checked, and you were right. It’s 6:00 exactly. 6:30 sound good?”

“Sure. South Lovelace Mall sound good? My sisters drag me there a lot.”

“Are bears the apex predator?”

“No. Shane will fight you over that.” Eugene stifled a laugh.

Annoyance flooded Ryan’s entire being with that sentence. His soulmate didn’t think bears were the
apex predator. Dammit, Shane Mayday Parade.

Ryan’s silence was all Eugene needed to hear, “You’re serious about this bears thing, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Eugene, I am.”

“Damn boi.” Eugene chuckled, “Just don’t mention it, alright? I’ll see you at the mall.”

“Fine.” Ryan pouted, thoroughly disappointed by the fact that Shane disagreed about the Bears argument. “See you soon.”

“Bye, Ryan.”

The phone call was short, but the time between the call and the mall was shorter. And boring. The phone call had at least some semblance of interesting anything fun or interesting, but the car ride to the mall (that Ryan was sure Eugene was still laughing about) was completely lacking in that department, which left time for Ryan to think about what predator Shane Mandatory Overtime thought was better than the bear. The bear was the best. How could anyone think anything was above bears-?

Luckily, finding something to make Shane Merrily Dead fall for him kept Ryan distracted- or maybe it was the amount of comments Eugene was making about how this wasn’t going to work because Shane was ready and willing to fight over whether the Soulmate System had any sort of truth to it or not. It could also be the fact that Ryan had found and purchased a ‘believer’ necklace, and Eugene was insisting that their relationship was doomed from that moment on. Ryan chose to ignore that, though. Shane maybe an idiot, but he was still Ryan’s soulmate, and Ryan genuinely believed that Shane would come around- even if this trip with the best-dressed guy didn’t pay off.

“You’re blowing it already, Bergara.” Eugene shook his head, “If you really want to make Shane like you, just do something casual. And ditch the fucking believer necklace.”

“Leave the necklace alone.”

“No. The necklace is going to counteract anything you can do to make Shane fall for you at all.”

“Meet you halfway?”

“Ryan.”

Ryan sighed and pocketed the necklace (that he would buy later) and walked with Eugene to find- well, anything they thought Shane would like. Eugene was trying to get Ryan into something extremely casual, while Ryan was thinking of going all-out with a suit and tie. The obvious differences between what Ryan wanted to wear and what Eugene knew Shane liked tired Eugene out, and eventually they settled on what Ryan described as ‘a nice-looking tee shirt.’ Eugene thought it was too dressy for Shane, Ryan thought it was too casual for a first meeting, but dammit they were gonna deal.

At the end of the night, Eugene and Ryan were too tired to exist.

“Ryan Bergara, you are a difficult man to make a soulmate outfit for, but this should make you and Shane closer to not polar opposites.”

Unfortunately, Ryan wasn’t listening. He was too busy putting on his ‘believer’ necklace.
Eugene groaned. “And we’re back to square one. You know what? This is on you. Have fun dealing with your soulmate not falling for you.”

Once Ryan got home, he collapsed on his bed. This party was going to be incredible.
Without the Soulmate System, the world they lived in could fall into chaos. According to the believers, that is. Believers believed that life existed in a balance, one that could easily fall off-center and create a terrifying mess of existence. Most believers thought that the skeptics who chose to ignore their soulmates were part of the reason the balance was as unstable as it was.

The Balance, if kept, would bring peace and kindness to the world, delivering it to a state of hope and love. By keeping this balance, relationships and people would flourish, people would grow, and families would be close. To keep this balance, people would have to marry their soulmates. Believers thought that soulmates were hand-picked to best complement each other, create a balance of sorts- if a person were wild and outgoing, their soulmate would be a relatively calm and reserved person. These two things were supposed to balance out. The wild and outgoing person was supposed to help the reserved person break out of their shell, while the quiet one would, in theory, help the wild one hold back a bit. If one person was a creative and innovative individual, their match would be a logical and reasonable individual. In theory, the creativity of one person would help the logical person see ways to fix a problem that weren’t necessarily ‘by the book’, while the logic of the other would help the more creative person find solutions to a problem that weren’t as complicated as they may think. The Soulmate System would take two extremes and balance them, bringing each person to their peak state of happiness and productivity, making sure they could contribute to society.

In theory, this was a completely reasonable conclusion to come to, as most members of their society who ended up with their soulmates would go onto cure illnesses, create movies, write books, build monuments, make breakthroughs in science and biology, find ways to generally improve the quality of life on their planet. In theory.

In theory, skeptics would argue, anything could be made to make sense. In theory, music caused spontaneous combustion. In theory, books created tornados. In theory, cats made cars go as fast as they could.

The Balance Theory, as Skeptics called it, was a ridiculous and overblown idea based on a loose, general concept of what the Soulmate System really was- an unnecessary, unreasonable, impractical misuse of power and scientific breakthroughs. The universe had a balance, but it was a balance created by nature and years of natural order. It was never meant to be tampered with people, least of all people who only wanted to confine and control variables within their society. Skeptics felt that the Soulmate System only caused more problems than it solved, including the issue of people not being sure whether or not the tally marks even mattered. If people were supposed to be with their soulmates and only their soulmates, what did it matter if they loved or were loved? What was the point? There wasn’t one!

If the tally marks were hard-coded into their DNA, why did the Soulmate System exist? What was the purpose of taking comfort and warmth from infants that would only be returned when they met a certain person? This was why skeptics felt the Balance Theory was bullshit. If the Balance Theory had any sort of weight to it, human DNA wouldn’t give tally marks to show you had loved and been loved. If the Balance Theory were true, people wouldn’t be living happily without their soulmates. If the balance theory were true, people would be drawn to their soulmates without the incentive of not being cold at all hours of the day.

If it were true, Shane would feel completely on-balance talking to ryan at the party, he wouldn’t feel
that Ryan’s ‘believer’ necklace was the Soulmate System’s sick way of joking with him, he wouldn’t be unbelievably thankful that the lights and people giving off heat around them masked the warmth of his soulmate standing in front of him so he could pretend Ryan was just another co-worker.

If it weren’t true, though, why had Shane walked over to him? Why had he been the one to start conversation? Why had he been so, so dumb?

Shane Madej, Skeptic Extraordinaire, had been the one to approach his soulmate and ask if he enjoyed the party. Shane Madej, Skeptic Extraordinaire, had also been the one to kick himself in the nuts after it.

“Parties are fine,” Ryan, Benevolent Believer, smiled back at him, “but I’m mostly here because some guy named Eugene seemed to love parties, and his friends apparently only agree once every thousand years.”

Shane shook his head, laughing lightly as he replied, “Eugene is a party animal. He’ll do anything for free booze, including throw parties.”

“I kind of guessed that when he offered to throw me a party two seconds after meeting him.” Ryan grinned, “But who am I to block a man’s partying?”

“Well, can’t argue with that!” Shane laughed, trying to be heard over the party’s ever-growing volume, “Messing with Eugene’s partying is like messing with a pirate’s treasure! It’ll get you taking a long walk off a short pier- or plank!”

If the purple lights were any lower, Shane wouldn’t have been able to see Ryan’s reaction to the dumbest joke he’d ever made. The reaction was an amused headshake. Thank God. “So, are dumb jokes your specialty, or are they reserved only for parties?”

“Well since I never go to parties, it would be a shame if they were reserved for parties, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” And with that, the conversation lulled.

If Shane weren’t his supposed soulmate, Ryan would be okay with this exchange, he might even mark it down as a success, but weren’t soulmates supposed to hit it off instantly? Wasn’t that how soulmates were supposed to work? Why was Shane so much harder to talk to than any of his other coworkers?

It got to the point that Eugene calling up the dance tradition and assigning partners was Ryan’s saving grace. Shane found it to be the exact opposite of his saving grace. His damning demons blood, he decided. Eugene was an asshole. Shane would fight. Once this dumb dance tradition was over, of course.

“Alright ladies and gentlemen!” Eugene grinned into a mic onstage, “This is a very special party. This is Ryan’s welcome party. Part the Heartfeed Seas so we can see him and whoever he’s with!”

As though Eugene was the Korean Heartfeed Jesus, every person on the dancefloor moved to the side to create a path from them to the stage. A spotlight was moved so that it was aimed directly at the two, mostly Ryan.
Eugene called Ryan up to the stage, spotlight following Ryan each step he took. “Now, Ryan, It is tradition for each new Heartfeed worker to be assigned one other Heartfeed worker for one single dance. Your Heartfeed worker is, Drumroll please…”

Zach and Keith did a drumroll on a table as the pseudo-anticipation built, almost pseudo-killing Shane in the process. Shane thought this tradition was pointless. Why assign a dance partner if you’re just going to leave after one dance? Whatever, it wasn’t like it meant anything to Shane, anyway. Since Eugene was assigning people, Ryan would be assigned to someone like Ned, who had a wife, as a kind of joke. That was how Eugene worked. He assigned almost every new worker to dance with Ned because he knew it would vaguely annoy him, and it would probably end in Ned giving Eugene the middle finger. After that, all would go back to normal. Shane could turn around and leave the party, never to see Ryan or have to deal with the new soulmate mark ever again, and it would be fine. Nobody would notice.

Shane decided that would be the best, fastest, easiest way out of there. He turned to leave-

“Shane Madej!”

Fuck.

Shane turned back around. God damn it, Eugene.

Eugene called up a slow dance as Ryan got offstage to dance with Shane. Couples and Soulmates were partnered up around them, preparing to dance to what would most likely be the only slow dance of the night. Ryan used them as a reference for how he and Shane were supposed to be. Shane was too busy glaring at a finger-gunning and winking Eugene to notice Ryan until the dance started. When the warmth had gone full-blown fire.

Shane and Ryan danced for awhile in silence, both awkward and welcomed. Just dancing seemed to calm Shane down for a bit. He seemed less tense than before. Ryan welcomed this.

Ryan broke the silence, though. “Why is this a tradition again?”

“A few years ago, some guy danced with someone at one of these and ended up being soulmates.” Shane answered, much more nonchalant than before.

Ryan smiled at that, “That’s sweet.”

Their conversation continued throughout the dance, all the while each man found himself noticing things about the other.

Shane noticed how Ryan’s eyes lit up when he was talking about something. Ryan noticed how Shane would make some dumb, corny joke when things started to slow down. Shane noticed how Ryan’s laugh would become a wheeze at times. Ryan noticed how Shane had a little splatter of freckles across his nose.

Ryan noticed he wanted to spend more time with Shane.

Shane noticed he did, too.

Ryan was enthusiastic and wanted to stay.

Shane panicked and left.
Chapter End Notes

Rip
Chapter 6

The reality of their situation was that those who didn’t end up with their soulmates not only played roles that made sure the soulmate couples could do their work, but had also made just as many breakthroughs, created just as many phenomenal works as soulmate couples. The only difference was that non-soulmate couples had to work for it.

Non-soulmate couples didn’t have the ‘balance’ soulmate couples had, but they had support. They had care. They had love. They had their own balance, one that didn’t require someone else choosing a major aspect of their life for them. They may not have their body heat back, but they had their own warmth. They had the soft warmth they felt when they saw the love of their life smile. They had the burning heat of anger when someone hurt their partner. They had the fire-like heat of embarrassment and happiness when their partner joked around with them. The warmth in these may not be real, but they felt real. That was all that mattered.

They produced and directed their movies, they became movie stars, they wrote books, the achieved their dreams, and they did it all without having to bow to the whim of their ridiculous government who ordered a ‘soulmate’ at the moment of their birth. And sometimes, they made things better than soulmate couples! Just look at the book Shane was reading! The Adventures of Axeman and Razor Boy by Holly Horsely had always been able to perfectly capture whatever emotion Shane was feeling, despite what it may say- if he didn’t know any better, he’d call it supernatural. Today’s chapter was no exception.

*Idiot, idiot, idiot!*

The Adventures of Axeman and Razor Boy by Holly Horsely had always been one of Shane’s favorite ongoing book series. Being interesting, silly, and successful while being written by someone who had not married her soulmate, its sarcastic lines and witty jokes could usually cure Shane of any down mood. Under normal circumstances, the story would be updated daily, and Shane would rush to read the newest chapter on whichever digital reading platform she would post it on. Under normal circumstances, the book would mirror the tone and styles of mid-20th century comic books and crime shows, and, when paired with Horsely’s writing style, would leave Shane with an entertained grin on his face, looking forward to the next chapter. Unfortunately, these were not normal circumstances.

This time, Axeman’s flare for the dramatic seemed over exaggerated, and Razor Boy’s corny, 50’s-esque slang seemed to annoy Shane more than it amused him. With every “Gee Whillikers, Axeman!” Shane found Razor Boy’s everlasting optimism to be more and more intolerable. How could anyone be optimistic when life was fucking shit? How could any single person, let alone an over-the-top kid who had been forced into insane and dangerous situations with a grown man he barely knew be excited? Where the hell were Razor Boy’s parents? Why were they letting him go off with this strange man? What kind of parents did Razor Boy have? Not good ones, even Shane could tell you that.

It wasn’t Horsely’s fault, the chapter was on-par with what her readers expected, it was *Shane* - or rather, the move he had made at the party. He’d barely even given the guy a chance before rushing out of the party like an idiot. He didn’t hate the guy- in fact, he was realizing that he may even-

Shane sighed as he closed the platform, deciding that the best thing he could do at this point was sleep. It was two o’clock in the morning, two days after he had run off, and he had work the next day. He could think about what happened later, when his mind wasn’t clouded by exhaustion, but not sleeping because he couldn’t stop thinking was a dumb move, and he knew it. Being exhausted at work wouldn’t be good for anyone, least of all him, and he wasn’t about to lose his job because of
some dumbass soulmate crisis.

It wasn’t long before Shane managed to fall into the sweet embrace of sleep.

Shane thought he wouldn’t care too much about the party or Ryan Brandy Pasta by the time he clocked into Heartfeed the day after it. Shane thought he would be over running out of the party and, by extension, Ryan Brexit Roster by his lunch break two days after it happened. Shane had been wrong on both occasions. Why had he thought he would be over the realization about why he had ran out on the third day?

That wasn’t what was ruining his day, though, it was how god damned cold it was. He knew people felt colder than ever when they were away from their soulmates for the first time after meeting them, but hadn’t had any idea how long people were left like this. Shane knew this was one of the government's more ridiculous tactics to ensure people would marry their soulmates, but he hadn’t had any way of knowing why it always seemed to work. Before the party, Shane had just assumed that all soulmates were together because they were Believers or Skeptic-Believers whose soulmates had worked out. After the party, Shane was convinced at least half of Soulmate Couples were only together because the extreme coldness was so far beyond annoying, he would do anything- almost anything to make it go away. The other things were bugging him, of course, and he knew he would have to deal with them, but they paled in comparison to the sheer force of the coldness. Yes, they were there, they had an impact, and he had been heavily focused on them the night before, but he could distract himself from those issues for a while. He could put off dealing with most issues the party had caused, but he couldn’t just make himself not feel colder than a shark swimming around in the Atlantic Ocean. At least sharks had a reason to be there, at least they were getting to live and eat other aquatic animals, this excessive coldness (that decidedly needed a god damned title) had no purpose whatsoever. It wasn’t making people happy or teaching them to do things, it was just making life harder on the people who didn’t end up with their soulmates immediately.

It wasn’t just the excessive coldness that was ruining his day, either, it was exactly what it did. It didn’t make people spiral into a never-ending depression or anything, but it did make everything and everyone around you less likable. It made it easier for people to annoy you, piss you off, or ruin your day- depending on who you were and how you reacted to things, it could make everyone and everything more likely to upset you. The Frozen Feeling, as Ned had dubbed it after Shane brought up the absence of a name for it, could make it easier for people to misinterpret conversations, phrases, glances, movements, actions, everything, as hostile or passive-aggressive or disapproving or judgemental or anything. Ryan was on the latter end of the spectrum, Shane was on the former, but regardless of where you fell on the Frozen Feeling Spectrum, it had similar effects. It would take whatever negative emotion a person felt most often and amplified it. If someone was an angry person, they would snap at the most subtle misunderstandings. If someone was a sad person, they would burst into tears at one slight misconception about a tone of voice. That Frozen Feeling was hell.

Yes, all people were taught that it was bad, that they would feel cold after leaving their soulmates the first time, and that it could last anywhere from three days to a month, but nobody had ever articulated exactly how awful it felt to anyone. It wasn’t the embarrassment, it wasn’t the cold, it wasn’t even the Frozen Feeling that was ruining his day- It was the fact that after experiencing it, he knew he wouldn’t wish this on anyone, and the knowledge that by doing his job, by working at Heartfeed, he knew he was ensuring other people would have to experience it. He and his coworkers were ensuring that hundreds of thousands of people would have some negative emotion amplified for up to a month. They were making sure that every human being, regardless of age, sexuality, gender, mental state, etc, would have to experience this internal hell for up to a month. They were pushing
this hell on people so that they might end up in relationships they don’t even want, and nobody would listen to reason when he tried to explain why it the Frozen Feeling was detrimental to people’s lives. That’s what was ruining his day. That’s what was fucking him up.

It was their lunch break before Shane could bring it up to any of his friends, and their reactions only annoyed him more.

“It’s only a month.” Ned had brushed him off with a shrug as he typed away at his phone, most likely texting his perfect believer soulmate wife who he was in a perfect believer soulmate relationship with in their perfect believer soulmate life. There was no way Shane could sway this perfect believer on the topic, show him why it should be taken down. “Not even a month, in most cases. It’s just a passing part of life, it’s not permanent.”

Eugene, on the other hand, agreed with him. Somewhat. “It sucks, yeah, but we just have to deal with it. What are we going to do, make the Uppers take out a huge part of their own system?”

He shook his head, knowing Eugene was right. Of course, knowing something and feeling it were two different things- Shane knew that to be fact, even if nobody else wanted to admit it. Sarcasm seeped into his tone at that, “I don’t know, Eugene, but we have to do something.”

The annoyance momentarily ceased, though, when Keith seemed to agree. He nodded, anger or annoyance on his features, “Shane’s right! We have to do something!”

“I am?” Shane quirked an eyebrow. Was Keith being serious? This could be great for Shane! Maybe he would help him pitch the idea to the Uppers! Excitement flooded him as Keith stood from the table. If Keith was with him, if there were more than one person saying it, they would be more likely to listen!

It all died, though, when Keith slammed his hand down on the table. The room went silent. Shane’s annoyance returned as Keith yelled, “Let’s take down the fucking government!”

Some laughter came from each of the try guys as Keith sat down. Shane pinched the bridge of his nose, trying not to lose his cool. “I’m being god damned serious, assholes.” Obviously, it wasn’t working.

“We know you are,” Zach managed, still catching his breath, “but we can’t do anything about it, so why waste time trying?”

“Because you’re the fucking Try Guys. You’ll try god damned anything.”

“Yeah,” Zach leaned forward on the table, wiping his eyes of the tears Keith’s abrupt outburst had caused, “Anything within reason. This isn’t reasonable. It’s not even fun.”

Ned nodded in agreement, “There’s no enjoyment we get from it if it fails, there’s no dumb stories we can laugh about later, and if it flops, I lose my job. I have a wife, Shane, I can’t take that kind of risk.”

“Yeah,” Keith said quickly, “Besides, you can’t just march into the office of the Uppers and demand a change. You have to have a reason, a plan.”

“ If you get some kind of plan or something, let us know, but until then, we can’t help you.” Eugene crossed his arms.
Shane walked out of the room after that, pissed. He knew they were right, of course, but he didn’t want to accept it. He wouldn’t accept it. If they wanted a plan, he would get them one. *A plan to end all plans*, he thought, *one that’s unreasonable but fun, they’ll agree to it.*

Shane had a few ideas buzzing in his mind, but one thought was far more prominent than the others.

*Didn’t Keith say something about taking down the government?*
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I don’t have a beta reader btw, so if any of you guys want to help out ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Did I do something wrong?

That was the question that had been on Ryan’s mind since the party.

They talked, they danced, they made each other laugh. Things had been going well with Shane- or so he’d thought. Obviously he’d been wrong, though, as Shane had run out at the end of their dance. He just wanted to know why.

Was he too loud? Was it the outfit? Was it the Believer necklace? Did he bring up the Bears vs Sharks argument? Was it just Ryan? Was it all just Ryan’s fault? Had he really just fucked up that badly?

And Why was he this cold? It couldn’t be the After-Soulmate Effect, he thought, that was only a minor annoyance. This had to be something else.

Was that the reason Shane Majestic Daria had left? Was Ryan just too cold?

Ryan was caught in a thought loop. He hated it. Thought loops are hard enough to escape from on their own, and the fact that his apartment was silent didn’t help at all. His phone was dead, so no music, his TV was off, so no background noise, and it was around midnight, so no sound outside. His ceiling fan was turned on, but that constant, quiet, steady sound couldn’t do much to help. Sleep would help him get to a clean slate, he knew that, and he would put his ability to sleep to use if he could. Unfortunately, the After-Soulmate Effect- that he was denying it was- made him so cold that he could not make himself sleep.

For sleep and Ryan to be able to be together, Ryan had to have some semblance of warmth. He had to have the sun beating down on him, a heater blasting by his bed, or just some sort of happy, warm thoughts in his mind. At the moment, he had none of those- even if he did have the heater or the sun, he realized, they wouldn’t warm him like he needed. The current coldness was far worse than he’d ever experienced, and this time it was deep within him. He was literally chilled to the bone. A heater couldn’t reach that.

A sigh escaped him as he sat up from the bed, glancing out the window. The dog park was understandably empty, as were the streets and sidewalks surrounding it. Streetlights illuminated the empty paths with a dull orange glow, creating a scene that managed to be simultaneously eerie and calming. The glow of the lights cast the translucent shadows of the cars they reflected off of on the streets, only adding to the unique atmosphere of the scene. If Ryan’s apartment weren’t so high up,
the orange glow would show through his window, maybe even provide a bit of warmth so he wouldn’t feel this unbelievably cold. He would welcome anything that would bring some miniscule amount of warmth, if he were being honest.

He didn’t realize he was out of bed until he opened the window to take the scene in in its entirety. Had he been in his usual state of mind, one where he had managed to get enough sleep and wasn’t caught in a thought loop about the soulmate who had run out, he may have found the scene beautiful; In his current state of mind, though, it was a reminder. The emptiness of the streets, the dull glow, the absence of any human life at all, all of it only served as a reminder of how vacant he felt. It was neither calming nor eerie to him, it was just… sad.

Ryan remained at the window for the rest of the night, mind managing to escape from the thought loop long enough to wander elsewhere. It was a sleepless night for him, but at least it wasn’t a repetitive night.

He was still sitting in the window when his alarm clock went off. He had watched the sunrise from the spot, watched people slowly refill the streets, saw dog owners take their pets for a morning walk in the park, felt a vague warmth brush over him, but still felt cold. He didn’t understand how or why he was this cold, this empty, but he hated it. It had been like this since the party four days before, and it just kept getting worse. It had gotten so bad, in fact, that he would forget to do things he knew he had to do.

For example, charge his phone.

“Fuck.” Ryan mumbled, shaking his head as the realization hit. “This is fucking bullshit.”

That was the only reason he moved from the spot as quickly as he did, grabbing his charger and plugging in his phone in hopes that it would manage to reach 25% before he left. Whatever this cold, empty feeling was, he needed to get past it. He couldn’t keep losing sleep and forgetting to take care of things he needed to do if he wanted to keep his job and friendships. Luckily, once he was moving this time, he kept moving.

Everything seemed to be going relatively well, despite that empty coldness. He talked to Eugene, assigned a few soulmates, befriended Ned and Ariel- The day had been amazing! By lunch, he had managed to befriend the entire group he had met on day one, which he quickly discovered was nicknamed the “Try Guys” for their willingness to try almost anything.

Ryan thought this was a good thing, since he knew Shane was friends with them. He thought that maybe, just maybe, his Believer ass could talk to Shane at lunch with the Try guys, get closer to him, maybe find out what went wrong. When he got to the cafeteria, though, he was met with an atmosphere that was vastly different than the one they had when he first met them.

The Try Guys and Ryan were sitting at a table in the cafeteria, each one eating their own company-provided meal as they explained what had happened to Ryan. Eugene was the first to say anything.

“Shane’s trying to get them to remove the Frozen Feeling from the Soulmate System.” He explained, setting his company-provided, heart-shaped sandwich back onto its company-provided, heart-shaped
plate, “He’s worried it can cause some seriously bad stuff, and honestly, I don’t blame him.” Eugene shrugged as Keith scoffed and Zach quirked an eyebrow. There seemed to be a bit of turmoil within their group. If Ryan knew how happy, friendly they had been only a day before, he would be worried- he knew how close they had been a full week ago, and he was still worried. If he knew the reason behind the turmoil, though, it would all make sense.

Keith was the first one to speak after finishing his company-provided pink lemonade. “If you really agree with him, Eugene,” He crossed his arms in what Ryan could only assume was a passive-aggressive manner, “Why did you tell him he was being ridiculous? If you agreed, why didn’t you agree to go help him?”

Eugene glared and leaned forward slightly, his arms laying crossed against the table in front of them, “First of all, Keith, I don’t want to lose my job. Especially not over something I knew wasn’t going to go well. Second, I didn’t say I agreed. I just don’t disagree-”

“Oh, that’s rich.” Keith laughed bitterly, “What do you think it means when you don’t disagree, Eugene? And why should it matter if you agree? You’re supposed to be there for your friends.”

Ryan looked between the two, shocked. What had happened? Why were they so hostile so suddenly? Why-

“Not everything is that black and white, Keith.” Ned said quickly, trying desperately to diffuse the situation, “You guys are friends. Don’t-”

“This isn’t your fight, Fulmer.” Keith snapped, “You’re just an annoying ass Believer with a happy Soulmate Marriage. You don’t get what it means to the rest of us who fucking hate out soulmates.”

Ned’s eyes went wide. Ryan recoiled. Zach gasped. What had happened to them? Why did Keith hate his soulmate? Why were they fighting?

“Keith, stop this. Now.” Ned, after regaining his calmness, conntued trying to diffuse the situation, “You are behaving like a child. Whatever anger you have towards Eugene, take it up later. This is not the place to have this fight.”

Keith narrowed his eyes and stood up, “Whatever you say, Ned.” He walked away quickly, leaving Zach, Ned, Eugene, and Ryan to sit there awkwardly.

Ryan, who was completely clueless about the entire situation, sat back in shock. He was still reeling from the Frozen Feeling, and this only added more stress to his day. When he had walked in, the heart-shaped lunches and was a welcomed calmness. The people talking in the background had added to the relaxing atmosphere of the area. Despite the fluorescent lights draining everything of color, there was a certain feeling of relaxation that the room brought- most likely because Ryan already heavily associated it with a small break from his tedious work. He loved his job of matching people with their soulmates, but the actual work of assigning them quickly became repetitive. Click here, click there, press enter, continue.

Now, though, everything was flipped. The quiet chatter of their coworkers emphasized awkward atmosphere, the heart-shaped lunches added to the awkwardness, and the fluorescent lights emphasized exactly how they all felt- drained.

For a short while, it was silent. Eugene was the first to speak after that.

Eugene chuckled and sat up straight, closing his eyes for a moment, “Well that could have gone better.”
“Yeah, you’re telling me…” Ned rubbed his temple with one hand, “I’m so happy my wife wasn’t here to see all of that. She would’ve flipped.”

“What happened, anyway?” Ryan asked, “Weren’t you guys best friends?”

Eugene sighed, sitting up straight as he explained the events of the earlier night- or some basic concept of them. He explained that he and Keith had gotten into a pretty big fight the night before, and that Eugene had said some things he would later regret. Ryan asked if he thought Keith would ever forgive him, to which Eugene replied with a, “Keith isn’t the kind of guy who hold grudges. He talks big, but he usually doesn’t act on it. Just wait, this time tomorrow, we’ll have our normal jokester back.”

Once it was over, Ryan had to leave. He needed to process everything. When he left the cafeteria, though, he began to feel himself warm up again as a familiar voice drew close. A smile broke out across Ryan’s face.

“Sometimes I wonder if anyone really understands what we do.” Shane sighed, “If they did, I don’t think they would be quite as happy about it.”

“But is this really the best option? You only pitched the idea to Upper Lucas-” Another familiar voice came from the hall, but it was a more unwelcomed one. Keith stopped in his tracks, “If you think this is what we should do, I’ll join you in a heartbeat- no pun intended- but we’d need more than us.”

Shane’s voice dropped, “Keith, they’re not going to stop this, and you and I both know Luke- Lucas isn’t going to listen to reason. He didn’t when we were together, and he’s not going to now. He’s always had a fetish for power.”

Keith grumbled something, but ultimately ended up giving Shane an ‘Alright.’ before the two continued to walk down the hall.

“We need to get the other guys on board,” Shane told Keith, “and I have just the idea of how to pitch this to get them on board.”

“How?”

“Well, we start off with-” Shane stopped as soon as he saw Ryan. He had been so busy discussing his plan with Keith that he hadn’t even noticed his warmth returning. He should have known he would run into Ryan at some point or another, he just never thought it would be so soon.

When Shane spoke next, his tone reflected his expression.

“Oh, uh, Hey, it’s…you.”

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters in one day? Whoa!
I’m really hoping to start updating this story more often, honestly.
Also, my buddy Jay and I have a couple of story concepts in the works, so keep an eye out for those! They'll be written by both of us, and they're really cool. You should check out Jay's story, if you haven't! It's called The Great Heist of Shane Madej, and it is incredible.

Until next time, thank you so much for clicking on this story and/or reading all the way here! :) 
I hope you all have an absolutely incredible day! <3
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry about that semi-hiatus. Last week was fall break :/ I'm working on new chapters and will release them (hopefully) quickly to make up for it. :) <3 thank you so much for sticking with me throughout this <3 <3 <3

Shane had spent all night on this. He had searched and searched, typed and typed, practiced and practiced, just so that he could present this to an Upper. God, he hated the Uppers- not just in a typical ‘god I hate my boss’ way, either, he had genuine reasons to hate the Uppers. The Uppers were free of the Soulmate Shackles, free to experience that amazing feeling of warmth from the moment they snagged the position, and they still somehow were the perfect authorities for what the Soulmate System was and how it would affect people? And what of the people who had been assigned to be their soulmates? They were just stuck there, never able to find their soulmate because they no longer had one . It had always made him annoyed, but now, having experienced firsthand exactly what they weren’t having to ever experience in their lives, he hated it. With every fiber of his being, he despised the Uppers. They had no idea how the Soulmate System affected people, they couldn’t know how badly it was fucking people up, and they refused to listen to anyone who tried to tell them. Communication is important, and absolutely none of the Uppers would acknowledge it.

The Uppers were god damned awful, and Shane knew there was nothing he could do to change it except pitch his idea.

He needed a drink.

And so, that’s what he got. He left his house, going over his presentation repeatedly in his mind. Hello there, Uppers. He cringed. Too informal. That wouldn’t get him anywhere at all.

He passed by an electronics store that was playing an office sitcom in the windows- where an employee was meeting with his boss for something! That was a stroke of luck, maybe he could use something from it! He paused for a moment, closing his eyes and visualizing meeting with a room full of Uppers as he said the line. Dear Uppers, I just want to take a moment to express my gratitude- Fuck no, he was so god damned wrong. TV lied to him. That was so ridiculously over-the-top and formal! He wasn’t applying for a college scholarship as a broke college kid, he was a grown ass man who needed to change a system that was working against thousands of people. Total formality was not what he was going for.

He shook his head and continued walking. He was halfway to the bar now, and still he had no plan for convincing the Uppers to do away with the warmth aspect of the Soulmate System at least. He passed a street of abandoned buildings, glancing over at their charming but empty window fronts as he thought about how to combine both formalities and informalities in a way that would both grab their attention and not get him fired. He needed to know these things, especially if he wanted to get the Try Guys on board. Maybe he needed to be inviting, like the buildings had once had to be, but forceful, like the vibe they now gave off, all while maintaining some sort of front of charm and kindness. He took in a deep breath and tried that. Hello there, Uppers. He began internally, Thank you for this opportunity to meet with you. My name is Shane Madej, and I have an idea that is so unique, so revolutionary, it could improve the quality of life for thousands of people.
That actually...worked. It wasn’t awful. He was so much farther than he had been only minutes ago! He actually had...the beginning. Okay, he would admit it wasn’t much, but it was something. It was *something*, and it was more than he had before he started on this trip. And now, he needed to practice it. “Hello there, Uppers.” He took a breath and began walking away from the abandoned buildings, “Thank you for this opportunity to meet with you.” He was doing well, he thought. If nothing else, it was certainly better than he expected himself to do- Those were the easy lines, though, the next one had to be the one that both caught attention and somehow managed to not get him fired on the spot. “My name is Shane Madej, and I have an idea that is so unique, so revolutionary, it could improve the quality of life for thousands of people.”

He paused for a moment, uncertainty in himself clear in his expression. He was sure to be met with disapproval and punishment if he said it like *that*. He shook his head, passing by several people as he went over other possible ways he could say it to not be met with absolute dismissal. He practiced several possible ways, both aloud and internally, but kept falling short. By the time he had reached the bar, he was close to giving up on this entire endeavor. There was no possible way he could pitch an idea that could possibly leave hundreds of people without jobs or ways to care for themselves and their families if it went awry. Sure, other people had done it- hell, the president had built a career around it- but Shane was almost positive he couldn’t do it. He wasn’t like them, he couldn’t convince people that what he was saying would immediately benefit every person on the planet (even if it would), he couldn’t show them that it would be better for everyone in the long run (Even though it would), he wasn’t going to be able to prove to people that everyone’s quality of life would be ten thousand times better without having to be practically forced to marry someone chosen for you (even though it god damned *would*). Other people could do that, but he couldn’t, and it pissed him off. Other people were just bullshitting the citizens, other people were lying directly to their faces about it being helpful, other people knew damned well that their ideas were actually harmful, but they giftwrapped them in this little, colorful box of lies and deceit and always, *always* got people to buy into their bullcrap. Now that Shane had an actual good idea that really would help people and improve the lives of others, it was just going to be overlooked by citizens, shot down Uppers, and ridiculed by Believers, and it wasn’t going to be able to be put into place because of that. People would buy into the idea that a wall that would surround their borders and coasts, effectively cutting them off from the rest of the world, was a good idea, but immediately fight against the concept that forcing people to marry people who they didn’t or couldn’t love was rude, cruel, and unreasonable.

Shane knew he was spiraling, just like he knew damned well he was freezing, but he couldn’t stop it. Not on his own, at least. The dark-skinned woman beside him, though, managed to help him out of it when she spoke. “You look down on your luck,” She said as she sat on the stool beside Shane, her purple suit reminding him vaguely of someone he might see at work. She actually looked as though she had just gotten off work, but Shane dismissed this. If anything, she probably worked in the Heartfeed Giftshop or as a tour guide. The company had to make money somehow, and the tours they gave and the gift shops at the beginning and end of them just happened to be the company’s main source of income. “What’s on your mind?”

Shane shook his head, unsure of whether or not he should tell her. He didn’t know this woman, after all, why should he trust her. Then again, he didn’t know her, what harm could she *really* do? He decided to start off vague. “Just got a dumbass pitch in the morning. It’s probably going to get shot down.”

“I hear that.” She chuckled, deep red lips parting to make a smile as the bartender walked over, “I’ll take-” She went on to order two glasses of cheap alcohol with an okay taste, one for her and one for Shane, “I have a meeting with the board and an employee tomorrow. I keep wondering what it’s about, and all I can ever get back to is ‘God, I hope he’s not getting fired tomorrow.’”

“As an employee going to a meeting, I have that exact concern.” Shane took a sip of the drink she
ordered for him, “It’s kind of a controversial topic I’m pitching to my Uppers tomorrow.”

“Oh yeah?” she gave a smile, “What’s so controversial about it?”

Shane looked straight ahead, voice low, “You know the Soulmate System centered around warmth?”

The lady quirked an eyebrow. Of course she knew about it, everyone knew about it. Everyone had to know about it. Schools taught it to them from the age of five. It was impossible to not know about it. “I think I may have heard something about it.” Her tone was slightly sarcastic, but quickly returned to polite and sweet, “What does your controversial idea have to do with the Soulmate System?”

“I want to get rid of it.”

Her eyes widened a bit in surprise that Shane read as disapproval. The surprise quickly shifted to interest and curiosity, though, as she leaned closer to him, “That’s a pretty big leap. You think you’ll be able to convince them to do that?”

“I’m going to try.” Shane shook his head, “Someone has to do something about it, and I know nobody else will. I just hope I don’t get fired.” He mumbled, downing the rest of the drink the woman had purchased for him.

There was a moment of silence between the two before the woman turned to face Shane. “Convince me.” She said, placing her hands in her lap. She was met with a disbelieving and surprised what? From Shane, but she insisted, “I’m a Believer with a loving wife, a happy family, and a well-paying career. It all stems from the Soulmate System. Convince me that we should get rid of it.”

Shane’s eyebrows raised in surprise. He shook his head with a small laugh, “Whatever you say.” He turned his chair to face her, clearing his throat and fixing his posture as the woman waited patiently. When he was finally through, he spoke in a clear voice, “People have both shared and unique life experiences, and they react to all of them in their own ways. It’s just a fact- people experience life differently. While some people enjoy their alone time, even say it’s the only reason they’re able to make it through the day, others struggle with being alone. They could spiral into depression if it gets too bad. Some people hate their emotions and would be happy to feel numb. Some people would call it a blessing. Others, however, hate this numb feeling. It makes them more reckless, more careless, and so on. Some people hate warmth, others welcome the day they meet their soulmates because of it—”

“What does this have to do with your pitch?” The woman asked, waving the bartender over for two more drinks, “You’re trying to get an institution centered around the Soulmate System to shut down half of the Soulmate System, everything you say needs to have a point.”

“It does, I’m getting there.” Shane chuckled, taking a gulp of the new drink as soon as the bartender set it down, “The lack of warmth after meeting your soulmate is amplified, and it amplifies your negative emotions. We’ll call this feeling, the Frozen Feeling.” He had stolen the term from Ned, of course, but he could tell Ned later. That wasn’t the important part. The important part was convincing her.

She leaned on the bar, turning her seat a bit. “How do you know this?”

Shane’s answer to her was calm, serious, and low, but above all, “I’ve seen it happen to my friends.” it was a lie. “We don’t live in a society free of mental health issues- I’m sorry, what was your name?”

“Umbria Winters.” She held her hand out, her red fingernails reflecting the low lights of the bar
around them, “Nice to meet you…”

“Shane Madej.” He shook her hand with a smile, “Nice to meet you, too.”

She smiled kindly and pulled her hand back, “Now, What were you saying about the Frozen Feeling and mental health?”

After a two hour mock presentation full of questions from Umbria, Shane had convinced her that the Frozen Feeling wasn’t quite for everyone, and the bar was closing. The bartender yelled for everyone to leave. Umbria turned to Shane, finishing up her drink, “Aw, shit,” she grinned, “Guess that’s our que.”

“Guess so.” Shane smiled back. Despite the Frozen Feeling currently chilling him to his core, he had had a nice night. It was all thanks to Umbria. He was thankful to have met her.

Umbria smiled politely as she stood and took her purse off the back of her chair, pulling out a cash to leave the bartender, “It was nice meeting you, Shane Madej. Good luck on your pitch tomorrow.”

“Thanks. Good luck with the employee.” He smiled, reaching for his wallet, only to be interrupted by Umbria asking how much his tab for the night was. “I got it, Umbria. I’m not going to make you pay for my drinks.” He laughed.

Umbria insisted, “I’m not gonna leave you to pay before a huge pitch.” She smiled, pulling out some more money, “Besides, if the pitch goes south, you’re going to need it. You said it yourself, this is a risky idea.”

“I know it is, but I’m going to make sure it happens. Even if they veto it.” He didn’t really know how, but he knew it had to happen.

Umbria chuckled, laying the cash down and walking out the door with Shane close behind. They stood directly outside the glass exterior of the bar, continuing to converse, “And how are you going to do that?”

If he didn’t have several glasses of alcohol in him clouding his judgement, he would have made something up. After that, he would have ended his conversation with Umbria and left. He would probably never see her again, and he would always think fondly of this night, the night a nice woman helped him perfect his pitch. Instead, he answered honestly. “I’m going to recruit people and overthrow the government.”

“Oh my god,” Umbria laughed loudly, thankfully taking that as a joke, “Well, SHane Madej, if you ever actually actually get around to doing that, hit me up. Here’s my home phone. Don’t be a creep, though, or I will block you. My kid and wife’s there, and I’m not looking to leave them or cheat, got it?”

Shane nodded, taking the card with her number, “I’m not really into the whole dating thing, anyway.”

“Good.” She gave a nod, pulling her dreadlocks back into a loose ponytail, “It really was nice to meet you, Shane.”

“Have a nice night, Umbria.” Shane smiled. With that, they went their separate ways.
When Shane got home that night, he passed out on his couch. That was a bad idea, he would be hungover for the pitch. He had made a new friend, though, and a pretty nice, possibly badass one at that. Maybe she would actually help him.

That was his final thought before he fell asleep.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Wow this sucks. So much. Hopefully the next chapter will be better.

The presentation would have and should have gone well, given the circumstances- the night before hadn’t left him with a hangover, he had practiced his presentation, he was dressed well, and he had a backup plan if it didn’t go well (a ridiculous backup plan, but a backup plan nonetheless). He had been able to reign in the Frozen Feeling well enough, he had drank plenty of coffee, he had visuals, he had everything. When he headed out the door that morning, Shane thought that his plan would work. He knew, deep down, it would most likely be rejected, but he made himself be optimistic about it.

That’s how his walk to work was, too. Forcefully optimistic. The crowd of people walking to work wasn’t a ridiculous and slightly scary sign of the times that meant that people didn’t care about their quality of life and only about money, it was just a happy piece of evidence that people were still being allowed to move where they wanted! The shattered windows on abandoned buildings weren’t proof that people were so tired, angry, and bored that they were willing to vandalize what was only proof that people’s livelihoods had been destroyed by society, they just showed that people were still able to do things to other things and that they wanted to do things! All the fighting in the streets and anger directed at one another wasn’t-

Who was he kidding? This was all bullshit. Life was bullshit. Shane was just trying to do something to keep people in and improve the quality of that bullshit. As Shane did away with the thin veil of obviously fake optimism, he wondered if that would actually be enough to change a major part of people’s lives. Would simple proof that the Frozen Feeling destroyed lives and forced people into relationships they didn’t want be enough to make people change it? And why the hell did was the Frozen Feeling so strong today? Wasn’t it supposed to be fading?

He didn’t have time to ponder this, though, as he walked into a nearly empty board room. He sighed and looked around, making sure this was, in fact, the room he was supposed to be in before setting up his visual aids. Maybe this was a bad idea, he thought, maybe he should just back out before things went south. Maybe the extremely Frozen Feeling he woke up with was a sign that he should stop. Maybe he should just stop being a dumbass and trying to change things he knew damned well he couldn’t so he could-

“He Madej.” He was interrupted by a particular woman, her tone filled with recognition and a hint of joking friendship, “So you’re the employee I’m hoping not to fire today.”

The Frozen Feeling let up a bit as he smiled and turned to her, relieved to see a familiar face, “Umbria Winters, you’re the Upper I’m trying to pitch the idea to?”

She ran a hand over the vest of her purple suit, attempting to straighten it out, “Indeed, I am. I admit, I was wondering why someone who didn’t work at Heartfeed would be pitching an idea like this. I suppose that question’s settled.” She walked to her seat, her white teeth and red lips holding a friendly smile as she spoke, “It’s a good thing you’re not a creep, then. If you tried to ring my phone off the hook last night and then turned around and tried to pitch me any idea, especially one like this today, your ass would be out of here. I take care of my own. Not letting any creep in my building.”
Shane nodded in agreement, looking up to her seat from where he stood on the presentation floor. Presentation rooms were set up like domes, with the presenter standing on a lowered platform in the middle of a circle, surrounded by Uppers in raised seats who would watch them from all sides as they spoke. The Uppers insisted the rooms were shaped like this so each upper had a fair chance at seeing what the presenter had to say, but Shane felt it was more to mirror the colosseums of Ancient Greece when Gladiators fought lions as people watched in amusements. Only, in this room, the lions watched while the Gladiators fought themselves. “You should definitely keep this place safe. Fire any creep in here.”

Umbria’s eyebrows raised slightly at that, her smile growing as she leaned forward slightly, “Shane Madej, I am so glad you understand where I’m coming from.”

“Umbria Winters,” Shane stated, hands in his pockets, “Fuck creepy bastards up.”

There was a moment of silence in the room as the conversation lulled. After a short while, Umbria broke it. “I told one of my friends about your idea last night. He said he liked it—”

“He did?” Shane’s eyes widened in surprise. If the Frozen Feeling wasn’t amplified for some reason, he would be feeling hope in this board room. If one of Umbria’s friends liked it, there was a chance!

“Yes, and he’s an Upper, too. He’s got this blonde hair and blue eyes, and he said he’s actually heard of you before.” As Umbria spoke, Shane tried not to relate the description to someone he knew. There were plenty of blonde-haired, blue-eyed guys out there, this didn’t have to be— “Here he comes now!”

It was.

The blonde-haired man walked in, his white suit matching the color of the room. His mannerisms made it clear he didn’t want to be here, he thought himself above simple pitches such as this one, but Shane didn’t know if others could read his movements like he could. Given how he was hugging Umbria, and Umbria still carried a smile, Shane assumed not. Umbria was a sweet, kind woman, if she knew what kind of person this man was, she wouldn’t be hugging him. Other Uppers began to fill the room, as the set pitch time was quickly approaching, but Shane couldn’t move his attention from this Upper. As he sat by Umbria and stared down at Shane, just as the man had many times before he was in a position of power over Shane, the already amplified Frozen Feeling seemed to amplify more. Shane felt cold. Shane felt angry. Shane felt scared. Shane felt hopeless. Shane felt lost.

“Shane Madej,” The blonde spoke, tone dripping with disdain for Shane, “I never thought I would see you again, much less in an environment like this. I’ll tell you, Umbria, Shane always had the most unbelievable ideas, but I never thought he would be crazy enough to go through with pitching one!”

“Nice to see you, too, Lucas.” Shane said quietly.

“Present your idea, Shane, go on! This is your chance to change things, right? Go ahead and try! It won’t work, but you can try!” Umbria smacked Lucas on the arm for saying that, and Shane began. The presentation failed, though.

Lucas made it a point to interrupt Shane at every point, questioning his every move and action. He made a mockery of Shane at every opportunity. When Shane said they should do away with the frozen feeling, Lucas insisted the Frozen Feeling was beneficial and helped people find relationships.
When Shane explained that they were often horrible relationships, Lucas said the people could just leave them. When Shane tried to explain why they couldn’t, Lucas insisted that it wasn’t the system’s fault for personal weakness. These instances, on top of others, led the Uppers to elect to veto this pitch. After the pitch, Umbria walked down to Shane and hugged him, apologizing for Lucas. Shane promised it wasn’t her fault, Lucas was just like that.

As Shane gathered his things, preparing to step into the hall and go back to work, Lucas stopped him. Shane’s blood boiled. “Leave me the fuck alone.”

Lucas leaned against the doorway, appearing calm to the untrained eye. Shane knew better, however- he could see that Lucas was pissed from the way he looked at him as he spoke, “You didn’t think I would let you do this, did you? Or did you forget that I have connections?”

“Just get the hell out of my way, I have work to do.” Shane had an idea of where this was going. He just wanted to get out of there. Shane would be angry if these were normal circumstances, but these weren’t normal circumstances- the Frozen Feeling amplified it.

“Oh, Shane.” Lucas shook his head, chuckling, “Shane, Shane, Shane, Shane, Shane.” He stood straight up, crossing his arms, “You’re not going to have any victories. Not while I’m around, at least.”

“You don’t fucking know that-”

Lucas raised his eyebrows and scoffed, “Oh, don’t I? Tell me something, Shane, where else do you intend to take this? My father is the president of this branch, my uncle is the leader of the entire system, and my siblings are in offices of power in the other branch. With just one phone call, I can make this specific branch of the System a requirement. Do you really want to try me, Shane? As long as my family is around, you are not going to change this. Nobody is. Don’t even try.”

“You don’t even care how many people are hurting-”

“No. I don’t. You don’t, either, apparently. I have control of the Frozen Feeling, Shane. If you step out of line even one more time, I will turn it all the way up on you and everyone you love, and I won’t give it a second thought. As long as people know how much good the system is doing ad think you’re just being difficult, they won’t either. Give it up, Madej, I’ve won. You’ve lost.” And with that, Lucas walked away.

Shane was clenching his jaw tightly. He was pissed. He knew the frozen feeling made it worse, but he was pissed. He hated Lucas, he hated this system, he hated this feeling, he hated that Lucas could hurt his friends with this feeling, but above all, he hated that Lucas was right. He knew Lucas had family in every branch of this system, he knew they took care of their own, he knew they didn’t give a fuck about others. He hated that Lucas would let their past, their petty anger and hatred of each other (which had valid reasons) get in the way of helping countless people. He hated that he knew the only way to fix this was with his insane plan.

When lunch finally rolled around, Shane stayed in his office, planning every step of this idea. If something went amiss, he had a plan. If lots of things went amiss, he had a plan. If his plan didn’t
take off, he had a plan. Shane was making sure he had a plan for every possible instance. The one thing Shane didn’t have a plan for, though, was how he was going to recruit people into this crazy plan. As far as he knew, there was no possible way to make ‘My name is Shane Madej, I’m 31, I’m a Taurus, and I want to recruit you to overthrow the government’ sound like a good, sound, logical idea. The only way he would be able to get people on board with this would be to catch them in the Frozen Feeling, and what were the odds of that?

He sat back in his chair for a moment and sighed. If he wanted this plan to have any chance of success, he needed people to join him. How he was going to make people join was the only thing on his mind as he walked to the water cooler. Maybe he just needed a break from thinking about this. ‘Maybe I could recruit people once he cooled down.’ He thought, pulling the lever on the machine. Maybe he could cool down better, though, if Heartfeed didn’t have a fetish for love. As Shane stared down at the disposable, heart-shaped cup of pink-tinted water from the company’s deep fuschia ‘Water Cooler’, he realized how absolutely insane this all was. Not just his job, not just Lucas, not even the Frozen Feeling or his Soulmate. No, what was insane was the fact that so many people refused to acknowledge how fucked up their society was- It was so fucked up that a grown ass man was seriously making a plan to recruit people in an attempt to overthrow the government. The actual fucking government.

That’s when Shane realized- all he had to do to convince people to join him was convince them that the government was awful! He had convinced a Believer that doing away with the Soulmate System was a good idea, he could definitely convince others, maybe he could even convince coworkers! He could, at the very least, convince the Try Guys- or at least one Try Guy. Or at least the Try Guy who looked pissed and was headed towards him now.

Being the friendly guy he was, Keith stopped and asked Shane how the pitch went. He tried to keep his voice light, keep his smile showing, but anyone in the office could tell he was not okay. Despite this, Shane didn’t ask what was wrong. When Keith was upset, he liked to try to get off whatever made him upset as quickly as possible.

If anyone asked Shane why Keith was upset, he would tell them that he didn’t know. It was a lie. Given that Lucas had upped the Frozen Feeling in all of the people he knew Shane associated with, though, he had a pretty good idea. Maybe it was time Shane used Lucas’s system to his advantage. “Did you know that Lucas was an Upper?”

Keith’s eyes widened a bit, clearly surprised. Keith knew about Lucas, Keith knew what Lucas had done, and he knew what kind of person Lucas was. He decided this was going to be a long conversation, and collected his own pink water from the machine. “No, I didn’t. Are you okay-?”

“I’m fine, but he decided to veto the idea.” Shane shook his head, taking a drink of the pink water, “He threatened to up the Frozen Feeling if I tried again.”

“Fuck, man. What are you going to do? The Frozen Feeling needs to be taken away-”

“I know. We need to fight it.” Shane said quietly, “We have to take the system down ourselves.”

“What?” Keith coughed, choking on his water, “Shane, WHat the hell do you mean? What are you talking about?”

Shane shook his head, “Keith, you and I both know this system, this fucked up government, needs to change, but you and I also know that it’s not going to. Not legally, anyway.” He lowered his voice, looking Keith directly in the eyes, “We have to take it down. Not just for me, not just for you, not even for people like Eugene and Zach, but for everyone.”
“Shane, you’re sounding insane—”

“Keith, this system is ruining lives, destroying families, and hurting good people. And it’s somehow managing to do it all while somehow convincing people it’s a good thing.” Shane sighed, “You don’t have to help if you don’t want to, but I’m not going to stop trying to get this taken down.”

The two stood in silence for a moment, Keith letting everything Shane had said sink in, Shane waiting for Keith to process it all. After around ten minutes, Keith broke the silence, staring up at a heart-shaped security camera, “Let’s talk about this somewhere else.”

The two moved to a hallway without cameras, Keith speaking first, his voice filled with concern, “Shane, this is insane. I don’t think you realize—”

“Do you ever think about this, Keith?”

“What?”

“Do you ever think about what society thinks we do? Because I do. I think about it a lot.” Shane said simply. He had maintained a calm, somewhat serious voice throughout the discussion, but his true emotions began to show through. “Sometimes I wonder if anyone actually understands what we do,” He sighed, “If they did, I don’t think they would be quite as happy about it.”

“But is this really the best option? You only pitched the idea to Upper Lucas—” Keith said softly, keeping his voice low as he put a hand on Shane’s shoulder. He didn’t disagree with Shane- on the contrary, he actually agreed!- but he wanted to make sure Shane wasn’t going to just drop out of this at any given moment, “If you think this is what we should do, I’ll join you in a heartbeat- no pun intended- but we’d need more than us.”

Shane’s voice dropped. He didn’t know Keith was ready to join him, all he knew was that he needed to convince people. “Keith, they’re not going to stop this,” He said seriously, “and you and I both know Luke—” he took in a breath, “Lucas isn’t going to listen to reason. He didn’t when we were together, and he’s not going to now. He’s always had a fetish for power.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Keith grumbled, looking down. After a few moments, he gave Shane an ‘Alright.’ and they headed down the hall.

“We need to get the other guys on board,” Shane told Keith, “and I have just the idea of how to pitch this to get them on board.”

Keith looked over at Shane, thoroughly curious, “How?”

“Well, we start off with—” Shane stopped as soon as he saw Ryan. He had been so busy discussing his plan with Keith that he hadn’t even noticed his warmth returning, even in the miniscule amount it had. He should have known he would run into Ryan at some point or another, he just never thought it would be so soon.

When Shane spoke next, his tone reflected his expression. Surprised and concerned.

“Oh, uh, Hey, it’s...you.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

this is the lonest chapter I've written holy shit

Founded in 2182 by genetic matching pioneer Quinta Brunsen, the Soulmate System was supposed to be a good thing that could help people and change lives forever. When she began, Quinta used a select few volunteers and matched them up using their personality traits, familial relationship histories, and genetic codes, ultimately using these to activate the tally mark aspect of what many would come to know as The Soulmate System, and people loved it. In the vast majority of cases, Quinta managed to match each person up with their own specific soulmate, the relationship blossomed, and she used the ones that didn’t work out to perfect her system. When released to the public, Quinta’s Tally Marks- or QT Marks, as some would come to know them- quickly became a success. She worked day and night to match people with their perfect love, the person they would be most compatible with, and the people they would support and would support them back. Quinta was thrilled.

Quinta hired a select group of scientists- Dr. Lim, Dr. Ilynckyj, and Dr. Lawson- to join her in her working to improve and perfect her Soulmate Tally Marks. Each one of them proved to be an amazing addition to the team, as they quickly came up with additions to the existing system that would be used years, even decades into the future. Dr. Lim proposed the idea that the system shouldn’t be exclusive to just soulmates, as it was not a guarantee that people would fall in love with their soulmates. Dr. Lim explained that it would be helpful to many to be able to see how many people they had fallen in love with. In the beginning, there was some debate over this concept- how could something like that benefit the masses? How could it harm them?- but it was ultimately added after she explained the issues of people not being able to decipher love from lust, happiness, and excitement, among other emotions. After deciding that these tally marks- Lim’s Love Marks- would be black and linked not to genetics, but to the person themselves, they tinkered with their volunteer control group, and promptly released them to the public. People were a bit weary, but they soon became a staple of society.

After Lim’s Love Marks became a success, Dr. Ilynckyj came to the conclusion that it would be incredibly helpful for people to know if someone has fallen for them, proposing that these marks be blue and show how many times people had genuinely, thoroughly loved them. She explained that these marks would link to all people’s emotions, but would not affect the emotions of anyone in the slightest. Once perfected, Ilynckyj’s ‘Loved By’ Marks were praised by the Control group. They said that the ILMs would help them feel better about themselves at times, giving a small ‘you have been loved’ at some points when they were not feeling that great about themselves. The public did not trust the ILMs at first, taking almost a full year for many people to take them into their own codes. Once people began to get them, though, they swept the nation. Everyone loved having these little blue marks that reminded them that people had loved them.

Things were going well for their Soulmate System, so Quinta, Lim, and Ilynckyj decided it was time to start perfecting them. Lawson, however, had another idea. Lawson proposed that warmth be another aspect of the system, having people be cold away from their soulmates, and warm when near them. Quinta, Lim, and Ilynckyj attempted to shut this down, explaining why that was a bad idea to their younger counterpart. They explained that this would take the option part out of the entirely
optional system Quinta had first designed, compromising the integrity of the soulmates because they would have to be assigned early on, before a person’s entire identity had developed. Lawson reluctantly put her idea to the side.

While Quinta, Lim, and Ilynckyj were alive, the system flourished. People loved the system, they loved the pick-me-ups, they loved that they could know who their soulmates were, but didn’t have to be with them if they chose not to. They knew the system could be flawed, but overall it was perfect. Some people began to revere Quinta, some even going as far as to call her a religious figure, and the team as none other than angels, while some respected her and her breakthroughs, but not so much what they were used for. Quinta, Lim, and Ilynckyj were proud of their accomplishments, as were their children. They passed down stories of how they had decided which tally marks were good, and which ideas were bad. When they died, the world wept. All but one. Dr. Lawson.

Dr. Lawson knew the world trusted the system, just a she knew she had perfected her Warmth addition to it. Shortly after the deaths of Quinta, Lim, and Ilynckyj, Lawson released the biggest part of the System as people would later know it- her warmth addition. She claimed that she had full support from her fellow scientists on this, and the people, struck with grief and adoring the system and its creators, were quick to take this part on themselves. They quickly regretted it, but it was irreversible. The options Quinta has tried to make sure were easily accessible to all who chose the system were now more difficult to have. By choosing the option to not be with their soulmates, they were choosing a life of coldness, emptiness, and what Shane would later dub ‘*The Frozen Feeling*’.

Lawson used her political connection to make the Soulmate System a necessary part of life, and later found herself in a position of power. She tried to make the warmth aspect work, but without her team, the few minor flaws became many and major. She promised Quinta, Lim, and Ilynckyj’s children and their descendants a career to last all times if they would take over the System. She left the offer on the table for years. When each one hit hard times, they each reluctantly agreed to be part of a system their parents never wanted.

As population size increased, the children had to hire more and more people to keep up, essentially turning their parents’ Soulmate System into a Soulmate Business. The children told their children what the Soulmate System originally was, and how they never wanted this to be their creation, who passed these stories down to theirs, and so on. Once Lawson died and passed her seat to her children, though, Quinta, Lim, and Ilynckyj’s families were no longer guaranteed employment, and the only family that could do anything to the system from that point on was the Lawsons.

Now, in the year 2283, most people had forgotten what the Soulmate System originally was, who made it, and who put the most controversial aspect of it into play. The only people who still remembered were Umbria Winters, Steven Lim, and Andrew Ilynckyj, and Lucas Lawson, direct descendants of the original scientists who made it happen. Umbria desperately wanted her great great grandmother’s system to be restored to what it was always meant to be, which is why she had pulled hard for the Uppers to approve Shane’s pitch, and why she was willing to overthrow the government if Shane was willing to. She wanted her employees to be choosing for adults again, putting a harmless system back into place. She could not tell she was a descendant of Quinta, though, as it could lead to her being removed from having any part at all in the system. This is why she not only went by Winters, but also lied about being a Believer.

Umbria didn’t entirely believe Shane would do it, and she had no possible way of knowing that he had discussed this with one of his friends, either. Above all, she could not possibly know that this would lead to Shane seeing Ryan again.
As Shane stood there, thinking over what he could possibly say to Ryan Bra strap Grandma, he became aware of the warmth flooding him. He became aware of how short Ryan was compared to him, and how much fun they had together at the dance. After that, he knew that, if he had the option and this hadn’t been chosen for him, if the topic and feeling of love hadn’t been entirely destroyed for him by Lucas, he wouldn’t actually be opposed to spending time with Ryan. When Ryan spoke, though, his tone reminded him that he had clearly just been brought back from the Frozen Feeling, and he was reminded why he had to take this system down, why he had to overthrow the government that was controlling the soulmated this feeling, and give people the choice back—because The Frozen Feeling was hurting people, and relationships should not be controlled by someone else.

“Yeah, it’s me,” Ryan gave a small smile as he returned from the Frozen Feeling, “And it’s you! How have you been?”

“Good. You know me, just living. Day-to-day, y’know?” Shane groaned internally. Obviously Ryan didn’t know. Ryan only met him a few days ago, “How about you?”

“I’ve been alive. That’s pretty much all I can say.” Ryan chuckled, thinking about how to continue this conversation. He was a Believer, and he wanted to believe that he and Shane could work out. “The Try Guys told me you had a pitch today?”

Shane nodded softly. He actually did want to get to know Ryan, he wanted to be Ryan’s friend, but he didn’t know if he could do that with the current system in place. He couldn’t recruit Ryan until this feeling was away, at the very least. “I did, but it didn’t go over well.” He shrugged, sticking his hands in his pockets. “Some people just don’t know a good idea when it’s spelled out for them.”

“I know, right? People are crazy.”

The conversation continued for around twenty minutes until break was over, when Ryan proposed that they all go do something after work. Shane had planned to scout areas for the Riot Hearts Rebellion to meet, but he decided he could do that with them all there. Maybe he could even convince them all at once! And he could actually talk to Ryan during this!

“Me, you, Eugene, Ned, Zach, and Keith could all go check out the town.” Shane proposed, “There’s a lot to see, believe it or not.”

When Ryan agreed, excitement—actual, full-fledged excitement that was not numbed by the Frozen Feeling—flooded him. When Keith offered to get the Try Guys to come along, Shane wondered if the 180 his day had done would continue through the night. They set up a time—8:00 PM—and a place—Standrew’s Bakery on the corner of Rogers and Link—and went about their days, Shane making plans for his recruitment the entire time.

When the day let out, Shane called Umbria and asked her if she wanted to go on an outing with a group. She asked if this was a trap or a joke, and reminded him that she would call the cops on him and fire him if he tried anything. He understood that she was just being safe, and swore he wouldn’t. He didn’t know exactly why Umbria was so over-the-top about being safe, though—of course, he also didn’t know that she was the daughter of Quinta. Once she explained that she would have her pepper spray on her just in case, she agreed. He told her the time and location, and the call was done.
8:00 rolled around, and the majority of the group were sitting at a large table in the back of Standrew’s Bakery, an air of awkwardness and relief surrounding them- awkwardness from the earlier fights and the incidents at the party, relief because everyone seemed to be okay with all of it. As the table joked, though, teasing each other over simple things, it became obvious that they were not letting the air around them put a damper on things.

Shane’s Frozen Feeling had calmed, as Ryan was sitting across from him, to the point that he could almost forget about Lucas and the party while he was sitting there with his friends, just laughing and joking with each other. It had only been a few days since this happened, but he already missed times like this when they could just sit around, joking about anything and everything. To think it had been less than a week since it stopped was unbelievable.

Ryan’s Frozen Feeling had also stopped. He was joking with Eugene and Keith about some current song and how it basically ripped off someone else when he realized it was gone. At that point, he was incredibly thankful- not just for his warmth returning, but for the Try Guys and the fact that they appeared to have made up. If they hadn’t, Ryan didn’t know what he would’ve done. These are the Try Guys, after all! If it was so easy for them to completely fall apart, what hope was there for anyone else?

“And of course, Ned brought his Wife.” Zach laughed lightly, teasing Ned about his connection to Ariel as he usually did. The fact that he was back to teasing Ned about this showed how the storm from earlier had calmed. When he spoke, it was lighthearted and friendly, even when it was dripping with sarcasm. “Dude, it was just supposed to be us tonight.”

Ariel smiled and shook her head, giving Ned’s hand a light squeeze, “Guess you’ll just have to make room for one more, Zach! Unless…” She gasped jokingly, pulling a face of pseudo-concern and pity. The entire table knew where this was going. Eugene was already snickering. “Is Zach jealous of a little love?”

“Zach, you know you can tell us anything. Just let it out. Tell us all about your soulmate sadness.” Ned joined Ariel in teasing Zach, reaching across the table to pat Zach’s hand, “We’re here for you, Zach.”

Zach rolled his eyes and grinned, letting out a low ‘Fuck You’ before turning to the rest of the table, “Anyway, the one who’s most sad here is Eugene.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Eugene quirked an eyebrow. He laughed, sitting up straight and placing a hand over his heart, falsely offended, “How am I the sad one?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Zach grinned, “You’re the only one here without his Soulmate Mark, Genie.” Zach laughed at Eugene rolled his eyes.

“I told you not to call me that.” Eugene said, sitting back in his chair. The group had been so loud and caught up in their own conversation that they didn’t even notice the final member of their group arriving. When she entered, she came in with a bang.

“Besides, Keith,” When Shane heard her voice, he broke into a huge grin. This night would go incredibly well. “Soulmates aren’t the only source of happiness. If you think they are, then that’s on you.”

“Damn!” Shane grinned, standing up. He fucking loved Umbria sometimes. Her purple suit had been traded in for a purple top and jeans, and her casual appearance had been met with a casually incredible attitude. Umbria was incredible.
Umbria grinned, “Hey, Shane. Thanks for inviting me along.” She sat at the empty seat, glancing over at the tall boy with bleached hair behind the counter. She knew this guy, and he knew her. She quickly turned her attention back to the table, though, smiling, “Umbria Winters, Upper at Heartfeed. Nice to meet you all.”

Shane sat back down, grinning, “Thanks for coming, Umbria. This is Ryan.”

“Nice to meet you, Umbria.”

“The girl beside you is Ned’s wife, Ariel.”

“Hello!”

“And beside her, of course, is the one and only Ned.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet an Upper.”

“On Ryan’s right is Keith.”

“Local dork and comedian.”

“Beside him is our local badass, Eugene.”

“I love your shirt.”

“And last, but not least, is Zach.”

“Speaking of which, I need to talk to you guys about how you’re spelling my name-”

Umbria laughed lightly, setting her purse in her lap, “I’ll try to remember all of that. Now, What’s the plan for the night?”

“I’m incredibly glad you asked, Umbria, because I was just wondering the same thing.” Ned said, holding up a finger, “Shane?”

“We’re just exploring.” Shane shrugged simply, “Lots to see, wanna get them all in before I retire.”

Ryan perked up, excitement flooding his features, “Let’s explore somewhere haunted first!”

“Hell yes!” Eugene exclaimed with a grin, “Ryan, I like you already!”

Ryan broke into a grin. They all discussed a few possible places to go for a while before the silver-haired guy behind the counter walked over to them. This man seemed to radiate happiness and positivity. He seemed like the kind of guy who would never not smile. Even when he spoke, it was like his words and tone were punching you in the face with happiness, but in a way that you would thank him. “Hey you guys!” He spoke kindly, “I really don’t mean to put a damper on your night, it sounds like it’s going to be incredibly fun, but Andrew and I are just about to close up shop! Think you guys would mind going on out?”

They all agreed and gathered their things before walking out. After the others had gone, Umbria grabbed Shane’s shoulder and pulled him back, keeping her voice low, “Madej, what’s the actual plan?”

Shane nodded and turned to her. She was maybe five feet tall, but she clearly possessed more authority and power than Shane probably ever would. Shane lowered his voice, “I want to get them over to the abandoned buildings before the night is over. I want to get them on board with the Riot
Hearts Rebellion—"

“*That’s* what you’re calling it?”

“Yes, I know it’s dumb, but it’s fun to say. Let me finish.”

“Please continue.”

“Anyway, I want to get them on board with the plan, and I think one of those buildings would be a good place to meet and plan.”

Umbria nodded, “Alright, thanks for telling me.” She released him, “I’ll be out in a minute, I want to leave a tip.” Shane nodded, lightening up and heading out as Umbria walked to the counter, “Hey Steven.”

The white-haired man grinned, “Hey Umbria! Long time, no see! How’s life?”

“It’s been good. How about you?” She smiled politely. She and Steven had been friends for years—he even helped her come up with a fake name for the job. He responded with a similar answer, and Umbria nodded. “One of my employees is starting the rebellion.”

Steven’s eyes widened. He gasped. Holy fuck. “Are you serious? You better not be joking with me right now, Umbria, you know how I feel about this—”

“I’m not. We’re going to be in the abandoned buildings on the old street later tonight. I want you and Andrew to come by.”

Steven leaned forward and looked her in the eyes, his tone upbeat, but serious, “You better believe we’ll be there.”

Umbria nodded and began walking out. At the last minute, she turned to him. “We’re going to be the ones who finally fix our family’s legacy, Steven. We’re going to bring them justice.”

Outside of the bakery, the group was laughing about something Eugene had said. The honestly didn’t remember well exactly what he said or why it was so funny, but they were laughing so hard they were crying. “I swear to god,” Shane laughed, trying hard to stop laughing, “Eugene, you’re a motherfucking genius!”

When Umbria walked out, she didn’t expect to see this. “Hey guys, what’s u—” She stopped in her tracks, “Guys?”

“Umbria, Eugene is incredible!” Shane beamed, “He just made this joke—”

“Guys, it’s already ten PM.” Umbria said lightly with a smile, “If we don’t get going, we’re not going to have time to explore!” And Shane wouldn’t have time to get his poorly-named rebellion off the ground. Luckily, the laughter quickly died down, and they were on their way. As they walked, Ryan stayed close to Shane, making conversation with him.

“Thanks for agreeing to do this, Shane.” Ryan said, sticking his hands in his pockets, “It may not mean much to you, but it really does mean the world to me.”
“It’s no problem,” Shane said honestly, glancing down at Ryan as they walked, “If I’m being honest, I was just happy to have an excuse to get out of the house. It gets pretty cramped up when you’re there everyday, y’know?”

“Believe me, I know.” Ryan smiled, “I’m usually the only one in my apartment, too. It gets pretty lonely.”

Shane nodded in understanding, “Maybe we should do this more often- go out and do things, I mean.”

“As long as you don’t run off like last time.” Ryan attempted to joke, only realizing that it would cause an awkward pause once it happened. The pause only lasted a few minutes, luckily, when Ryan decided to ask why he had run off. If he were under the frozen feeling, Shane would have ignored the question. He would have attempted to change topics if he weren’t under the Frozen Feeling’s influence and things were normal. Unfortunately for Shane, things were not normal, and he was being warmed by simply being around Ryan Bear Graham Cracker.

Shane knew, logically, that the Soulmate System’s warmth manipulation was (at least partly) responsible for how at ease he was, how warm he felt around Ryan, but he couldn’t help it. The Soulmate System was ensuring that Shane was comfortable with Ryan, and that every time he saw Ryan Brazen Rockslide’s dorky-yet-charming smile, Shane would be hit with another rush of manufactured happiness. He tried to remind himself this isn’t true love, this is forced, but he did want to form a friendship with Ryan, at the very least. And so, ignoring the tally marks and the false happiness the Soulmate System had forced upon him, he made a decision. He chose to tell Ryan the truth. “I was scared.”

Ryan was a bit taken aback by this. He didn’t know Shane personally, of course, but he had talked to the Try Guys about him, he had heard stories about him from his coworkers, he had seen and heard Shane around the office, and Shane didn’t seem like the kind of guy to be afraid of things, much less of a simple party. Ryan tried to speak softly, hoping to get Shane to tell him more, but ready to pull back and leave the topic alone if Shane wouldn’t talk about it. Ryan knew he was on thin ice.

“Afraid? Of what?”

Shane sighed, checking to make sure the others were occupied by their own conversations before turning to face Ryan, “I don’t exactly have the best track record in love, Ryan, and all of the relationships I’ve been in have crashed and burned. I seem to have a talent for attracting assholes. I was scared of actually liking you, and then you turning out to be like the others, or that whatever relationship we managed to have from being forced together would crash and burn like the others.”

Ryan’s eyes widened. He gave Shane an I’m so sorry and opened his arms to hug him. Shane blocked the hug, responding with, “Don’t be sorry, man. Just...Just don’t talk about it, okay?” Ryan gave a hesitant nod, and they arrived at the first stop on their City Exploration Adventure.

Umbria broke into a grin, recognizing the building from her childhood. The familiar, two-story building gave off a welcoming yellow glow, the enticing smell of fresh-baked cookies luring the group closer and closer. Umbria would visit Storybrooke Factory every Saturday as a child and into her early teens, always accompanied by the woman she was now happy to call her wife.

Storybrooke’s falsely candy-coated exterior wasn’t for everyone, though, and Ryan was particularly confused by its book-shaped entryway. What was this? Why was it called a factory? Did they make something? Why was it open? Shouldn’t this be closed?

“Storybrooke Factory is sort of like a building full of games,” Shane explained to Ryan, “You choose your favorite fairytale, and you have to escape from the villain of that story.”
“Hansel and Gretel is the most popular one, as you can see from the exterior.” Eugene said simply, “Plus, once you get out, they have an awesome candy bar. Yes, I think there was a pun intended there.”

“It’s tons of fun.” Umbria assured Ryan, “There’s no real danger.”

Ryan looked around at the group, then to the starless sky, and finally to his watch. 10:30. “We’re not doing this tonight, right?”

“Not unless you want to.” Shane shrugged nonchalantly, “This is just a city exploration, not a full-on city adventure.”

Ryan nodded and apologized, but started to walk away. He wanted to see the city, and they didn’t have much time to do it. It was already 10:30 and they hadn’t even reached a single haunted site! Shane assured him they would get there soon, and off the group headed into the damp, wet night.

For the most part, the night passed in a blur of laughter, jokes, and complaints about the lack of ghosts. It wasn’t until almost midnight that Shane had managed to lead them to the abandoned buildings. Once inside, Shane seemed more anxious than ever. Shane couldn’t help but note how out of place they all looked in the old building. It was a bit... unnerving. Seeing all of his friends, everyone he cared about, surrounded by the disappointment and destruction of the building’s rubble made him second-guess even going through with pitching the Riot Heart’s Rebellion. He didn’t want to see his friends hurt or dead, and both of those were a distinct possibility if he did this. He could very well be recruiting his friends for their death beds.

How he knew, Shane would never know, but Keith had picked up on the fact that Shane was having doubts, walked up to him, and promised him that this would be worth it in the end. Shane gave him a shaky glance, unsure of if this was the right thing to do. Keith gave him a reassuring nod, “When we win, nobody else will have to suffer. When we win, things will be better.”

“No more Frozen Feeling.” Shane reminded himself, taking in a deep breath. Right. He had to do this. People deserved to not have to suffer. Shane looked Keith in the eyes, his voice low and serious, “Get everyone around the table, we’re getting this rebellion together.”

A few minutes later, once Keith had managed to gather everyone around a rotting, wooden table in what Shane could only assume was once a parlor of some sort, Shane was being met with confusion and curiosity. Eugene tried to make sense of it all, glancing at the others and quietly asking if they knew, while Ryan tried to play it off with a sort of joke.

“I know I said I wanted ghosts, Shane, but these ghosts seem to be more-”

“I didn’t bring you here for ghosts.” Shane admitted, glancing around the table, “I want you all to help me overthrow the government.”

As soon as the phrase left his mouth, an odd silence overtook the room. The air was bursting with the mixed emotions each person carried in their expression, but none seemed to know how to put what
their thoughts or feelings into words. How could they? This wasn’t like a child on the playground asking you to help steal a pebble from a nearby stream, this was treason. This was illegal. This was dangerous.

After a few more minutes of silence, Shane sighed. Maybe this was a mistake. He could just turn back now, the Try Guys would probably forget this happened. Just as he opened his mouth to disregard the Riot Heart’s Rebellion as a joking prank of sorts, though, a peppy, optimistic voice spoke behind him.

“Count me in, good sir!” the platinum blond grinned, stepping out of the shadows, “I’ve always wanted to fix the world, now I can get the chance to!”

“I’m in, too.” another man appeared on the other side of the room, “This is a fight we were born for. Let’s jack up the System.”

Despite being overwhelmingly excited for his rebellion to have support, Shane couldn’t help but ask the question. “Who the hell are you?”

“They’re my friends.” Umbria explained quickly, “They’re direct descendants of Dr. Ilynckyj and Dr. Lim, two of the scientists who worked with my great great grandmother to create the system.” Steven and Andrew made their way to the table as Umbria continued, “This wasn’t what Dr. Quinta, Dr. Ilynckyj, or Dr. Lim had wanted to happen with the system, guys. They wanted there to be a freedom of choice alongside it. They wanted to help, not hurt.” She said simply, leaning forward on the table, “You guys can choose to help, or you can leave, but we need this rebellion. We want to return the system to what it was meant to be.”

The rest of the group were stunned, silence still seeming to be their only reaction. Finally, Ryan spoke up. “It’ll reflect on me, no matter what Shane does, so I’ll go too.”

He was met with surprise, questions being flung at him from every angle. Ryan didn’t even try to answer them. The more questions they asked, the louder the room got, making other sounds almost impossible to hear. As a matter of fact, when Eugene agreed to join Shane’s rebellion, it was almost inaudible.

“Are both of you insane?” Ned yelled, pleading desperately with the group, “They’re going to catch you! My wife and I don’t want to be planning your funerals, please -”

“So what if they do?” Shane shrugged, “It’s better to fight now, while we can still change things for the better, rather than to wait until they find this, find us and fire us from the company.”

“Yeah, but- but this is insane! The system is fine where it is, nobody is going to be hurt-” Ned tried desperately, “Zach, Keith, help me out here!”

Keith shook his head, “Sorry, Ned, I joined a few days ago.”

If it wasn’t caused by the situation at hand, the expression on Ned’s face would have been priceless. It was a mix of shock and betrayal, as well as every possible way to express and emphasize the phrase ‘what the fuck?’ His tone matched his expression as he looked at Zach desperately, “Zach, please -”

“Sorry, man, you’re outnumbered.” Zach shrugged. “Besides, if what Keith and Shane say is true, I wouldn’t want anyone I know or care about to experience the Frozen Feeling, either.”

The group had to explain what the Frozen Feeling was to Ariel, but once they had, she insisted that she didn’t want her and Ned’s future child to ever have to experience it again. All it took was a few
Shane was excited, relieved, and terrified. He had a plan, yes, but now it was real. It wasn’t just a plan anymore, he couldn’t just hope nothing bad happened, he had to face the fact that bad things could happen because of this. If they were caught, they could be executed. If they messed up, the Frozen Feeling could become more severe. If they lost, things could be worse than ever. If they won, there could be casualties.

Luckily, Umbria didn’t give him time to dwell on these things. She drew Shane’s attention back to the group, explaining the basic idea of their rebellion. Shane explained the details he had worked out so far, telling them that he would send them actual, physical versions of the plan in the morning. They all nodded, slowly leaving the building and heading to their respective homes once the recruitment was over. They hadn’t had time to think deeply about what had just happened until they got home. As they began to lay down, the force of what they had just agreed to slammed into them like a truck, and they began to feel.

Some, like Ned, hoped to god this would blow over, praying like hell this was a single, impulsive concept that would quickly be long forgotten so they wouldn’t actually have to be part of a rebellion, others, like Keith, were excited for this, mentally preparing for the challenges and struggles of the rebellion that were to come, knowing that this could result in a permanent change of how their society functioned, possibly leaving people better than they had been in a long time, a few, though, were ecstatic just to right the wrongs of the past.

As they laid in bed that night, not a single one of them was free from thoughts of what was to come. Even in sleep, the anxiety of what was to come would haunt them.
Soooo I’ve decided to return this to regular/scheduled updates :) Friday updates once more! :D <3 Thank you all so much for reading, you have no idea how much your comments mean to me. <3

Checking his phone the minute he woke up had become almost second nature to Eugene. Every morning, before he even got up, he would check his phone tiredly, scrolling through the abundance of notifications he would receive, from both acquaintances and friends, before unlocking it and heading to the messages app to respond to each one halfheartedly and turning on his music to help him keep track of time while he got ready for work. He thought nothing of it most mornings, of course, as it had become his daily routine, but this morning was different.

Electronics, specifically portable, multipurpose ones, had been a necessity for humanity for as long as any of them could remember, but nobody really understood why. Why had electronics come so far? Why did people accept them into society? Why had their society gotten to the point that not having electronics was not an option? And why didn’t they mind? Why did nobody care enough to get answers about this? Was it because they knew they loved it? Was it because they knew how much good it was doing them? Did employers not care to know the answers because of how efficient technology had made contacting their employees? Did parents not care because technology gave them a way to calm their children down easily when they didn’t have the energy to do so themselves? Did students not care because it gave them an efficient and economic way to purchase and carry around textbooks and required reading materials? Did scholars not care because it gave them access to worlds of published and unpublished literature- both fact and fiction- at the touch of a button? Did scientists not care because it made their work easier? Did technology give them a base and years of technological advancements and breakthroughs only so they could build on top of it and progress farther and farther along without taking a moment to figure out why they, as a society, had chosen to go digital forever? Very few people asked these questions, none of which ever got answers to them.

Technology was incredible, and everybody loved it. Technology provided services for those who had bad memory or mental health issues, it provided online counseling to those who could not relay their problems verbally, it helped people with physical disabilities be able to walk and move and function in everyday life, it helped those who couldn’t find good people to help them...technology was amazing. Technology was an amazing tool that helped improve the quality of life for a lot of people, that was a fact nobody could ever even hope to deny. No matter how far along technology would progress, people knew it would be amazing and help lots of people, nobody could dispute that, and nobody would try. Technology progressing and becoming more easily accessible to people from all walks of life was an amazing thing, and everybody wanted it become better, keep progressing, help more people; however, wanting to see something helpful progress, knowing it was incredible for people to have and not wanting to know where, how, or when it had become so required for everyone? Those were two completely different things. People say not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but look where that got the Trojans. If people refused to know part of their own history, the future would never work out well.

Eugene was among the people who didn’t think or didn’t want to think about these things or how
they would affect the future, so he didn’t. He distracted himself from thinking about these things by thinking about the night before and hoping certain aspects of it didn’t actually happen the way he remembered, like if he had called Ned a ‘simple, short fool’ for claiming that Shane’s legs were better than his, or whether or not Shane had actually proposed they overthrow the government, and, above all, whether or not everyone actually agreed.

Eugene shook his head, letting out a light laugh before setting his phone down, all of his notifications now taken care of, as he pushed himself out of bed. Of course Shane hadn’t actually proposed that idea, he was probably just joking around with them like Keith sometimes did. Shane was the most level-headed, sarcastic person Eugene knew, he couldn’t have been serious. He didn’t actually want to overthrow the government and plunge the city Eugene had just pushed his grey curtains to either side of the window to look out on and wake up into chaos. He didn’t really want to take his friends and turn their skills into weapons against the government. He didn’t truly want to bite the hand that fed him. No, of course he didn’t! And Eugene didn’t want to join him because he had witnessed how the Frozen Feeling had changed his sister, and he didn’t feel guilty for turning Keith away that night he hadshown up on Eugene’s doorstep, asking him to help him get away from his government-assigned soulmate. Eugene hadn’t agreed to join Shane’s insane rebellion because he told Keith to ‘get over it’ when Keith explained why the Frozen Feeling wouldn’t let him leave, and later saw how badly it affected his sister. Yeah. None of that was true.

Besides, if it were true, Shane would have sent them that message he promised about their roles and how they were each going to accomplish them. Since Shane hadn’t mass-texted them that Eugene had no reason to worry as he buttoned the final button on the jacket of his suit (the required uniform for Heartfeed employees) and began fixing his hair, as he did every morning. He always wanted to look nice for work, even if it did take a bit longer in the mornings. Most mornings, he was able to get out the door of his two-bedroom apartment without a fuss, but shock and stress were not helpful in getting out of the apartment looking nice, and that was exactly what filled him when he checked what message he had been sent just as he was stepping out the door. The text from Shane had finally arrived. It was real. The rebellion was real. And he had agreed to be part of it.

Shane was nothing if not a man of his word. Ryan realized this when he received the text from Shane after he had almost finished his morning routine.

Ryan’s head had still been reeling from the events of the night before, thinking about how Shane had invited him on the outing with his friends and then trusted him enough to tell him about why he ran off instead of just shutting him down. Ryan knew all too well that things like that weren’t things you just openly talk about, they were things you only discussed with people you trusted. And Shane had trusted him enough to tell him. And Ryan was excited. Even if it was just the warmth of being around your soulmate that prompted him to tell, it still had to be backed by a personal decision. Sure, the warmth aspect of the Soulmate System would make people more likely to share parts of themselves with said soulmate, but it was always a person’s decision. The warmth didn’t force a person to share, it just made them feel like they could.

On top of that, Shane had trusted him to be part of his Riot Hearts Rebellion. Ryan was a Believer through and through, of course, but even he would be quick to admit the warmth aspect, at least, was flawed. Even as he stood there now, twisting and turning the pendant on his Believer necklace, he knew it was a dangerous thing. And besides, he realized, Shane was right! If they hadn’t taken the warmth aspect out yet, they most likely weren’t going to. And someone had to do it! Ryan wanted people to be able to choose happiness, not have happiness forced upon them, and the warmth aspect just wasn’t letting that happen.
Despite his excitement to be part of a large-scale, world-changing rebellion that would leave everyone in a much better state than they currently were and would return an incredible system to what it was meant to be, Ryan couldn’t deny that, as he slipped on the shoes that reflected the early morning light shining in through the window, regret was also seeping into his consciousness. The birds were chirping, the temperature was a nice warm, the sun was rising over the buildings, the morning was amazing- and yet, as he sat on top of the light blue blankets he covered his bed with, he realized he had wasted his friends’ time. Eugene had been nice enough to take Ryan shopping, help him get clothes that would impress Shane, coach him so that Ryan would be a good soulmate, but it was pointless. Ned had helped him learn about the company and why Shane worked there despite hating the Soulmate System, but that had ended up being pointless. Keith helped him practice the buttons and be better at his job, but even that was pointless. Zach had been his friend and helped him better understand Heartfeed’s dynamics, but that, even that, had pointless. It had all been pointless.

He shook his head quickly, attempting to shake the thought from his head. A lot of things are pointless, he reminded himself, walking outside for a moment to take in some fresh air, but these had made sure he could be part of this rebellion. These hadn’t been entirely pointless. These were just... moderately pointless.

Ryan didn’t know if that was what he actually believed or if it was just what he was telling himself to not feel awful, but he opted for the first. The first was what he wanted to believe, so that’s what he would try to believe. He was a Believer, after all, surely he could do that much, hopefully, and what kind of believer couldn’t believe in something like that? Believing was second-nature, even when it was believing in something he knew wasn’t true. He thought that if he made himself believe it long enough, he would eventually actually believe in it. If Keith or Shane were there, they would explain to him why that was absolute bullshit, each one using their own chosen words and tone, but both making sure to get their point across.

Luckily for Ryan, Shane and Keith were getting ready for work in their own apartments, each following their own routines.

Keith’s routine was the simpler one, consisting of him simply getting up and dressed, grabbing his phone and charger quickly, and heading out the door to work, all in a grand total of approximately ten or fifteen minutes tops. Keith didn’t think too much about the text Shane had sent his group that morning, nor did he even remotely worry about the possible consequences of partaking in a world-changing, life-shattering rebellion with people who may or may not even be able to make it happen, he just accepted that that was what was happening. When he joined the Riot Heart’s Rebellion on the first day, he had already accepted it, why should he start freaking out about it now? The best thing he, as both a person and a rebellion participant, could do now was to pretend everything was normal so nobody would suspect them, and hope to god that the other people were acting just as calm about this as he was.

Having what would only be described as a mental breakdown fueled entirely by denial less than ten minutes after you wake up is not a good way to start your morning, but that was exactly how Ned’s morning was going on this particular day. He wasn’t screaming or crying, of course, but he was insisting that Shane’s message was not sitting on his phone unopened, asking Ariel if she was sure she didn’t need glasses each time she pointed out that it was, in fact, right there. Ned, despite being completely ready for work and dressed in his Heartfeed approved business suit, was not acting professional in the least on this warm summer’s day, but given how dangerous this...this thing he had
agreed to do was, nothing else could have even been expected. Ariel, on the other hand, was completely calm, even trying to quietly calm Ned down.

“Ned, it’s going to be okay,” she smiled softly, placing a gentle kiss on his cheek, “This is going to help a lot of people- you’re going to help a lot of people. You can do this, I promise.”

Ned shook his head quickly, his worried eyes meeting Ariel’s calming eyes for a few moments. When he spoke, his tone matched his expression perfectly, “Ariel, this can’t be happening. There’s no possible way this is real. I didn’t sign up for a dangerous rebellion that could get you killed-”

Ariel chuckled softly, smile as kind and caring as her tone, “Ned, don’t worry about this- don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. You agreed to be part of a world-changing event, now go do it. It’s going to work out. It’s going to be okay.”

“How do you know? How are you so calm?”

“Ned, I just know. I know you, and I know how incredible you are. I know you’ll be great. Just take it one step at a time.” Ariel said softly, “Step one is to read the message and respond. You can do that much, right?”

Ned nodded slowly. His heart pounded quickly in his chest, feeling as though it would leap straight out of his mouth at any moment. He had to reminded himself he agreed to this over and over in his head, hoping that maybe, just maybe, as he reached into his pocket, it would calm his nerves or make him more prepared to face the message and reality, finally letting out a breath as his hand found his phone, and he realized that he was still just as worried, just as scared as he had been before Ariel had convinced him to read the message.

He hesitated a moment, fingers wrapped firmly around the device in his pocket. He hadn’t read it yet, maybe he could still convince Ariel that this was a bad idea that they shouldn’t go through with. He was only moments from attempting this, had every word planned out, when he realized… it was too late. He had already promised Shane and the others he would be part of this, he promised Ariel he would do this for their future child, it was far too late to attempt to back out now, no matter how terrified it made him. He looked down a moment, tightening his grip on the phone and hesitating another moment before pulling it out of his pocket slowly, mentally preparing to read the message that caused him such extreme fear and bound him to this act of treason while Ariel whispered words of encouragement. He held his breath as he flipped his phone to see the screen, messages popping up as soon as it was unlocked.

It didn’t matter to Zach whether or not things would go well in the rebellion, all that mattered to him was that it would change things. When he got the message from Shane confirming that it would happen, excitement filled him. His morning routine had been completed already, the night before had been rushing through his mind, and the ding before he walked out the door had been welcomed.

The message Shane sent to the group sounded so professional, it was almost scary when you remembered it was about a rebellion. Shane had made it sound as common and mundane as a letter from work, but somehow still managed to keep the urgent tone in the text.

Alright, first I wanna thank you guys for going with me on this. It actually means a lot to me.
Second, I know you guys are probably doubting this, but I have a plan. You guys all have stuff you’re good at, but now you’re going to use them against people. Eugene actually has it the easiest. Eugene already knows everything about everyone in the lower levels of Heartfeed, so he’s going to be our spy and blackmail master for the lowers. Umbria is already part of the Uppers, so she’ll be doing the same thing for them. It’s extremely important that we don’t lose our jobs here. We need to be able to work from the inside at first. Maybe we can eventually work outside of Heartfeed, but we *have* to be able to know what’s happening inside of it.

Ned and Ariel, I know you guys will probably hate me for this, but that balance between anxiety and excitement, as well as your contrasting hope and uncertainty makes you guys a good strategy team. You two are able to make plans and coordinate where they should be perfectly. Ariel is able to make a plan that gets things going quickly, and Ned’s great at having backups in case things fall through. I need you guys to use these abilities for fights and plots.

Zach, you’ve always been good with computers. Remember that time Eugene offered to hack into the system and erase my soulmate for me as a joke? Do you remember how you told me that you could do that afterwards? Remember how you tried to explain the steps for hacking into computers and broadcasts, but none of us could understand? You’re a hacker, Zach. You’re unbelievably important to this rebellion.

We’re going to need a distraction for some things, of course, and that’s left up to Keith. Keith, I know you’re reading this, and don’t even try to deny that this is the best fucking position for you. We all know it is.

The two guys we just met, Steven and Andrew, you two were... well, you threw off my plan a bit, but you’re helpful. Steven has this natural aura of likability around him. It draws people in, makes people more likely to trust him quickly, so maybe he can help recruit people for this. We can’t do this with just us. (There are other things we’ll do to get backing, but this is quiet and efficient for now.)

Andrew, you’ll be with Ryan. You guys are already strong guys, so you can practice fighting? Maybe? Hand-to-hand? For when we don’t have traps?

We’ll talk more about this tonight at the building. We all need to meet there around 8. See (most of) you at work.

When you’re participating in a rebellion and anxiously awaiting the first meeting of your small rebellion, hoping to see it grow soon, you’ll find that most of the tasks you carry out daily and once found tolerable or likable quickly become mundane and boring, and the first few months were always the worst. Sitting at a computer in a room full of people, matching the behavior and genetics of babies to the behavior and genetics of other babies was once creepy but tolerable to Shane. Now, though, it was not only incredibly creepy, but also boring and infuriating. This was ridiculous and sinister and Shane could not wait to get out of there. The one and only thing that made him able to stand doing his work was the fact that nobody monitored what he was doing on the computer, which meant that he could work on finding ways to turn the abandoned building- maybe even the entire abandoned street- into an efficient secret headquarters for the Riot Hearts Rebellion and work on getting them put into action.

Of course, he could only really work on this when he wasn’t battling with the inability to focus and
numb anger the Frozen Feeling gave him. Shane couldn’t even begin to describe how wonderful it was that the Frozen Feeling was finally beginning to fade, leaving him able to feel a bit more warmth than he had before, and he loved it. What he didn’t love was that, even after so long, it was only beginning to fade, and even then, it only faded a tiny amount. At this rate, it would be years before he was free of the Frozen Feeling. Luckily, though, Shane’s soulmate had become tolerable. Shane had begun to enjoy being around Ryan Independant Rocket, making a point to spend more time with him after work and before Rebellion meetings. They had spent so much time together, in fact, that Shane was considering even calling Ryan his friend.

Shane and Ryan clocked out around the same time now, and they were incredibly happy about that. It had taken the duo only three weeks to decide to ask Umbria to help them be able to clock out around the same time as the other each day, but it had taken her three and a half months to finally convince the timesheet manager to allow it to happen. Shane and Ryan had started to doubt whether or not they would ever be able to more than once per month when Umbria finally approached them outside of Standrew’s Bakery. There were a few moments of awkward silence between them before Umbria broke into a grin and gave them the good news. Now, as they stood side-by-side while clocking out, they realized the wait had been worth it. Shane couldn’t be more thankful for anything if he tried. Seeing this absolute dork every day, being able to tease him about his height, every time Ryan wheezed when he laughed… nothing could ever top any that- and it wasn’t just because the slowly-fading Frozen Feeling was pushed away when they were near each other.

Ryan’s fingerprinting machine was running slow that day, so Shane took the opportunity to tell him about the improvements he had found that they could make to their base. “We have the electricity back already, and Steven and Andrew have repaired the building to make the main floor into a take-out version of their bakery, but the second floor and the basement is what we’re primarily concerned with. We’ll be spending most of our time there.”

Confusion flashed across Ryan’s features, “Then why are we inviting people into our HQ again? And why did they need to turn it into a bakery?”

“It looks more than a bit suspicious for a large group of people to be meeting in an abandoned building at a set time everyday, Ryan. At least if it’s a bakery, there’s some kind of reason for it.”

Ryan gave a grin when the machine finally beeped, signaling that Ryan was now off the clock and they could leave. Ryan turned to Shane, giving a thumbs up as they headed out. Once they were outside, he started back in, “You’re right about the bakery thing, by the way, but-”

Shane nodded, “Of course I am. I’m always right.”

“Not always.” Ryan grinned, glancing up at Shane as they walked. Shane was so conceited, so fucking arrogant, and he hated it. ‘Shane’s always right’ was so fucking wrong, it was almost funny. Oh, he hated that. He hated Shane. (That was a lie. All of that was a lie. Ryan was a liar. Shane was his best friend.)

If Shane could hear Ryan’s ridiculously wrong monologue, he would have used it as proof that Ryan was usually wrong. Since fiction remained the only place telepathic powers could even vaguely seem realistic, though, Shane could only react to the words Ryan had spoken aloud. Ryan saying that Shane wasn’t always right evoked the small, joking reaction of Shane quirking an eyebrow at him, mock disbelief flooding his features as he spoke, “Name one time I’ve been wrong.”

A mischievous grin creeped onto Ryan’s face. He knew exactly what he planned to say next, and it would be perfect. He took in a breath, eyes twinkling playfully as he spoke, “Sharks versus Bears-”

“A mischievous grin creeped onto Ryan’s face. He knew exactly what he planned to say next, and it would be perfect. He took in a breath, eyes twinkling playfully as he spoke, “Sharks versus Bears-”
“Shane Asshole Madej, you know damned well I’m right.” Ryan grinned, laughing lightly, “You’re just angry that you can’t deny it.”

“Bears are not the best predator! They’re not even in the top ten!”

“What, and sharks are? Shane, you’re more likely to get attacked by a cow than a shark-”

“That’s just because there are more cows than sharks, Ryan! If you look at attacks and deaths in reference to population, Sharks are better predators than bears!”

“When’s the last time you heard of someone dying in a shark attack?”

“When’s the last time you heard of a bear even attacking someone?”

“People don’t get attacked by bears because people know to stay away from them because of how dangerous they are!”

“That’s why we give our kids stuffed teddy bears to sleep with, right? Because they’re so scary and dangerous?”

“Kids have stuffed sharks-”

“Not until they’re like five or six and find out that sharks are cool and badass, Ryan. We give kids stuffed teddy bears when they’re born. And y’know, look at Yogi and Winnie the Pooh! They’re bears!”

“This isn’t about how the media portrays bears, Shane!” Ryan only wanted to joke about the argument, but now he was ready to fight, “This is about, realistically, how dangerous they are!”

“And bears aren’t that dangerous!”

“Bears are more dangerous than sharks!”

“Ryan, you are wrong!”

“Your sharks are bullshit!”

“You’re bullshit!”

“Jesus Christ, assholes, we have customers.” Neither man realized how long their argument had lasted until Andrew finally stepped in and said this, making them come to the realization that they were calling each other bullshit in the middle of what was supposed to be a family-oriented take-out bakery that fronted for their HQ to alleviate them and the location from suspicion. It was also Steven and Andrew’s livelihood and a major source of funding for their rebellion. If they scared off the customers with this argument, all of that would be lost, and the rebellion would crumble.

Shane glanced around the bakery, realizing quickly just how many parents and children frequented the establishment, how many parents were now covering their children’s ears, and how many children were asking their parents what ‘bullshit’ meant. The ‘fuck’ Shane uttered immediately afterwards was no better, being met with Andrew harshly whispering for him to ‘shut the fuck up.’ Shane quickly apologized to Andrew for the commotion they had caused, quickly slipping into the basement as Steven made his way to each customer, attempting to fix the damage Shane, Ryan, and Andrew had done to their sales.
Being the hidden area where they all met after work and the main area they used to make plans, create weapons and traps, and train, the basement was the true heart of their HQ. The group had spent weeks together restoring it, taking part of their paychecks each week to purchase supplies and tools individually so they, as a group, could make it into what they needed, and it worked well. The basement was suited perfectly for the rebellion, each person having a portion of the room specially suited to be what they needed.

On one side of the room, a string of computers, televisions, phones, and car radios lined the wall, only one of which was actually ever used. This portion of the room was dedicated to Zach’s hacking. He had perfected getting into websites and servers remotely and undetected within the first month, at the end of the second month, he was able to hack into webcams and cellular devices to spy on people, and finally, by the three month mark, Zach had figured out how to hack into most devices with screens remotely and broadcast videos and audio to them, all while remaining completely untraceable. For two weeks after this, the group discussed what they could use this for and how it would affect their group. They finally decided to use it as a way to recruit people.

The wall beside that one was half green and half filled with modified weapons. The green portion was a relatively new addition, being made only so they could broadcast the video they had planned with a CGI background, which would help them remain untraceable. The weapon wall, though, had been there for a while. At one of the earliest meetings, Umbria had quickly pointed out that they would need to be able to think on their feet and create their own weapons, since the people they would be fighting against would have the equipment and training to take out their weapons. Once they came to terms with this, they began experimenting with their weapons, modifying them to be unique, changing the exterior slightly to throw the others off, and entirely creating new weapons from the leftover parts of their old ones. This was also the portion of the room where the members trained in combat, practicing both offensive and defensive moves so they would have a shot of survival when it came to that. And they all knew it would eventually come to that.

The next wall was both a pin board and a whiteboard that Eugene and Umbria used for the information they gathered about Heartfeed employees and the Heartfeed Uppers that they deemed necessary or helpful to their cause. The whiteboard was filled with tidbits of information scattered messily across the board in two drastically different handwriting styles and colors, but this was nothing compared to the pin board. The pin board closely resembled a conspiracy board, images of Heartfeed Employees and Uppers pinned to the board, the pins that stuck out of the top of their pictures being connected to other pins by various different colors of string. The Blue string, Eugene had explained, was about relationships and good intentions, while the red was mostly connected people to those they tried to sabotage, blackmail, or even kill. Before this began, nobody had even considered that Heartfeed Uppers were this obsessed with things like that, but now they had actual proof. Proof that they were almost ready to present.

The final wall was taken up by a blackboard that showcased several different strategies for the group, each one being adjusted for more changes in variables than the last. Ned and Ariel were imperfect at this, the group quickly realized, but they weren’t bad. As a matter of fact, most of the strategies they came up with were relatively solid and reasonable. Nobody had expected perfection, of course, but they sure as hell didn’t expect them to be this good at it. They were thankful for that.

Every member had expected to use every part of the room on occasion, but none of them had expected to use the entire room frequently. They hadn’t expected to collaborate with each other to draw connections and between the information Eugene and Umbria had gathered and the previous blackmail and actions of another member. They hadn’t expected to help Zach find flaws in his code or make suggestions to help improve them. They hadn’t expected to build and modify weapons as a group. They hadn’t expected to all train daily. They hadn’t expected to use the entire room. They hadn’t expected the electronic table at the center of the room, the one that they could press a certain
spot on the top and pull up terabytes of information and pictures and holograms they could use, to be used as frequently as it was. They hadn’t expected any of it, but they were extremely happy with how this had turned out. The one and only downside they had found was due to the bakery. Because Steven and Andrew were busy keeping up the safety front of the bakery, they very rarely found the time to come downstairs and train. They were a large part of this, they were direct descendants of Dr. Ilynckyj and Dr. Lim, they were two of the most important people on the team- without them, the rebellion wouldn’t be safe, funded, or passionately fueled. That would change soon, though, as they had one girl coming in later that night who was interviewing to be an employee.

Despite that, Shane and Ryan felt their rebellion had come a long way in a short time, and they were incredibly proud of it. They found the group to be extremely talented and wonderfully focused, and they were usually pleasantly surprised by what they found in the basement. This is why they were so unbelievably confused when they saw the group circled around Zach, dressing him in some of the edgiest clothes and most ridiculous facemask either of them had ever had the misfortune to have seen. After everything they had been through to become a serious threat before unveiling their rebellion, Shane and Ryan walking downstairs to find… that … created an unpleasantly awkward atmosphere- an atmosphere in which Ryan couldn’t stop himself from saying, “You guys know you’re a few of my closest friends, and you know I appreciate all of you, but what, and I mean this from the bottom of my heart, the fuck?”

The group quickly moved away from Zach after that, each one’s expression portraying a different mix of emotions, but each one also sporting a smile. They all seemed, at least slightly, excited. Keith walked up to Shane and Ryan, grinning wider than he ever had before. “Okay, so I know this looks dumb, but check this out- we masked his voice.”

“Yeah, but-”

“We masked it so it’s untraceable ;)”

“The video footage was untraceable too, Keith.” Shane sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose, “What’s so special about this untraceable thing? And why is it so… edgy?”

Keith seemed almost as annoyed as him, but finger gunned, “You could still hear part of Zach’s voice before, right? Remember that?” When Shane nodded softly, Keith continued, “You can’t anymore. See?”

Zach spoke once Keith gave him the signal. Everyone knew it was Zach, but it didn’t sound like him in the slightest. Zach was a short, optimistic man with glasses and a upper-mid pitch voice that usually had a backing of happiness and hope, so when Zach said, “This is pretty damned cool right?” in a pitch that overlayed high and low pitches with what could only be described as a stereotypical demonic base and a backing of anger and vengeance, Shane and Ryan were thrown for a loop. After a few moments of shock and disbelief, Shane broke into a grin and Ryan let out a ‘Holy shit.’

“Zach, I knew you were good with technology, but holy fuck-” Ryan walked to him with a grin, placing both hands on Zach’s shoulders, making sure to be careful to avoid his edgy-ass shoulder spikes. “This is fucking amazing!”

Shane couldn’t deny that it sounded badass, but he was worried about whether or not he would actually look badass. After Ryan stopped gushing about how incredible Zach was with technology, Shane spoke up, “He sounds badass, but he still looks edgy as fuck. Why does he look so edgy?”

In response to Shane’s question, Zach walked in front of the green wall, turned on the camera and preview, and explained the process to Shane- who seemed too busy staring at the preview to listen. Staring at the preview, Shane admitted to himself that the entirety of this was badass. While Zach’s
current attire would be edgy and ridiculous in modern, everyday life, it created an aura of danger, anger, and urgency when paired with voice and the background they had chosen. The small spikes on his black jacket, despite being edgy punk from the early 21st century, seemed surprisingly timeless and terrifying when paired with the two straps around his arms and the strap across his chest that held weapons. The mask, despite being grey and having a screen across his mouth that would display a moving, jagged line when he spoke, seemed surprisingly terrifying when it was the only thing moving other than the background. All in all, though, it was the background that tied it all together and made it terrifying yet enticing. The background was comprised of several strings of greenish-blue zeros and ones that scrolled down the screen quickly and a barely-visible overlay of a fire. Accompanying those two things, as though they weren’t odd enough on their own, were distorted red hearts. The hearts appeared to be dripping… something… and displayed stitches along their center. Black lines crossed them out as they scrolled upwards in the background, eventually reaching the top and shattering into pieces.

Shane was in awe.

“Pretty badass, right?” Zach grinned beneath the mask, hands behind his back, “We were going to send out the message today, whaddaya think?”

Shane turned to the group, his expression unreadable for a moment. When he spoke, though, his tone was clearly determined. “Let’s fucking do this.”

The nation had been going about their daily lives happily, each person being caught up in their own personal dramas or questions or turmoil, before this happened. Children had been playing, friends and families had been spending time together, pet owners had been taking care of their animals, employees were headed to bed or just waking up and checking their devices, things were normal. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary that day until every electronic device stopped working. People were confused. They were anxious. They were annoyed. They were scared. Nothing like this had happened before, and suddenly it was happening to everyone at once. What was happening? What went wrong? Some looked to the sky for answers, others to their friends or family, others to complete strangers on the street. It was five minutes of total confusion before two words appeared on the screens of all devices, informing people with epilepsy to look away from their screens. More confusion surrounded the population as they looked to their screens for answers.

Finally, after a few seconds, binary digits began to flash on their screens, zooming down their screens quickly. Once the flashing stopped, a strange man appeared, the background shocking and confusing the people more. If they were in a position to, some people put their phones down and turned on their TVs or turned their heads to large monitors that were displayed proudly over their cities, only to be met with the same image. Broadcasters, internet providers, network companies, they all tried to stop this, but their monitors were filled with the same image. They couldn’t stop this. They couldn’t trace it. The nation had come to a total standstill.

After what seemed like an eternity, the man- they assumed the person to be a man, but their gender was beyond unclear- onscreen spoke. The voice shook the population to its core, but the message was what was truly terrifying.

“Don’t change the channel, I’m on every channel. Don’t switch devices, I’m on all of them. Don’t
be alarmed, I’m not here to hurt you. Don’t ignore me, I am only here to free you. Peribitamor, I’m here to tell you the truth. My name is Redi Cordis. I only want to help.

“Your children, your parents, your friends. Look at them. I want you to imagine life without them. I want you to imagine that they felt broken. Imagine, for a moment, that they are launched one day into a hellish relationship, a relationship they can’t get out of. Imagine they feel broken and disgusting and wish death upon themselves. Imagine your parents are too sad, too angry, too scared to fix you food or to interact with. Imagine your friends being angry with you for no reason, to the point that they go off on you or completely cut you out of their lives. Imagine your friends coming to you in tears because they desperately long for death. Imagine your children being completely unable to function because they are filled with rage and hatred. Imagine, for a moment, that everyone you know has been broken, physically or emotionally, because of something someone else is controlling. Imagine that someone else is pulling the strings and putting everyone in a mental, emotional, and physical hell. I want you to think long and hard about this, because, if they haven’t already experienced this, they will, and it will be because of someone else.

“Your government is knowingly hurting people, knowingly causing fights, panic attacks, and suicides in mentally and emotionally sound people. Your government silences all who actively oppose them with threats of death and violence, they threaten to make people feel these things more and more until the person opposing commits suicide or gets killed in a fight. Once that happens, there is no clear evidence to link the government to the murder. Think of your friends and family who have died lately. How many are there? 5? 10? 20? More?

“How many of them said something about the Soulmate System?

“The government is actively killing people. They’re tracking people, hunting them down, and killing them, and they do it in a way that they can avoid blame and send innocent people to prison for crimes they did not commit. They’re controlling us. They’re controlling you. They want to keep that control and not have to face any consequences. They want you to not question them. They want you to never have justice for your friends and families. They want to be able to keep their system in place and continue ruining lives. They want you to forget what actual love is.

“I am part of a group, a small rebellion focused on taking down their Soulmate System, thereby taking away their control, and bringing them to justice. We hope to return happiness and love to the people. We want to decrease deaths and increase your ability to control your own lives once more. We call ourselves the Riot Hearts Rebellion. We want you to join us.

“Consider what we’ve told you here. Make our name known. Let them know that you will not be silenced. Scream it! Make it clear that they cannot control us! They cannot destroy us! They cannot kill us! We will love freely again! We will Rise! They will fall! Calor Redit!”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Golly Gosh, this is not my best chapter. It's kinda shorter than the rest, so I hope you don't mind too much!! >~<
I try not to give you guys too much filler, and I really, really tried hard here, but I couldn't think of many major plot points to take care of >~<
Regardless, I hope you all Enjoy!!!! <3

Lucas clenched his jaw tightly, anger rushing over him like an uncontained forest fire. The bastard had done it. The bastard had actually done it. Shane Madej and his little group of idiots had actually hijacked everything and instilled questions and doubt in the public, and now he and his people were left to clean up the mess and take the blow. He slammed his hands down on his table, rage in his eyes as he shouted at Heartfeed and the Government’s Media Management Sectors to fix this. How had they been so careless? Why hadn’t they taken it down? What were they thinking? How could they possibly be so pathetically, laughably bad at their jobs?

The employees cowered in fear. Lucas was known to have a temper, as did the rest of his family, but Lucas… Lucas had the worst temper of them all. The Lawson Family had been metaphorically cursed with anger issues, and each of them knew this. Most Lawsons sought help for these anger issues, desperately wanting to be better, calmer, less angry than they were. With proper help and treatment, most Lawsons got better, became better people, but Lucas was… different. Lucas refused to seek help. Lucas chose to be awful. He had accepted his anger issues-which, in and of itself, wasn’t bad! Accepting something is the first step to get better! All Lawsons who sought help had to accept that they had them in order to get better! The problem lied in that, when he accepted that he had anger issues and a short temper, he accepted that it was who he was. He accepted the anger issues as good things, viewed the burning rage and sudden, violent outbursts he experienced as other people’s problem. When they passed, of course, he felt bad, but he expected them to forgive him. When they didn’t forgive him, when they didn’t trust him, he got angry again. He felt it was the duty of others to understand and forgive him when he got angry and violent with them, and when they didn’t, they were the bad guys who he hated. This was what separated Lucas from the other Lawsons. This is what made him bad. This was how he was with Shane, and, as he stood there, screaming harshly at the terrified employees, he somehow couldn’t see that the fault was, at least partially, his own.

The employees stammered, desperately trying to make Lucas understand that the signal was impossible to track or shut down, that they couldn’t do anything to stop it, buy this only made Lucas angrier. His screams grew louder. The fire behind his eyes burned brighter. The employees backed away, trying to get away from their Upper. Under normal circumstances, Lucas could and would be fired for hurting employees physically, but, in their current society, not only were Lawsons untouchable, but Uppers could quickly and easily make these incidents, these people suddenly ‘disappear’ should they try to file a lawsuit. The Uppers were untouchable. The employees were locked in this job. Their business, their government, was incredibly corrupt, and there was little they could do about it. Sara Rubin exchanged horrified glances with her coworker and best friend, Helen Pan. They had been sitting together when the message appeared on screen. Together, they had
listened to every word Redi Cordis spoke, and together, they would soon decide to locate this rebellion and join. They had been working these positions for years, and the longer they stayed, the worse it got. Together, they would become traitors to their own nation. Together, they would make jobs safer again. Together, they would fix things.

Even if it meant putting themselves in danger.

“*What the fuck is ‘Calor Redit?’*”

Ryan wasn’t going to admit it, but he was beyond relieved when Andrew asked that, even if Andrew and Steven walking down to to the basement did mean that the bakery above was completely empty of customers, because he, too, had no clue what *Calor Redit* was or why Zach in the neat but laughable facemask had screamed it at the end of the speech before they cut the broadcast off. If Andrew and Steven didn’t know, though, it was fine, the group would tell them. Ryan assumed they would, anyway. If they didn’t tell them, he didn’t know what he would do to translate it- he didn’t even know what language it was.

Luckily, though, assumptions were sometimes true, and as he stood at Shane’s side, across the room from Zach, Eugene began to explain, “*Calor Redit* is a phrase Umbria actually found online. It’s Latin for ‘Heat returns,’ she said.”

“Why the fuck is it in latin?”

“Because almost every spoken language today stems primarily from Latin, Andrew.” Eugene said, a slight sarcasm in his tone as he helped Zach remove his face mask, “We couldn’t exactly choose a phrase that stems from, I dunno, Yiddish, now could we?”

“Yes, Eugene, we could have.” Andrew said, walking to the glowing table, Steven by his side, “We are the ones in control of this rebellion. We could have picked a phrase that stems from literally any language.”

“Okay, well, we chose *Calor Redit*, Andrew. Deal with it.” Eugene said simply as he removed the spikes from Zach’s shoulders. Once the spikes were removed, Zach started helping Eugene remove the edgy-ass clothes from himself. They looked badass on screen, they looked edgy in real life, and they were extremely uncomfortable to wear. Luckily, they weren’t uncomfortable enough to make Zach refuse to be in them. He was now to face of the rebellion- or, at the very least, his character, Redi Cordis, was. And Zach loved it.

As a matter of fact, Zach loved it so much, he decided to tell Andrew about Redi Cordis. “Umbria also helped me make the name for Redi Cordis,” He gave Andrew that dorky grin he was so well known for, “It actually means ‘Return Heart.’ It’s also Latin.”

“Great, so everyone here who just happens to somehow know Latin will know what you’re talking about.”

“Andrew, calm down.” Shane placed a hand on his shoulder calmly. He knew this was a lot more personal to Andrew, Steven, and Umbria than it was to them, but he also knew that it meant a lot to the rest of them, and he knew he couldn’t express exactly how much it meant to him specifically in
words. “I get you’re upset, man, but that won’t get us anywhere. We had to move forward, and you guys were busy with the bakery.”

“Yeah, but you could have at least run this whole thing by us first.” Andrew met Shane’s eyes. This wasn’t just a rebellion to him, this was his chance to restore his family’s legacy. He just wanted to be a part of it. “We’re part of this, too. We need to be included.”

Shane nodded in understanding, “I know, and you will. You’re hiring that new girl for your bakery, right? You’ll be down here more often.” Shane removed his hand from Andrew’s shoulder, “We won’t make anymore big decisions like that without you guys, okay?”

Andrew sighed tiredly, running a hand through his hair as he nodded, “Yeah. Yeah, okay, just… Just don’t do that again.”

“We won’t.”

Andrew nodded, glancing around the room and summoning Steven to his side again. Despite the mood of the room and the overall anxious feeling everyone was so clearly experiencing, Steven still, somehow, managed to exude that happiness and positivity he was so well-liked for. Even his walk seemed to have a small, excited bounce in each step as he made his way to the table to speak. “That was incredible, you guys! How did you do the background? How did you make Zach- Zach of all people!- sound so intimidating?”

Umbria, who had been at the computers making sure nothing interrupted their signal during the broadcast, smiled widely at the excitement of her friend, chuckling softly as she began to explain the mechanics behind the voice modifier and green screen- or, wall, as they had. All the while, Steven was grinning, listening intently to Umbria’s every word. Once the mechanics had been properly explained, and the group had finished catching Andrew up on what had happened and what they had discovered about Heartfeed and the Government, Steven bounced over to Andrew excitedly.

Andrew asked the group- the rebellion, only one question- “Do you think they’re going to believe us?”

The question hung heavy in the hearts of the group, even as they left for the night. They had no certain answer. They could not definitively tell Andrew that all of this would pay off, that what they were doing would absolutely, without a doubt, work, all they could do was try.

Umbria was the first one to leave that night, making her way to the exit several hours before Shane and Ryan, who were the last two to leave. By ten o’clock, everyone who was going to leave was gone, and the bakery was locked up tightly, only a few lights left illuminating the small shop as Steven and Andrew cleaned and prepared the dough for the next day. These two used to stay in the basement of their old shop together- it had been large enough to contain a very basic floor plan, and they kept it sanitary enough that no patrons ever questioned it. The only downside was that, now, since they had to be here to protect the rebellion and the shop, they had nowhere else to go. They were trying to fashion the upstairs into a makeshift apartment, but in its current condition, neither of them could walk up there for more than a few hours at a time, much less sleep there.

Despite this, Steven was able to make the best of their situation, finding a blow-up mattress and
placing it on the floor of the Rebellion’s HQ, covering it with dozens of bargain-brand pillows and blankets for them to share. If they weren’t together, there may have been a bit of awkwardness between them. Fortunately, sharing a bed with your romantic partner wasn’t quite as strange as sharing one with a friend.

Steven smiled at Andrew as he swept, the flour contrasting harshly against his black apron. Steven had always been great at reading the emotions of his friends, and Andrew was no exception. “Keep your chin up, Andrew.” Steven smiled as he walked over to Andrew, leaning against their bakery’s marble countertops, “Today went great! Just you watch, by this time tomorrow, the rebellion will have a whole slew of supporters, and everything will be right as rain again. We just have to wait, okay?”

“Steven,” Andrew began, shaking his head and fighting back a smile, “It’s not just that. We’re a huge part of this rebellion, right? Aren’t you the least bit upset that we weren’t even consulted about any of this?”

“Yes, Andrew, I am,” Steven answered, leaning his flour-covered arms against their countertops, “but that’s in the past. We can’t change it, so why dwell on it?” He sighed, “We just have to believe things will turn around. They promised they would. If they don’t, then we can be mad, okay? Until then… They were just doing their best.”

Andrew looked away and continued to clean. Maybe Steven was right, maybe they were trying their best, but it still annoyed him. This was more than just a rebellion to him, this was his one chance, his only chance to fix things. He had taken it, yes, but if he didn’t get the chance to actually help, this could damage their families more than they had ever been before. He had taken this opportunity, temporarily closed down the main bakery that he and Steven had been planning to run together for years, joined this rebellion knowing that it could be dangerous and result in bloodshed, was it too much to ask for them to be included in making decisions?

Steven realized Andrew had a lot on his mind. He gave him a quick peck on the cheek, speaking in a calming, comforting tone, “Hey, I know you’re upset, and that’s completely fine. It’s okay for you to be upset, just know that things are going to be better. Promise me you’ll give them a chance to make things better?”

Andrew looked up at Steven. Yes, he was upset, but anytime he looked into Steven’s deep, brown eyes, he melted. Steven’s eyes were not just a deep brown, they were a deep, dark brown. They were the type of brown that meshed together irises and pupils to the point that, unless you were really looking, you couldn’t tell where the irises ended and the pupils began. In movies, they were the type of eyes that the mysterious, badass love interest with a tragic and dark past would have, the type that most people heavily associated with stubble and squared off jawlines and luxuriously long, thick, wavy brown hair and an extremely muscular abdomen, sometimes littered with cuts and bruises and scars and tattoos. Steven was nothing like this. Steven was tall and lanky, his muscles small, bordering nonexistent. Steven’s abdomen was soft, his arms were bony, and his jawline was a soft rectangular circle at best. If you were to ask Steven about stubble, he would gesture to Andrew and joke that his own just liked Andrew’s face more. The men in the stories would usually have small, round eyes and ride motorcycles. Steven didn’t. Steven’s eyes were almond-shaped and thin, making a point pointing slightly at the tips. Steven wasn’t your hot, sexy, mysterious, six-foot tall Hallmark movie love interest who could carry you away from danger on his motorcycle and make you fall in love with his manly good looks or voluminous locks. No, Steven was your average, lanky, six-foot tall Asian man with bleached hair that he styled up everyday and a personality that drew people in and made some people fall in love. Steven wasn’t the kind of guy who would be able to remain serious at all times and handle every situation with grace and wisdom that he couldn’t possibly possess, Steven was the guy who made dumb puns and could draw a laugh out of even the
serious, emotionless love interest guy by simply laughing at his own stupid-yet-wonderful pun. Steven was a dork. That’s why Andrew loved him.

Andrew smiled a bit, letting out a breath after Steven spoke, “Alright, Stevie, I’ll give them a chance, but only because you convinced me.”

Steven quickly broke into a huge grin, the type of grin Andrew always loved to see on his face, and clapped his hands, a puff of flour lifting into the air as he spoke. “Thank you, Andrew! This will be amazing, I promise-” Steven cut himself off for a moment, confusion suddenly welling inside him, “Wait, how did I convince you? All I did was ask-?”

“And that’s all you have to do.”

That night, they had fallen asleep close together, Andrew’s arm wrapped around Steven protectively. Andrew was the shorter one, standing at only five-foot-eight, but he was the type of guy who preferred holding to be held, which worked out perfectly since Steven, despite being well over six feet tall, preferred being held. Their relationship was one that was difficult to describe, it just was, and it was amazing.

The next day, Steven and Andrew were preparing to interview their new hire, a woman from out-of-town named Becky Miller, as Umbria gathered information about how everyone had reacted to Redi Cordis and the entirety of the broadcast. She expected people to react badly, of course, but she hadn’t expected to hear about how Lucas had treated the employees afterwards. She knew Lucas could get bad, but he was usually kind- that’s why she had befriended him. When she had to find out from two of her employees just how poorly Lucas had reacted, it jarred her. Her eyes widened in shock as she apologized quickly to Sara and Helen, promising them that she would talk to him about his actions, but knowing damned well she couldn’t. She had a knot in her stomach afterwards, the feeling of guilt eating away at her. It took all she had to remind herself that she couldn’t control Lucas’s actions, but even then she felt it was her fault. If she had just been there, maybe she could have stopped it… Maybe… just maybe…

She let out a breath, faking a smile as she made her way down the hall, wondering silently if the office had always been this loud. Yes, this was a busy government office, but, for whatever reason, it seemed immeasurably louder today. The normal watercooler chatter among employees seemed to be less quietly chatting and more rambunctiously yelling, the turning of papers seemed less like one or two employees turning out a Soulmate Form and more like thousands of people turning out pages in unison, and the closer she got to Lucas’s office, the louder everything got. For a moment, she considered walking past his office without greeting him, but she knew that if she did something out of the ordinary- like not greeting her work friend after being out of the office the day before- people might get suspicious, so she took in a breath and prepared to talk to the man who had treated his counterparts so poorly only the day before.

A smile spread across Lucas’s face when he heard a rhythmic knock on the side of his cubicle wall. Only Umbria used that knock, which meant she was back. He turned his swivel chair to greet her
with a large, friendly grin, “Umbie! Hey! Missed you yesterday!”

“Hey Luke! Heard it got pretty insane yesterday, huh?” Umbria pushed the feeling of disgust out of her mind and plastered a phony smile on her face, pressing record on her watch. Maybe she could use this. Maybe this could have a secondary reason. “I really missed out.”

“You have no idea.” Lucas chuckled quietly, pouring himself a cup of coffee, “I’m hoping that was just a stupid prank. Our media department is contacting every news station and talk show host to tell them to play it off like it was confirmed to be a bunch of high school students, but I’m not sure how long we’ll be able to hold the people off. It shouldn’t be too bad, though. We’ll just get them to disappear, if you know what I mean.”

Umbria’s stomach churned at that. She did know. When did Lucas start talking like that? She forced out a chuckle and continued discussing, wondering silently what the others were doing, hoping they weren’t having to face a man like this for their jobs.

Eugene was on a completely different level than Umbria. He wasn’t forcing himself to talk to people or question them about the events of the day before, all he had to do was mention how odd it was for his coworkers to launch themselves into an entire discussion about the broadcast. They talked about Calor Redit and Redi Cordis as though they were vigilantes- which, in a way, they were. That wasn’t the interesting part, though. No, the best part was when they started talking about whether or not the rebellion was needed, and whether or not they thought they would join.

“I mean, I didn’t even think it was that bad before this,” One of Eugene’s male coworkers said quickly, taking a drink of his coffee and turning in his chair to the rest of the office, “But I looked it up after that, and sure enough, suicide rates do increase right after people meet their soulmates. Pretty sickening, I think.”

Their office was set up completely different than Umbria’s. While the Uppers had their own personal cubicles to do work and complete tasks on their own time, every Heartfeed employee was required to be set up right beside each other, nothing to block them, in rows of four or five. When a large discussion was taking place, like the current discussion, every single employee could hear and join in, just like the woman behind Eugene had, “Ronald, I’m not disagreeing that,” She had a thick southern accent with naturally red hair and freckles to match, but Emma always seemed to act and think more like a city lady than even some city-born employees there, “but they’re going about it all wrong. Surely, there’s a better way to take care of this than to start a gosh darn rebellion.”

Another woman, slightly younger than Emma and named Ashley, spoke up after that, “Yeah! And the rate of suicide doesn’t actually change that much, it’s just the amount of attempts-”

“Don’t you think attempts are bad enough to want a change?” Emma asked, turning to the employee who was just walking in, “You there! Do you think that rebellion from last night is serious?”

The woman had been an employee there for a while, Eugene knew this, but she was somehow still not accustomed to their odd conversational topics. She actually tended to go between the Upper Offices and Lower Office quite frequently, though, so maybe it was just difficult to go from not talking to anyone to openly having discussion during work in five minutes flat. Her eyes widened a bit as Emma called out to her, holding her papers close to her chest for half a moment as she registered what she was being asked. As soon as it was registered, she spoke up, “I hope it is. I think
it’s a good cause.”

Ashley seemed taken aback when the woman said this, placing one manicured hand over her chest, “Helen! How could you say that?”

“You wanted my opinion, don’t get upset when I give it.” Helen handed Eugene a stack of papers and moving down the line, “Relationships are hard enough on their own, and the entirety of the Soulmate System just makes it more difficult. Look at Eugene! He’s a heartbreaker! Now imagine he’s your soulmate—”

“Done.”

“An look at how many people have fallen for him.”

“Oh.”

“Wouldn’t that make your life just a bit more difficult?”

“Yeah.”

Eugene spoke up, annoyed at the thought of people seeing him as a heartbreaker, “Actually, I’m not a heartbreaker.” When confusion seemed to fill every one of his coworkers at his statement, Eugene continued, “I can’t be a heartbreaker because I’ve never been in a relationship—”

Ashley seemed to perk up at this, “Oh, honey, that’s alright. Do you want to be?”

“No.”

“What?”

“I don’t have any desire for a relationship.”

“Oh, so you’re just not ready?”

“No, I’m just ace. The only attraction I’ve ever felt to anyone was platonic, Ashley.”

“How can that be so? Romance is—”

“Completely unnecessary and a cause of ridiculous drama that could have easily been skipped over in tv shows, movies, and books, as well as real life?”

“It’s what makes us human.”

“Just don’t feel it.”

“Well, now you’ve broken my heart.”

“That’s your own fault, now can we please get back to the actual discussion?”

And with that, the main discussion continued. The majority of it seemed to just be recycling the same arguments for both sides for the most part, but when they started discussing whether or not they would join, things quickly got interesting. Each person had their own opinions and viewpoints, each one justifying their choices quickly. The last few questions were the best. They helped Eugene know what to put in their next broadcast. Helen had said she would join if she could, but the issue was that she didn’t know how. That posed a good question for Eugene to ask the team, and an even better answer to come.
After everything Becky had been through at her other interviews, she had no idea how this one would go. She had been questioned, interrogated, arrested, and refused jobs because she was too ‘battle-ready.’ If that fucking broadcast hadn’t happened the night before, she was sure she would have had the jobs. She completely agreed with the rebellion, but she didn’t like it messing up all of her interviews, especially when she wasn’t even technically part of it. Unfortunately, it did, and All she could do as she approached the bakery was hope like hell they wouldn’t think she was here to fight or steal dough for a rebellion or some shit.

If you had told her a week ago that she would have to seriously, genuinely consider that she might be denied jobs for being too ‘battle-ready’, she would have laughed in your face. Life sucks. Life spat in her face because she was strong, and she hated it. Fuck life, and fuck the fact that she had to put on a fake smile to even vaguely be considered for this job. Fuck it all.

“Hi, I’m here for the interview? My name is Becky Miller, I applied online.” She smiled at the man behind the counter, reading his nametag silently. Steven. Cool name. It suited him.

The man smiled kindly, his tone as peppy as his step when he left after telling her, “I’ll go get Andrew, we’ll be right with you.”

*Oh. Standrew is a mix of their names*. When she realized that, she felt like an idiot. If Steven knew she was, though, he would assure her that it was completely fine and that she wasn’t an idiot in the slightest. Of course, Becky didn’t know this, so she simply distracted herself by thinking about her interactions so far. Nobody had accused her of taking part in a rebellion yet, so that was good…

It didn’t take them long to come back out and sit her at a table, asking questions that any interviewer would ask. Becky took each question cautiously, trying to make her sound the least battle-ready she could so she could get the job. The interview was going incredibly well, Becky was pretty sure, so when they stood up together and began to walk away, Becky wondered what had happened. She sat there for around five minutes before walking up to them and asking what had happened.

“We were just discussing your interview,” Andrew explained, “You understand that this our livelihood, right? It’s pretty much all we have.”

Becky gave a nod, crossing her arms behind her back, “Yes sir, I do. It’s going to be mine, too, hopefully. I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize that.”

“Good, because we really don’t want our first employee to want our business to be bad.” Andrew said simply as he locked the door downstairs. Becky had to ask for clarification to be sure Andrew had said what she thought he had, a sense of relief and happiness washing over her when he did, “The biggest thing we need you to remember, Becky, is that you cannot let customers go downstairs, okay? You also can’t let them go upstairs, but downstairs is most important.”

“Yes sir,” She promised diligently, “No customers will go downstairs on my watch.”

“Alright, because it’s a mess.” Steven said quickly, “And we might get sued.”

“I understand.”

Once they put her on the register, she couldn’t help but wonder whether or not cleaning up down there on her own time would be a good thing- it could help with their legal issues, after all! She’d have to make a plan and find out one day, she decided, pressing the screen of her register for practice.
ringing up customers. They didn’t tell her that *she* couldn’t be down there, after all- Maybe this was a sign for her to go down! Surely, it couldn’t be that bad.
Sometimes, people weren’t the brightest. Umbria knew this to be fact. Despite this, she thoroughly believed that most people were kind at heart- or, at least, she did before talking to Lucas about the events of the day before. She had believed that people would take responsibility for their mistakes, admit that they were wrong, but after talking to Lucas… she was starting to doubt whether or not there was actually any good in some people. Lucas had blamed their Media Management Sector for not only the broadcast, but also for him lashing out against them. He blamed them for not being able to stop an unstoppable broadcast, blamed them for his violent tendencies and short temper, insisted that they were purposely making him mad, so it was obviously their faults. The more Umbria had to listen to it, the worse her nausea seemed to get. This discussion had thoroughly made her sick.

It wasn’t just the discussion that did this to her, though, it was how he discussed it. He wasn’t just telling her what happened- no, he seemed to be trying to frame it in such a way that would convince Umbria that he was in the right . He refused to even consider that they were trying their hardest, or they weren’t trying to make him angry, or even that his actions were even a bit extreme. He wouldn’t listen to Umbria when she told him that he maybe should seek treatment for his anger issues, since he was in a place where he had access to medical coverage for emotional disorders and could afford whatever therapy or medication he needed, instead insisting that it was the world that needed to change for him . Umbria tried to express to him that this was unhealthy, even harmful to both himself and those around him, but he refused to listen. Umbria understood entirely people needed to make adjustments for people, she knew all too well, and she completely understood that people needed to be careful sometimes to ensure the safety of people with emotional issues and those around them, but she also knew that people could get better if they tried . Yes, the world can deal people a cruel and unjust hand, especially in the field of mental and emotional health and stability, but that’s not the fault of the people around you. Those around you, they can’t help it, all they can do is live their lives and try their hardest, and maybe try to help you get better, but they’re living their own lives, too. There are things they can’t control, and, try as they might, they can’t make the world bend to your whim. Mental and emotional health was always an extremely tricky subject, and it still was, but treatment was possible, getting better is possible . She knew it was difficult, she knew it was hard to make yourself even try , she knew it could take a while, but she also knew that refusing to get help when it was something you so desperately need to avoid hurting yourself or others was bad. And she knew she was thankful to get out of that building that day, thankful to get home.

Umbria’s wife was out of town that week, but their daughter was just getting home on the school bus. Abigail was only eight years old (she would insist you say ‘eight and a half’), but she had already been through a lot. Because of what she went through, Abigail had an uncommon emotional disorder called Reactive Attachment Disorder that made her struggle to form meaningful relationships with other children and adults, but it was more than that. Abigail was detached, she would fight when people tried to comfort her. She bottled things up, either refusing to or being unable to express her emotions. She was withdrawn when they adopted her, but it eventually became a touch-and-go relationship. These were just a few of the things that RAD caused. Had they gone untreated, they could have led to several other issues for her later in life- what she had gone through would already lead to some, but Umbria would make sure to be there for and with her through them.
They adopted Abigail when she was six (five-and-three-quarters), and at that time you would’ve been hard-pressed to find a moment when she was genuinely smiling. When they adopted her, the agency had been quick to inform them of her history- with both her biological family and all of her foster families- and try to turn them to another child. That only sealed the deal. Umbria’s wife had been in a similar situation during childhood, and she refused to stand by and knowingly let this happen to another child- besides, Abigail had already won their hearts. After they adopted her, they got her into therapy as quickly as possible- it was a struggle at first, she tried her hardest not to open up, but the doctor let her take her time, promising her that whatever they said would stay between them, and that he wouldn’t hate her or turn her away for what she said. They went to these sessions weekly, this being all that happened for months before she finally started talking. It wasn’t all at once, of course, little bits came out at a time while she was playing with the toys the doctor let her use. Eventually, he had enough for a diagnosis, and treatment could begin. At that point, Abigail was seven (six-and-seven-eighths), and from there, the doctor helped Abigail with expressing herself and her needs, and helped her parents learn to care for her, what to do when she got bad, and how to tell when she needed time alone. At first, things were touch-and-go, but the tips and sessions quickly improved the quality of life for both Abigail and her parents. Now, after years of therapy, Abigail would run up to Umbria with a huge smile after school, a smile Umbria cherished it each time she saw it. It was a sign that Abigail was getting better. It was a sign that getting better was possible. If an eight-year-old could understand, why could a grown ass adult?

Umbria tiredly smiled as Abigail raced towards her, her pink Detective Horsley backpack being held to her back by only one strap. When she was close enough, Umbria picked her up and spun her around once, smiling brightly, “How’s my favorite girl today?”

Abigail beamed, her big brown eyes seeming to twinkle in delight. That smile always seemed to light up Umbria’s day. “I thought Rachelle was your favorite girl?” Abigail was trying to tease her, but she couldn’t hide her smile.

“Rachelle’s my favorite woman.” Umbria grinned, tapping Abigail’s nose lightly with her index finger, “You’re my favorite girl.”

“My favorite girl is Detective Horsley.” Abigail grinned mischievously, wrapping her tiny arms around Umbria’s neck so she wouldn’t fall.

Umbria gasped lightly, pretending to be hurt, “And to think, I was gonna take you to my friends’ bakery for cookies!” Umbria knew it might not be the best idea, but she also knew Steven and ANdrew wouldn’t mind too much- they were two of her best friends, after all!

Abigail gasped lightly, shock clear on her face, “No no I wanna go get cookies!”

“I dunno, Abby-”

“Detective Horsley’s my favorite girl!” Abigail said quickly, “You’re my favorite foster parent, Umbria!”

“Really? Are you suuurreee?” Umbria grinned teasingly, quickly being interrupted by Abigail.

“I’m sure, I’m sure!”

“Then off to Standrew’s we go!”
The walk from her house to Steven and Andrew’s bakery wasn’t far, as Umbria and her wife had chosen a house relatively close to the city to make a home out of, but for Abigail, it seemed completely unbearable. She had a skip in her step and a grin on her face, but she was tugging at Umbria’s arm, trying to make her walk faster. “C’m’mon, c’mon, c’mon! I have homework!”

“I’m coming, Abby, I’m coming.” Umbria laughed lightly, “We’ll make sure you get your homework done for school tomorrow, I promise.” She picked Abigail up again, “We’re almost there. See that building up there?” Umbria pointed to the one good building down the street of run-down, abandoned, trashed buildings. Abigail held onto her tightly, quietly asking if she had been a bad girl and if Umbria was going to leave her among other things. Before she took a step down the alleyway, Umbria stopped to comfort Abby, promising her that there really was a good bakery down there with nice cookies, and that she would never leave Abby, even if it was the end of the world. She had to pause for a moment silently, knowing fully well that the end of her world could come at any moment, but quickly regathered herself, “We’re just gonna sit there, okay? I might have to go downstairs for a while, but I will come back up for you. I’m not leaving, I promise. Okay?”

When Abigail gave a small nod, Umbria picked her back up and continued walking down the alley to the bakery. In the windows were freshly-baked goodies of all sorts, ranging from slices of and whole apple pies to homemade, better tasting versions of Zebra Cakes. Abby stared at them in awe, still holding tightly onto Umbria. She nearly jumped down to make a grab at a small strawberry shortcake in the window as they walked inside, but Umbria carried her to the counter where Steven and Andrew’s new Employee, a woman named Becky, had greeted them.

Becky was beyond excited to take their order, nearly bouncing as she spoke. “Hi there, welcome to Standrew’s Bakery! My name is Becky, how can I help you?”

“Hi Becky, my name’s Umbria. I’m actually one of Steven and Andrew’s friends. I was gonna leave my daughter up here while I go talk to them in the basement, okay? Let her get whatever, I’ll pay on my way out, I promise.”

Abby gasped lightly, a grin spreading across her face. Becky, on the other hand, seemed to go from excited to nervous. She didn’t know Umbria, she didn’t know if Steven and Andrew were actually friends with her, and she really, really needed this job. She held up her index finger slightly, “Give me just one minute, I need to make sure, okay?” When Umbria gave a nod, Becky knocked on the door to the basement.

Andrew came to the door quickly, “What’s up, Becky?”

“Do you know this woman? She, uh, she’s claiming to be your friend.”

Andrew nodded, “Yeah, that’s Umbria. You can let her down.”

Becky nodded and let Umbria down, apologizing for not believing her in the process. Umbria assured her it was fine as she shut the door.

“Fuck, I gotta remember all of these people.” Becky let out a breath as she walked back to the counter, grabbing a pen and paper to jot down all of the names of the people Steven or Andrew had approved. Umbria, Shane, Ryan, Eugene, Ned, Ariel, Keith, Zach. More to (possibly) be added.

As she wrote, she couldn’t help but glance back at the door, wondering why so many people were
allowed down there. They didn’t bring anything out, so they weren’t cleaning, and they had been
down there for hours … So what were they hiding down there?

That night was odd for sure. Steven wasn’t used to having an employee, he definitely wasn’t used to
having to be careful about talking about the rebellion in their shop, but, above all, he wasn’t used to
actually being present for rebellion meetings. Over the few months they had known each other, they
had grown to be an extremely tight-knit group of friends, and Steven cared deeply for all of them, so
hearing them all discuss tactics to take people down, pieces of blackmail they could use against
people, even what to do in the event that one of them died— it scared Steven. He knew there were
risks, knew that they might one day lose a member, but knowing it and actually discussing it were
two radically different things.

Steven would try to hide how he felt about these things, but he was an extremely expressive person.
When Steven felt something, he didn’t just feel it or emote, he seemed to exude it, sometimes even
seemingly being able to create an atmosphere of that emotion in the room. When this happened,
Andrew would carefully intertwine their fingers, quietly promising him that everything would be
okay as he rubbed his thumb gently over the back of Steven’s hand. Andrew knew there was a
chance he was lying, a chance that not everything would be okay, but it calmed Steven, and Andrew
hated seeing Steven upset. He would give Steven a small smile, which would prompt Steven to
return the smile, and they would return their attention to the meeting, where things had continued to
progress.

This meeting was about recruiting members, and Shane, as per usual, was the one speaking. He
stood at the point of the table closest to the green wall, his palms lightly resting against the glow of
the table, “Rebellions like ours, they’re easily squashed if they don’t have enough manpower. We
need to recruit. Anyone have any ideas at all?”

Eugene spoke up first, explaining that he had some people to recruit as he swiped his palm over the
top of the table. This prompted the table to display a video. After it was over, Eugene scrolled to a
part of the video where several people could be clearly seen, gesturing to a few, “I think they would
be helpful. All of these people said they would be willing to join, and all of them could serve a
purpose.” After a small pause, Shane gestured for Eugene to continue. “Well, if we can convince
Emma to join, she would be able to charm a few people into this. She’d also be another spy on the
floor. We need another.”

Shane nodded along. Ned made note of names and possible positions “And the other girl?”

“Her name is Helen Pan, she’s in the Media Management sector. She might be able to protect us
when we slip up or grab us a studio room to broadcast from.”

Ned nodded, writing it all down. Shane closed the window out, “That’s great and all, but how do we
recruit them without getting caught?”

The room was silent for a moment, each person clearly unsure as to how they could recruit without
being caught. Different people began to speak a few times, but each one stopped themselves before
saying anything. After ten minutes of silence, Steven cautiously spoke up, his voice small, “What if
we create a codeword? If they want to join, they can contact us?”

“Won’t that create little rebellion cells?” Ryan spoke up, quickly being cut off by Steven.
“Yes, but then we can contact the rebellion cells! Especially if we get Helen onboard!”

Ariel began to nod, seeming to pick up on what Steven was saying. When she spoke, her tone seemed to have excitement behind it. “Steven’s right. If we can get Helen onboard, having little rebellion cells might actually be beneficial.”

Ned quirked an eyebrow at her, pushing himself up from leaning on the table as he had been. His eyes, his expression, his tone- they all showed confusion and curiosity, “what are you talking about, Ariel-?”

Ariel quickly made her way to the board, pulling out a tack and some red yarn, “we already know that the Media Management sector is being used for more than just Media management, right?” she pressed the tack into the board, creating another hole in a paper with the letters Med. Mgmt. scrawled across it in bold, red letters, quickly making her way across the board as she continued to explain. “We know that they have the capabilities to catch quick glimpses through unprotected electronics. And who do we know usually demands them to do this?” She pressed the other tack harshly into a picture of Lucas.

“Ariel,” Andrew’s eyes widened, “Wait, what?”

Eugene leaned against the table, keeping his back to Andrew and his eyes to the board. His tone was unreadable as he explained to Andrew that they were safe. “They can see through unprotected devices. Zach’s shielded us and our equipment from being tracked, traced, or remotely viewed.”

Ariel Beamed, pointing quickly at Eugene as she pressed another pin into the board, “Yes, exactly! We’re untrackable because we have a Zach on our team, but they won’t be! It’s nearly impossible to protect devices, and there’s a good chance the other cells won’t.”

Keith seemed to be with her until that point. “How is that a good thing?”

“It’s a good thing, Keith, because, if we get Helen in on this and we make a codeword, we will not only have a spy in Media Management, but we’ll also have someone who can view and track the other cells. Which means that we will be able to safely have them join this, our main cell.” The group finally followed along, but Ariel wasn’t quite done. “And, on top of that, who do we know regularly mistreats his employees?” She pressed another pin into the picture of Lucas, “And, because of this, Helen maybe able to easily recruit other members of Media Management. We maybe able to have an entire cell secretly working in Heartfeed without them even knowing.”

“That’s incredible!” Steven beamed, clapping his hands once, “We have to recruit her!”

“The only problem is who’s going to recruit her?” Andrew looked from Steven around the table, eyes seeming to land on Eugene. Ryan seemed to pick up on this.

“I vote Eugene.” Ryan said quickly, eyes locking with Andrew’s for half a moment before returning to Eugene, who seemed to be genuinely surprised. Eugene shot the two a questioning look. Ryan shook his head and began explaining. “Think about it, Eugene knows how to talk to people. If Zach can take down the cameras for a short while, he’ll be able to get her in here in no time. She might even be able to be here for the next meeting.”

The rest of the group seemed to agree, despite Eugene’s protests. Shane nodded, “It’s settled. Tomorrow, Zach’s calling in. He’ll take out the cameras and alert Eugene. Eugene, when you get that alert, you better hurry your ass up and recruit her. Okay?”

Eugene sighed, accepting this as just a rebellion thing before nodding. “Got it. Helen will be here by
next meeting.”

Shane nodded and the meeting continued, eventually landing on the topic of catching Andrew and Steven up to speed. It was quickly decided that Ryan would be the main one catching them up on training, while Eugene and Umbria would explain what they have on the conspiracy board, and finally, Ned and Ariel would explain the different strategies they had for battles and blackmail. Zach might also explain the purpose of the videos, if they got a chance, but for now, they were focused on splitting the two up for this. With a quick clap, the meeting in and of itself was over, and the real fun began- now it was time to train.

The group had decided to leave Steven and Andrew’s training for the next day, deciding instead to have Ned and Ariel teach each one individually about the strategies and their roles in each one. Ryan and Shane claimed the training area for the day.

“Alright, Madej, are you ready?” Ryan asked, getting in his fighting position, “I’m not going easy on you just because you look weaker.”

Shane smirked, knowing fully well that he was going to lose, “Bergara, I’m always ready. Don’t get too upset when I win, okay?”

“That’s not gonna happen, but keep on dreaming.” Ryan began fighting Shane.

They weren’t evenly matched. At all. Ryan threw a punch at Shane while he was distracted, nailing him directly in his ribcage. Ryan got back into fighting position, “You need to block, Shane. They’re not going to stop a battle because you’re hurt. If you think they will, you seriously overestimate our government.” He waited for Shane to get back into fight position to attack again, throwing another punch at him. Shane didn’t block again. “Shane! Come on! Block with your forearm or dodge!”

“Show me how to do that?” Shane stood back up, walking to Ryan. He knew how to dodge and block, he just wanted to see Ryan annoyed. The little thing he did with his mouth, the smile that still refused to falter in his annoyance, the crinkle on his forehead when Ryan raised an eyebrow, Shane thought it was adorable. He wanted to see him annoyed, and he got exactly what he wanted.

Ryan sighed, that adorably annoyed expression on his all-too-adorable face as he moved Shane’s arm into a blocking position, “See this? This is how you block. Do you know how to punch? Please say you do, I just taught you this last week-”

“No I do not.” Shane lied. Ryan groaned.

“Okay, look,” Ryan balled his hands into fists and held them close to his body, “See how I have my arms and hands? You do that.” Shane quickly mirrored his actions and Ryan continued, moving his fist away from his body, “Show me your fists.” Shane showed Ryan his fists. “No, you have to have your thumb inside the fist. Keeping the thumb inside will keep you from crushing your thumb and will make the person be hit with only your bony ass knuckles-”

Shane snickered, “Ass knuckles-”

“Are you a rebellion leader or a teenager?”

“C’mon, you can’t tell me the mental image of Ass Knuckles isn’t funny .”

“I’m not debating Ass knuckles with you, Shane.”

“Fine, okay, no ass knuckles.” Shane straightened up, correcting how he held his fists.
“Okay, now,” Ryan continued, getting himself back into fighting stance, “Put all of your force behind it. Try to punch me, I’m going to block it.”

While they trained, Eugene and Zach went to work on the next broadcast. They each had their own ideas, each one having its own pros and cons, but they had to somehow combine the to make one extremely beneficial broadcast. They sat at the computers, facing each other as Zach spoke. “Okay, so we need to be able to have a codeword to sneak into the broadcasts without getting us caught—”

Eugene nodded, leaning back in his chair, “Right, but we need to get Helen on board first. Without her, the codeword is pointless.”

Zach nodded softly, “Right, but we’re assuming she’ll join, so let’s focus on the code, okay?” After Eugene agreed to focus on the code, Zach continued, “It needs to be something people can easily pass off as a misunderstanding if they end up saying it to someone who would turn them in.”

Eugene nodded in agreement, repositioning himself in his chair, “Right, something kind of like, ‘I like your shirt,’ but more specific.”

Zach gave a thumbs up and nodded, “Yeah, but it can’t be too specific—”

“But it needs to be specific.”

“Right. So, clearly we’re on the same page here.”

“Clearly.”

“But we don’t have a code.”

“Neg.”

There was a lull in the conversation, possibly a much-needed one, before Zach spoke again, “Maybe it could be something bashing Heartfeed?”

Eugene quirked an eyebrow, a lopsided grin creeping onto his face in amusement, “Okay, I’ll bite. What are you thinking over there, Corn Field?”

“Don’t call me that. Maybe it could be just something simple like, ‘Heartfeed sucks.’ and the reply is what confirms it?”

Eugene laughed lightly, “God I love the idea of people just walking around going ‘Heartfeed fucking sucks’ to other people—”

“Eugene, this is serious!”

“I know, but it’s also hilarious.” Eugene took a moment to calm down, “Okay, okay, so after people say Heartfeed sucks, how are the other people supposed to reply to confirm it’s a rebellion thing? You have to consider that there’s a chance the person saying it might just be criticizing Heartfeed—let’s face it, Heartfeed deserves it.”

“Right, well, what if it’s something like ‘So let’s fight them?’” Zach smiled dorkily, hoping Eugene liked it.

It was a dumb set of phrases, sure, but they were simple and could be passed off. They were laughably simple, but functional. Eugene appreciated the funny aura surrounding them, as well as the
fact that they were funny and functional. “Sounds good. So, if someone walks up to someone else and complains, but the person just responds with that, it can be passed off as a joke. These are good, Zach. Not cool, but good.”

“Well, I mean rebellions can’t be entirely just cool, can they? I mean, rebellions centered entirely around being cool make things that are easy to tack, easy to stop. We can have a little dorkiness if it means we’ll live, right?”

“You are completely right, Zach.” Eugene chuckled, “Let’s have the dorkiest rebellion in the history of the world so it can work."

Meanwhile, Andrew and Steven were at opposite sides of the board, listening to Ned and Ariel explain exactly what they had up there.

“Basically, what we know right now is that Lucas is a dick and his family fucked over yours, Andrew’s, and Umbria’s.”

“Yeah, I kinda got that.” Andrew said, slight sarcasm in his tone, “What else do you know?”

Ariel nodded, pointing to a paper with an L on it, “We know he has anger issues, and he refuses to get help for them- Umbria told us that- and we have video of him going off on employees. We also know that he’s a power-hungry guy, and he’s willing to do anything to get there- remember when he was put into office up there?”

Andrew nodded, quirking an eyebrow and crossing his arms, “Yeah? What about it?”

“Assassins. He’s hired them, other powerful uppers have hired them, they’re a staple up there. And they just talk about it like they’re talking about the game.”

“... Jesus Christ- ” Andrew took in a breath. He was here to take down the government and restore the system to goodness, but this was insane. He ran his hands down his face, “It’s like the more we find out about them, the worse they are.”

Ariel nodded in agreement, glancing back up to the board sadly, “I think we wanted to believe they were good so badly that we turned a blind eye to things like this. We knew it was happening, but we wanted to think it wasn’t so much that we ignored it when it did…”

“Fuck, man…”

At that point, there was a knock on the door. Everyone stopped what they were doing, staring at Andrew as he walked upstairs. When he came back down, Umbria was with him. “Hey nerds, what happened?”

Ryan smiled as Shane groaned on the floor, “We got a shit ton of plans!” and proceeded to explain everything to her.
All-in-all, the night went smoothly. It wasn’t until after they left that things hit a bump.

The group had decided to leave early, as Steven and Andrew had to go to gather some stuff from their previous property, which left Becky in the bakery alone. She was not known for her impulsivity, but it was late and she was curious and the store was empty and locked. She glanced at the door downstairs, grabbing her keys silently and walking over. If she was quick, they wouldn’t know. She just had to rush.

She stuck her key in the lock and turned it, glancing back over her shoulder quickly. The lights were still lit, the store was still clean, everything was wiped down, it was still empty. She could do this. She could do this.

She sucked in a breath and shut her eyes, removing the key from the lock and placing her hand on the handle. Just five minutes. Steven and Andrew wouldn’t even know. She turned the handle and pushed the door open, glancing through the doorway to the unlit room below. She couldn’t see a thing. What was down there? The stairway looked cleaner than the store…

She hesitated a moment before carefully taking a step down, placing only one foot on one step of the hardwood staircase before shutting her eyes and taking another step. She was in. She was doing this. Fuck, she was doing this! Maybe if she turned back and shut the door-

No, there was no turning back now. She made the dumbass, impulsive decision to do this, now she better fucking follow through. She walked down the stairs quickly, using her phone as a flashlight when it got too dark, holding her broom in her other hand. She was going to do this. She was going to clean up and surprise them. She was going to be a great employee.

When she finally got back to flat ground, she felt around for the light switch. She couldn’t be their best employee in the dark. WHEN she found it, the lights came whirring on. She smiled slightly, excited to maybe be praised and turned around, “Let’s get to work.”

When she turned, though, she was met not with a messy room, but with a harsh and jarring reality. And a fucking conspiracy board.

Her eyes widened. Her breath hitched in her throat. She stood there silently longer than she’d like to admit, trying desperately to make herself say something, anything, before finally making out one phrase quietly.

“Oh shit...”
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

This is a lot shorter than normal. I'm so sorry. :/

“What the hell are you doing, Sara? You're wasting your time and mine! Get this fucking bullshit done, now! You've had a week! A fucking week! I hired you for results, not for you to say that they 'Have you blocked.' We're trying to squash a rebellion, not play a game of internet tag. Either you get this done today or you're fired, got it? Now get the hell out of my office.”

Sara stood there in shock, fumbling over her words in a failed attempt to form a coherent sentence. What was she going to say? She had already explained the situation to Upper Giovanni that the rebellion either didn’t meet regularly, which he replied to by telling her what she already knew (that the rebellion was obviously too coordinated and planned out to not be a group), or they had managed to completely protect themselves from prying eyes, which was most likely the case. She thought Upper Giovanni understood, she thought the way he had nodded and walked on after receiving this news meant she was out of hot water, she thought that after working in Media Management for several years, he would understand. She was obviously wrong. Her words failed her, leaving her to stand there, dumbfounded, shock filling her features as her Upper moved to seat himself at his desk once more. He began to go back to his work, looking up only once to repeat that she had a job to do, which seemed to jar Sara out of her shock. She thanked him for letting her know- despite the fact that this was complete and utter bullshit- her voice cracking slightly as she turned on her heel to walk out, a feeling of dread sitting in the pit of her stomach like a rock in a riverbed- cold, hard, unmoving, unpleasant.

She kept her head down, staring at the white tiles as she walked, questions racing through her mind faster than a cheetah on wheels. How was she going to fix this? How was she going to unmask a well-masked signal? How could she unprotect a protected network? How would this affect the rebellion? As her thoughts sped up, so did she. The white tiles started to mesh together into one long tile as she picked up her pace, the paintings on the gray wall blurred as she ran, their muted, abstract colors leaving only colorful streaks in her peripheral vision, the numerous light shadows cast by the fluorescent lights overhead seemed to begin their cycles even faster. She was sprinting towards the door, still lacking an answer as questions continued to speed through her mind. What was she going to do? What could she do? What would she do?

By the time she reached the door at the end of the hall, she was gasping for breath. What was she going to tell Helen? She closed her eyes and leaned against the gray, oddly-textured walls for a moment to catch her breath, thinking momentarily about her girlfriend. Helen had been there for her through thick and thin, assuring her that everything would turn out okay- she was wrong, obviously, but the sentiment was nice. Helen had always told her to just take slow, deep breaths when she couldn’t stop her mind. She always told her this in a nice, calm voice. Sara thought of Helen saying this, imagining she was with her to talk to her while she calmed down. It took a few minutes, but it had worked, and Sara could walk back to the Media Management Room to help Helen set up for the day.

The Media Management Room was oddly dark, the main light sources being the ring of computers around the edge of the room, each one facing towards the center for the convenience of Uppers
walking in to check on their work, and the one, large screen that took up half of the wall on the opposite side of the room from the door. When you entered the Media Management Room, you would be met with a set of stairs on either side of the railed platform you would be on. Uppers seemed to have some kind of fetish for standing up there, watching over the employees like some sort of dictator watching their people squirm like ants under a magnifying glass on a sunny day. It seemed to make them feel powerful, and every Heartfeed and government employee knew damned well how much every Upper loved having power.

Sara quickly shook her head and corrected herself. No, not every Upper loved power, not every Upper enjoyed watching people with an uncomfortable, terrifyingly cold gaze, but a lot of them did. That’s what made the government branch of Heartfeed so impossible for Sara- if an Upper wanted to single her out, they could, and she knew nobody could or would stop them. The employees were defenseless, robbed of the ability to defend themselves. There was nobody around to keep the power of the Uppers in check, so if they defended themselves, they were fired, blocked from finding employment elsewhere because the Upper would demand the Media Management Sector put together false ads, lies about the person that made them seem terrible, and broadcast them, thereby destroying a person’s ability to find employment at a livable wage. If Sara had known this before joining the Media Management Sector, she wouldn’t have even considered joining in the slightest, but now it was too late. She was part of the sector, she had ruined people’s lives, she had no way out, she was at the mercy of the Uppers- and she knew all-too-well how cruel the Uppers were.

Someone who wasn’t cruel, though, was Helen Pan, her best friend who had also joined before knowing how terrible the government sector of Heartfeed was. Helen was a blessing in Sara’s life, and, as she made her way down the stairs, she began to smile. Helen was there with her, so it couldn’t be all bad, right? Helen was looking at Sara with those beautiful, dark eyes, concern and relief etched into her features- an odd emotional combination people couldn’t fully understand until seeing someone again after thinking something terrible was going to happen. She walked quickly to Sara, the expression of that odd emotional combination seeming to grow clearer and clearer the closer she got. This was one thing Sara loved about Helen, she never could hide what she felt, and Sara found it absolutely adorable. And when she spoke… oh gosh, when Helen spoke, it made everything in Sara’s life seem right, even when asking about what terrible thing had been demanded of her. “What’d Upper Geo say? Nothing too bad, I hope?”

Unfortunately, that happiness couldn’t last. She quickly processed exactly what Helen had asked and hugged her tightly, her short, purple hair pressing against the side of Helen’s dark brown hair as she began to cry silently. So silently, in fact, that Helen couldn’t even tell she was crying until the shoulder of her shirt began to dampen. This broke Helen’s heart. Helen cautiously pulled away from the hug, placing her hands lightly on Sara’s shoulders, her brown eyes wide as she read Sara’s expression. Helen’s voice was softer than ever when she spoke next, “What did Geo say, Sara…?”

Sara took in a shaky breath, trying desperately to calm herself enough to answer. When she did, though, it was still shaky. “I have one day to locate the rebel cell or I’m fired.”

“What-?” Helen gasped softly, eyes widening even more, fear becoming more prevalent than relief or concern. Sometimes the punishment for leaving Government Heartfeed was as simple as having your life destroyed, but other times… other times ex-employees would have their lives taken. And Sara had failed to locate a rebellion. They wouldn’t just let this go. This was bad. This wasn’t simply fired and ruined bad, this was… this was fired and killed bad, and no matter how much they hated it, no matter how desperately Sara tried to ignore it, they both knew it. That was why they were both so scared. If Sara couldn’t find this impossible-to-find rebellion, she would be killed. And there was nothing either of them could do about it.
While some people were trying to find a way around death and spend what precious time they had left with the people they loved, others were teasing their friends about their literary choices.

“Detective Horsely?” Ryan held the book up, quirking an eyebrow at Shane with a small smirk, trying to stifle a laugh, “You read this shit?”

“Holly Horsley is a queen and her books are incredible, you shut your face Bergara.” Shane defended quickly, pointing a finger towards Ryan in what could only be described as a feeble attempt to seem angry and make Ryan stop mocking his highly-mockable interest, which, of course, resulted in Ryan sporting that playfully mischievous grin Shane loved so much. The way Ryan’s eyes would twinkle when he did that, the way that smile differed from his others… Shane loved it. If you asked him, though, he would deny it, just as he would deny the fact that he was quickly falling for his friend. Shane would fight you tooth-and-nail about it, but even he couldn’t deny that was starting to feel more-than-friendly feelings towards Ryan- Why else would he have invited Ryan into his apartment, after all?

Ryan stifled a laugh, placing the book back on Shane’s shelf with his other books and turning back to him, taking in the entirety of the small apartment. Shane’s apartment was a studio one, only one grey room made up the entire thing. He did have a toilet in the room, but he (and all others with studio apartments in the building) opted to use the public restroom in the hall- it had stalls and sinks. The decorations (if you could even call them that) were mostly shelves of books and knick-knacks, but there were a select few articles of functional furniture in the room. Overall, the apartment was nice. Small and cramped, but nice. He especially liked the dark couch Shane had in the corner of the room farthest from the door, which just happened to be the one Ryan had just taken a seat on. “So, Detective Horsley fan Shane Madej, is there a reason you invited me over?”

Ryan hadn’t asked it to be rude, he was genuinely curious. The two had been friends for a while at that point, and Ryan enjoyed it, he was happy, he was warm, but Shane had never invited him over- Shane never invited anyone over, it’s just who he was- so he had to ask if there was an ulterior motive for his visit today. If he were being honest, he hoped like hell there was- he had discovered that his feelings had calmed significantly since he first felt the warm feeling, but he still couldn’t shake his enjoyment, his love for, his crush on Shane Madej. He knew Shane the Skeptic most likely felt nothing for him, but a man could dream while he sat there and awaited his crush’s answer, couldn’t he?

“Can’t a guy just want to spend time with his best friend without there being a reason, Ry? I don’t always have to have a reason to be around you, right?” Shane quirked an eyebrow and sat by him, flipping the TV to whatever current horror movie was playing that he thought Ryan, the horror movie fanatic, would enjoy. “I mean, if you don’t want to be here, you can leave, I’m not gonna stop ya, so y’know, don’t think this is me being creepy- I’m not even gonna offer alcohol or anything, I can let you get your own drinks- remember the drinks we picked up on the way home-”

“Shane. Shane. Shane!” Ryan quickly grabbed Shane’s attention, “Shane, are you okay? I mean, I know damned well the 12 pack of canned soda we picked up on the way home isn’t drugged, what’s up? Why are you so nervous I think you’re trying to drug me?”

Shane glanced to the side. No, he wasn’t trying to drug Ryan, he just wanted to be sure he knew that, because he knew some people were afraid of that when someone invited them over, and he
knew some people would be up for drugging a friend’s drink. Shane wasn’t one of those people, but he was afraid Ryan thought he was. He had no rhyme or reason for this thought, it had popped up out of nowhere, but it had stuck the moment it reared its ugly little head. Now, he was just extremely worried Ryan did think it. “I just get worried as hell sometimes.”

“You? The leader of the big thing happening? Nervous about this?” Ryan quirked an eyebrow, taking an opened can of soda from the twelve-pack they purchased on the table and opening it. Ryan knew it wasn’t drugged for a few reasons: 1.) It was unopened, 2.) it was from a store, 3.) the pac had been sitting on the table, unopened, since they got to Shane’s apartment, and 4.) It was a big, open apartment, and Ryan had been able to see the box since he walked in. He took a drink, “Yep, that’s a normal soda.”

Shane sighed. Great. Wonderful. Now Ryan probably thought he was a freak. He had to explain. Shit. Okay. He could trust Ryan. He could do this. He could do this. He took a breath and spoke. “Okay, Ry, if we’re being honest, someone I used to date would always accuse me of spiking his drink when he got pissed, and it’s not a fun memory to deal with. It kind of just pops up a lot when people are over, especially if they’re drinking anything from my house, so I kinda jump to assure them it’s clean. I don’t really know well why, but—” Shane saw the shocked expression on Ryan’s face and quickly stopped talking, “Yeah, uh, sorry about that. I’ll just shut up now—”

“Shane, it’s alright. I trust you, I know you’re not going to drug me.” Ryan shook his head awkwardly, disbelief starting to fill him over the entire idea that this was his life. He did have a crush on Shane, but this was a bit odd and uncomfortable to talk about. He’d probably start bringing his own drink from home- both for Shane’s own mental sake, and so he could avoid ever having this discussion again. It was the epitome of bad conversation. Whether Ryan realized it or not, though, things like what happened to Shane could stick with a person for years, and things that make people remember what they went through could be as small and odd as a simple soda. It wasn’t that Shane wanted to drug him, it’s that he had been convinced by Lucas that nobody would ever trust him, that everyone would think he had, because Lucas accused him of it privately. Things like this stick with people. Someone could be the bravest, most courageous, most outgoing person you know, but if they had things like this in their not-so-distant past, they could end up having conversations like this one. If you want to stay their friend, you just have to kind of work around it while they try to fix it. “Let’s just change topics though, okay? This is a pretty awkward conversation for me, and it’s even a bit worrisome, so I’d like to not talk about it anymore.

Shane nodded softly, flipping through the channels to something happier than horror. He didn’t think a horror movie after that whole incident was a good idea. “Yeah that’s probably for the best. Sorry about making you uncomfortable, I’m working to get better so I don’t do that anymore. I’m gonna put on that movie about the dog who finds a home, okay?”

Ryan nodded, taking another drink of the soda, “Alright. I’m gonna bring my own drink from home from now on, okay? Not because I don’t trust you, just so I don’t end up having to talk about the entire concept of me being drugged again, okay?”

“That’s completely understandable, and I respect your choice.”

The conversation died awkwardly after that for a bit, each man just watching the movie. Finally, once a happy spot came up, Shane picked the conversation back up, “So, ya nerd, I’m sure you have some laughable interest—”

“More laughable than Detective Horsley? Not likely.” Ryan teased lightly, “WHy do you even like those things? My six year old sister reads them! She’s got some much better books, too, ones actually for adults—”
“I read those, too, for your information, Bergara.”

“Oh yeah? Prove it. Who was Alex and Ronnie’s target in the overarching plot centered around the cult and Alex’s friends, Sierra and Ricky?” Ryan repositioned himself on the couch and paused the movie, narrowing his eyes at Shane before crossing his legs. He didn’t know it, but that was something Shane found absolutely adorable.

Shane quirked an eyebrow and turned to face Ryan, as well, “Oh it is on, Bergara. Alex and Ronnie’s target was the boyfriend Ricky betrayed the cult for and was the son of the cult’s founder. His name was Charles Connor Tinsley, and he was a P.I. Give me a hard one next time, will ya?”

“What was Ricky’s main act of defiance while in the cult?”

“He snuck to the body pile and rescued the kids who weren’t quite dead and nursed them back to health. This was a main damned plot point, Ryan. CC found out about it on the first day he had Ricky away from the cult because Ricky was trying to explain why he had to go back.”

“Remember when Ricky joined the cult?”

“He was kidnapped as a child.”

“And CC-”

“CC was born in an asylum because his mother fled from Connor so she wouldn’t have to put her baby in a kill cult.”

“And-”

“And Connor never left him alone. Every time Connor found out CC was in a new foster home, he put a target on CC’s foster family’s heads.”

“Then- wait shit-”

“I’ve bested you, Bergara. Admit it.”

“I’ll never admit defeat, Madej. Never!”

“I will make you admit it someday!”

“Keep dreaming.”

The two could only keep a straight face for a few moments after that. Neither man wanted to be the first to ‘admit defeat’ by laughing at the ridiculous feat they had just participated in, but once Ryan failed to contain his laughter, it opened the floodgate for Shane to laugh with him. The two had completely forgotten about the earlier incident, now far too focused on having a nice night with the other- even if that included quizzing each other over shared interests. They could only be serious so long before they returned to this, their usual state of teasing each other and competing in a loving-friendly manner. Their jokes and competitions never got too serious, always managing to stay in that funny territory. That’s why they had so much fun with each other. It’s why they were both happy that the other was part of the rebellion, so that they had someone else right there to compete with. They loved it. They loved their friendship, that’s why they didn’t want to admit their feelings for the other- they didn’t want to ruin it.
Of course, at that moment, they had no idea that a certain author was researching the rebellion with genuine interest. She stared at her computer, eyes hurting from staring at it for hours on end, typing quickly in an attempt to write everything anybody knew about Redi Cordis so she could find him— and, by association, the rebellion. She agreed with them. She thought the entirety of the Soulmate System was just as bullshit as they did, and she wanted to stop it just as badly, but she didn’t know how. She needed to join. She needed to help them get their messages out. She needed to let them know she supported them. She was desperate.

Sadly, though, the rebellion had no information about it available to the public outside of ‘we exist.’ She sighed softly, closing her laptop and pulling her blonde hair out of its messy bun. She wasn’t going to find anything on her own. She would need to phone in help from her friends. Holly quickly pulled out her phone and dialed a cell phone number, waiting impatiently as it rang.

Finally, after what felt to Holly like an eternity, her closest friend picked up, tone unreadable. “Holls, I kinda just had a life-changing incident-”

Holly didn’t listen, instead going directly into her own needs. “Beck, I need you to do me a favor.”

“Holly. Holly listen. You’ll never fucking guess-”

“I need you to help me learn about the rebellion.”

“Holly, if you’ll listen-”

“It’s really important-”

“HOLLY!”

That jerked her back to listening. Holly never meant to do that, sometimes she just couldn’t help it— especially if she was hardcore focused on something. “Shit, I did the thing again, didn’t I?”

Becky nodded, walking around the room to take in everything they had so far. There was so much… who was this guy on the picture? Why were there so many tacks in his picture? “Yeah, don’t worry about it right now, just listen- I think I know where the main HQ for the rebellion is .”

Holly’s eyes widened as she gripped her phone tightly, “What the hell where is it-?”

“Holly, I can’t tell you .” Becky whispered into the phone, reading another sheet of paper on the wall by the light switch. It had rules for the rebellion- one of which was ‘Don’t mention it outside of this room They can track us.’ “We’ll have to meet somewhere, okay?”

“Alright, just tell me where, I can be there in ten!” Holly was already pulling on her oversized gray jacket and grabbing her keys. She was so excited to see it. She was excited to join .

“You know Standrew’s Bakery? Meet me at the old one.” Becky spoke quickly, running a hand over the table in the center of the room, gasping and jumping backwards when it swooshed to life and began glowing. “Holy shit, Holls, hurry .”

“I’m already on my way! See you soon, Becky!” Holly hung up and ran out the door. She was ready .
Becky stared at the glowing table in shock, lowering the phone slowly and taking in the entire sight. They had so much information, so many secrets on everyone… She slowly stepped closer to the table, raising her hand and flicking it, pulling away quickly when the display scrolled quickly to the end file. She moved her hand back into the blue light being emitted from the table and tapped the air, opening the file. In it were the names of hundreds of people, each name being the name of a file. She opened one - a file named Sierra Novak. It contained her name, age, employment, cause of death, and a photo. She was only twenty-six. She had short, curly hair, grey eyes, pale, smooth skin… she looked like she could have been a model. She died, apparently, of a car crash. Becky moved her hand up, causing it to scroll down. When she did, it revealed a theory. The theory was essentially that she had been assassinated for standing in the way of Heartfeed.

Becky’s eyebrows knit together in confusion. There was a video attached. She pressed the play button.

Her eyes widened as she watched it. The video had an upper talking to the cameraperson, talking about how ‘he told that bitch not to challenge him.’ Becky quickly closed it out, scrolling through other files and checking them. They each contained a similar story and video. These were the people in charge of their country. These were the people choosing what happened to them. These were people… hiring assassins to take out people who didn’t agree with them.

At this time, Ryan and Shane were having a simple discussion. Ryan was leaning on Shane, simply enjoying being around him, when Shane spoke. His voice was quiet, almost worried. “Hey, Ryan?”

Ryan carefully matched his tone, being careful not to disrupt their current position, “Yeah, Shane?”

“Do you think true love still exists?”

Becky scrolled quickly to another folder, fear building in her. No. No, no, no, these couldn’t be true! This couldn’t all be real!

The next folder had video of Heartfeed employees being mistreated in the workplace. It had videos of Uppers using their positions to force dates with others.

Ryan nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I think true love still exists. People still fall in love. I think, though, that the government has corrupted it.”

Becky closed that out, frantically, opening another folder. It revealed a cover-up, a government-implemented cover-up where people were convinced that this had always been. It made the warmth aspect seem like every scientist’s idea. It said that the government was good. It covered up exactly what was happening in the workplace.

Ryan spoke quietly, “It’s going to be fixed. It needs to be. It has to be. But, by believing in true love,
I also think…”

Becky watched the videos in horror, tears filling her eyes. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing. This couldn’t be real… it couldn’t be… This… this was terrible…

A lump formed in her throat as they watched each sile she viewed being more terrifying than the last. She had to help them. She had to join. She needed to do something.

She was so consumed by what she was seeing that she didn’t notice the door to the basement being opened. She didn’t hear the footsteps on the stairs. She didn’t notice the people walking up behind her until they cleared their throat. She spun around quickly, shocked, fearful, horrified. The expression she showed was one clearly full of terror- terror both at the things on the videos and the fact that the rebellion knew this. She almost didn’t notice exactly who it was that was standing there.

Ryan’s voice turned more macabre as he spoke, “True fear exists, too.”

“Do you think our rebellion will work?”

“I think… I think rebellions like ours have to have pre existing doubts to take off. People don’t back rebellions- good ones, anyway- just for the hell of it. Ours… ours is taking off like a damned rocket. People are making noise about it- you’ve seen it, and so have I- and they’re fighting back. People have been ready to fight back for years, but they knew they couldn’t do it alone. Now that we’ve started it, there’s nothing left to keep people from fighting. They’re going to fight back, Shane. We’re going to change it, and it’s going to be amazing. People wanted to change it, and now they can… they were just waiting for the chance.

“They already wanted to fight… and once they see everything the government is doing, there’ll be nothing keeping them from fighting.”

Becky sucked in a sharp breath, closing her eyes as she spoke to Andrew and Steven, “I want to join.”
Chapter 15

Their nation was no stranger to rebellions. Several times before, in decades past, small groups of rebellious people had planted the seeds for a wide-spread, life-changing rebellion to take place. Some rebellion lasted far longer than others, others garnered more support, others, still, managed to infiltrate and deceive government officials. Regardless, few had managed to gain the support of the people so quickly, few had managed to protect themselves so well, few had managed to be as well-planned and supported as quickly as this one. The rebellions from times before had caused the government to implement most of the once-illegal spyware they had- the rebellion focused on decreasing the status of the wealthy in government offices had brought about the government’s ability to track people through their electronics, the rebellion focused on returning rights to workers had resulted in the government being allowed to withhold information from the public, and the rebellion with the goal of returning people’s right to privacy had resulted in the government being allowed to track phone calls, and these were only a few of the rebellions! Numerous other rebellions had started up and painfully fallen numerous times before, each one resulting in yet another law that stole rights away from the people and allowed the government to do whatever they wished at any point in time. Despite this, the Riot Hearts Rebellion was never able to be tracked or discovered, thereby making it uncrushable.

That is, until Holly and Becky spoke on the phone. Had Helen and Sara been out of the Media Management Room by the time Holly and Becky spoke, all would have been well- Holly and Becky would have joined the rebellion, Eugene may have managed to recruit Helen, and things would have continued normally. Helen and Sara were not out of the Media Management Room, though. Helen and Sara were still standing in the dark room when an alert began to flash on every screen in the room, a high-pitched ding being emitted from each one.

Sara raised her head quickly, a silent gasp escaping her the moment the sound began. She rushed to a computer, fingers smashing keys faster than she ever had before, trying desperately to find whatever caused the alert.

“This might be something to do with the rebellion, Helen! They might have slipped up!” Finally, the computer began playing audio. Sara broke into a grin. “Helen, someone slipped up.”

Helen’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion as she crossed her arms, staring at the woman she loved from behind. “Sara, are you sure this is a good idea…? This rebellion is only trying to do good…”

“How good can it be if it hurts people while it’s happening?” Sara countered, pressing a key.

“I want to live, Helen.” Sara pressed another key.

With that, Holly Horsley’s house was being displayed on each screen, her phone call with Becky Miller being played overtop of it- right down to Becky saying she found the HQ. Sara broke into a grin, tears filling her eyes once more. She was going to live. Helen, on the other hand, was horrified. She supported this rebellion, she wanted to join them, she was sure they could protect both her and Sara if they did… but they would never be able to join if Sara turned this over to her boss right away.

Helen silently walked up to Sara, fear clear in her teary eyes as she spoke, “Sara, I can’t let you turn
“This isn’t your choice. I want to live, Helen.” Sara met her eyes, “We both know they’ll kill me if I don’t turn this in.”

Helen shook her head, placing a hand on the back of Sara’s chair, “They could protect us if we join.”

“What if they can’t?”

“What if they can?”

“I don’t want to take a chance on this, Helen! This is my life we’re gambling with!”

“Please, Sara…”

“No! I’m not just going to sit here and take a chance on death!” And with that, Helen ran out of the room, most likely to alert her Upper that she had information on the rebellion. Now that Helen was in the room alone, she had to make a choice- would she let Sara alert the uppers and crush the rebellion, or would she take a chance with Sara’s life and delete the audio. Helen stared at the screens, considering her options: option one would ensure Sara’s life for now, but would crush the rebellion, and would not ensure her status of protected for long, while option two would let the rebellion improve the quality of life for countless others for years upon years (if they weren’t captured at another point), but would risk the life of someone she loved more than anything. No matter which choice she made, it would haunt her for the rest of her life. Her hand began to inch towards the screen as she slowly decided—what is one life when compared to countless others?

Andrew glared down at Becky, eyes filled with a combination of anger and hatred the woman had hoped to never see in someone as physically intimidating as Andrew. “Do you know what you’ve done here, Becky? Do you have any idea what kind of mess you’ve just made?”

Becky stared at the two in shock. She hadn’t expected this. She hadn’t expected any of this to happen to her. She tried desperately to find words, but only one stumbled clumsily out of her mouth. “What—?”

“You not only deliberately broke our one rule,” Andrew began, sneering as he spoke. This woman—this child had just compromised everything they had been trying so hard to protect. His blood was boiling. “But you also gave away our location! Do you have any idea how much you fucked us over?”

Steven laid a hand softly on Andrew’s shoulder as Becky began to back away. Steven would have tried to calm Andrew down, but he knew damned well he couldn’t. Andrew was far beyond upset, he was furious, and they both knew it—the difference was that Steven was also angry, while Becky was confused. Steven knew why Andrew was furious, he understood, he shared the emotion, but Becky didn’t seem to understand whatsoever, and that, quite possibly, made it worse. “You’ve protected it this far, can’t you just protect it again—?”

“You think it’s that simple, Becky?” Steven began to speak, his tone far different than his usual tone.
Steven’s usual, happy, upbeat, caring tone had been replaced with anger, disappointment, and frustration. He glared Daggers into her as he spoke, though they were dulled by him looking less angry and more upset, “They can track us outside of this room, they could hear your conversation with Holly, they heard you tell her where we were! Once they know, they know! We can’t just take back what you told your friend!”

Andrew glared, whispering to Steven that he was going to call everyone back. Steven gave him a nod, still glaring at Becky, who was finding out that, when Steven wasn’t happy, he was somehow scary. She stammered over her words, trying to form a coherent sentence, “I didn’t know, I-I thought-” “You thought wrong.”

Becky quickly tried to make her way to the door, jumping backwards when it slammed. She was locked in. Becky yelled to Andrew through the door, “What are you going to do to me? Please, just let me go home-”

Andrew crossed his arms, sneering as he turned back to the door and replied, “We can’t let you show anyone where we are. We’re already trying to clean up one of your messes, we don’t need you going out and making another one for us.” before stepping outside

Andrew called Umbria first- she was an upper, he thought that maybe, with any luck, she could run in and fix it.

Umbria’s voice was heavy with sleep when she answered. When Andrew told her he needed her to go into the office and fix something, though, the sleepiness in her voice quickly began to dissipate, “Andrew, what happened? Did you guys do something-?”

“Steven and I didn’t do anything,” Andrew pulled a face, glancing back at the door as he tried to calm down. He knew his anger wasn’t going to fix anything, but the more he reminded himself of that, the more he realized how justified his anger was this time- Steven hadn’t even tried to remind him of that this time. No, this time, Steven was angry, too. “Becky told one of her friends where our new bread supply was.”

Umbria yawned and began pulling her clothes on, taking a moment to process what Andrew had said. They had made this code early-on, deciding that, to avoid talking about the rebellion over the phone, they would mention something about bread if there was a problem. Would they sound ridiculous doing so? Yes. Would it protect them, though? Also yes. “Alright, give me a minute, I’ll try to get this cleared up.”

Andrew nodded, thanking her and hanging up. Next was to call Eugene, Zach, or Shane and Ryan.

While Shane was the leader of the rebellion and Ryan was, by extension, second-in-command, Eugene and Zach seemed, to Andrew, like the second- and third-best people to contact in this situation. Shane and Ryan could give commands, yes, but so could Andrew, and right now the only command they needed was ‘fix this fast.’ With that in mind, he quickly dialed Eugene’s phone number and hit call. Andrew didn’t expect Eugene to pick up quite as quickly as he did, his urgent tone mixing with slight shock to hear Eugene, awake and alert, after only a ring and a half. Eugene gave his usual ‘What’s up, buttercup?’ before Andrew could compose himself once more, his tone returning to urgent as he spoke, “We have a problem. We need you at the bakery now. Becky ruined the bread.”
Eugene quirked an eyebrow on the other end of the phone, momentarily forgetting about their bread code. Although he was already preparing to head out, deciding not to leave Andrew alone on whatever the hell he was talking about, he needed to know exactly what this was about. “Andrew, what the fuck?”

“Eugene,” Andrew started in again, moving his hands as he spoke. He was becoming impatient. This couldn’t wait. This code was Eugene’s idea! How had he forgotten? “The Bread is Ruined!”

Eugene grabbed his house keys and opened the door, still confused, “Andrew, can’t you just make more bread?”

Andrew began to pace in front of the store and crossed his arms, tapping the fingers of his free arm against the forearm of the one holding the phone, “Eugene! Bread! Ruined! Umbria and Zach and-”

Finally, it clicked. Eugene let out a quiet oh and began to hurry, locking his door as quickly as possible, “Oh Shit, okay, I got it now. I’m on my way.” And with that, he hung up, leaving Andrew to call the rest of the people.

In the basement, Steven was finally calming down and apologizing to Becky. He walked over to her silently, only speaking once he was seated beside her. He knew she was probably only trying to do good, even if she went about it in the completely wrong way, and he didn’t want her to be scared of them. He didn’t want her to think they would hurt her. “Hey, Becky? Can I talk to you-?”

Becky was too shaken up to do much but slowly move away from Steven. She expected a member of a rebellion to be hard, tough, cruel- she expected them to treat her like Lucas treated his employees. Steven had no intention of doing that, though. He knew that rebellions weren’t successful if they treated members- or potential members like that. The problem was that, as Becky spoke, her eyes wide, voice trembling in fear despite joking to try to calm herself, it became clear that she didn’t know that he knew that.

“I don’t know, can you?”

Steven shook his head, chuckling awkwardly at that, “Hey, I’m just trying to make things less uncomfortable here.” He rubbed the back of his neck, glancing at her, concern clear in his eyes, “Look, um, I’m sorry about Andrew. I know he can get scary at times, especially when he’s pissed like that, but I want you to know that he’s not gonna hurt you- neither am I, or anyone else in this. We don’t have any intention of harming you whatsoever.”

“Oh yeah? Did that look like the face of someone who wouldn’t hurt someone?” Becky looked up at Steven, tears in her eyes, “I fucked up, and you’re all trained, and-”

“And we don’t enjoy hurting anyone. Andrew’s probably going to see what he can do to take care of this first, and then we’ll have a meeting about stuff like this. We’re not going to harm you at all, okay?” Steven spoke softly despite the sharp pain in his chest that came from hearing someone insinuate Andrew would ever hurt someone. Andrew could get angry, yes, and it was sometimes scary because of his physical demeanor and usually-calm attitude, but it never manifested itself in violence. Andrew had emotions, even if he rarely showed them, but he knew how to deal with them. Steven knew Andrew could be downright terrifying if he was angry enough, but they had addressed this- Andrew hated the idea that he could be as scary as he was, even if these times were few and far between, and he made a conscious effort to not be scary, he tried his hardest to never be angry like this- usually it involved walking away and calming down if it got to this point. In the year and a half of their relationship before the two addressed the issue, Andrew had only gotten that angry twice,
and, in the three years since addressing it, he had only been that angry once— and that was right now. Andrew never meant to be scary, he just had an appearance that made him more susceptible to being *accidentally terrifying* . “And Andrew’s not going to hurt anyone, I promise. He’s harmless.”

When Becky didn’t speak, Steven continued, “I understand you didn’t know you were doing something bad, and I understand that you’re upset with us, and I know that these things are completely reasonable and justified, but Andrew and I gave up a lot for this— for each other, and he’s upset because your accident may have put us all in danger. There’s a lot of things riding on this for us, and it’s honestly terrifying that it might go south. I know it was most likely an accident, and I want you to maybe, please consider joining us.”

“You think I still want to join? After all of this?” Becky scoffed, “You’ve lost your damned mind.”

Zach took a lot longer to answer Andrew’s phone call than either of the two before him, picking up tiredly after two seven-ring phone calls a piece. “What is it, Andrew?”

Andrew pinched the bridge of his nose, staring down the dark alley as he spoke. He was beginning to calm down, but that gave way to the feeling of being watched. “Finally! Zach, there’s been a bread-baking issue—”

“What?”

“Okay, when you all get here, we’re making another damned code. Now, I need you at the bakery. Now. It’s urgent.”

“Alright, fine,” Zach begrudgingly standing up from his bed and putting his glasses on, the cold air of his apartment slamming into him with the force of an arctic bear covered in snow. “I’ll be there in ten.”

Andrew nodded, “Alright, hurry.” The moment that phone call ended, another began, this one going out to Ned and Ariel.

Umbria quickly walked into the office, swiping her all-access key card faster than ever before. There was an urgency in her step that not one employee had ever witnessed before as she made her way to the Media Management Room. She could see the alert flashing from the end of the hall. She broke into a jog, letting out a breath of relief when she saw only one person in the room. She couldn’t relax for long, though. “*Press the dismissal button! Now!*” When the woman didn’t seem to respond beyond a ‘what’, Umbria used the upper hand, “*That’s an order! Dismiss the alert NOW!*”

At that point, Helen didn’t have time to be conflicted. Her body responded before her mind. She pressed the dismissal button. The alert went away and its records were permanently erased. Umbria sighed a breath of relief, placing a hand on one side of the doorway and leaning against it, her breaths heavy and deep. Umbria managed a *thank you* between breaths, finally making her way to the employee, reading her name tag as she approached. *Helen. Helen Pan, Med. MGMT.*. She could see the fear in Helen’s wide, Asian eyes. Her mouth hung open, if only slightly, her eyebrows knit in what Umbria read as a mixture of fear and confusion.
Umbria placed a hand on her shoulder, “Thank you, Helen.”

Helen looked as though she was about to speak when another voice came from outside the door, one that, even to Umbria, was all-too-familiar.

“Alright, Sara, what’s the breakthrough? Show it to me now!” One both the old man and the young woman entered the room, shock flooded their expressions, though each one clearly began to mix with another vastly different emotion, as well. Upper Giovanni’s was quickly being flooded with fury, while Sara’s slowly trickled into despair. Giovanni turned to Sara, raising a hand angrily at her and beginning to curse her. Sara yelped, flinching. Umbria witnessed this and yelled at the Upper.

“You so much as lay a finger on the poor girl, Giovanni, I will personally make sure you don’t see the light of day again!”

The Upper turned his attention to Umbria, shock once more filling his expression. Sara simply rushed over to Helen, who greeted her with a tight, comforting hug and quiet, kind words she hoped to use to calm her down. Umbria’s expression showed a mix of anger and disbelief as she walked briskly up to Giovanni, “It was a false alert, the system bugged out. Helen called me in here and we fixed it. Now, care to explain why you were attempting to harm the young lady over there for someone else following my direct order?”

“She had told me there was a breakthrough on the rebellion, and she hasn’t made a single breakthrough! She deceived me.”

“There was a bug in the system, you self-centered oaf. Have you considered that she maybe unable to make a breakthrough?”

“It is her one job-!”

“Giovanni, how about you leave these two alone. For good.”

“They are my employees-”

“And you are mine. Whatever you say, whatever news you get, whatever else you may learn about the rebellion, you are to report it to me first. You will not report on it, discuss it, or allow anyone else to so much as know it came in before you show it to me. If anyone else ever knows anything about the rebellion that I have not specifically and explicitly allowed, you will be fired, and I will treat your termination from the company exactly how you have treated your employees in years past. Right down to the detail. Do I make myself clear, Giovanni?”

“I cannot control what my employees share-!”

“Then you had better be extremely careful, hadn’t you?” Umbria crossed her arms. She was in a no-nonsense mood. “Now, skedaddle back to your little office and hope I don’t have to hear about you again.”

Giovanni glared and turned away, only turning back when Umbria spoke. “Oh, and one more thing,” Umbria met his eyes, “These girls no longer have to report to you. They report to me. You are not to ask them about the rebellion or any of their activities here at work. No, go.”
Ned and Ariel were pretty easy to get in touch with, the fact that they had two heads there to figure out exactly what was happening instead of one making it even easier for Andrew to get the message across. Ned and Ariel promised that they were heading out and quickly hung up. Andrew only had Shane and Ryan left to alert.

He dialed Shane’s number quickly, glancing up and checking his surroundings before hitting send. He didn’t like this. He didn’t like this at all. He felt like he was being watched. He knew there was a chance that this was just him being wrapped up in his own mind, but he also knew how real it felt, and he hated it. He hated it so much. He was so distracted by this feeling, in fact, that he didn’t even realize Shane had answered the phone- at least, he hadn’t until Shane asked him if he was okay three times in a row.

“Shit, Shane, we have a problem.” Andrew said into the phone quickly, trying to shake of his jumpiness, “The bread was fucked up. We need you here now. I don’t have time to explain much past that, just hurry.” and with that, he hung up. His phone call with Ryan didn’t differ much from the call he had with Shane. Both calls were short, but both were also effective, apparently, as both men hurried to get dressed and made their way to the bakery.

Andrew sighed after hanging up the phone, glancing around the alley one more time. He had calmed down from being angry, finally, but now he was paranoid. What if someone was there? What if they were following him? What if Umbria couldn’t save them? What if, what if, what if…

The only way he was able to break free from this train of thought was to head back inside, so he did. He quickly turned on his heel and began to walk back inside, freezing just as his hand reached the handle. Someone was there. They had a hand on his shoulder. Andrew grabbed the hand and turned, preparing to fight whoever was there-

Only to discover it was just Eugene.

Andrew let out a sigh of relief, placing a hand over his own chest, his heart pounding quickly again his chest. “Eugene, don’t fucking do that-”

Eugene noted how jumpy his friend was, chalk it up to whatever happened that compromised their rebellion, and nodded. He wasn’t here to shame Andrew for showing emotions, he was here to fix their fight. “Alright, I won’t. What happened? Why are we in a mess? What kind of mess is it-?”

“I can’t tell you out here, you know we can’t talk about it out here,” Andrew said slowly, straightening up and meeting Eugene’s eyes, “Get inside, we have a lot of shit to do-”

Three more familiar faces showed up, the feminine face being the one to interrupt Andrew, “Jesus Christ, Andrew, are you okay? I mean, I know it’s urgent, but you’re kinda barking orders now-”

Andrew was more relieved now, the feeling of being watched slowly beginning to disappear from the back of his mind. He nodded to Ariel, explaining that it was an extremely urgent topic and opening the door. “We have a pretty big problem to deal with, I just want to see if we can take care of this before tomorrow.” When the group nodded, he held the door open for them, anger beginning to boil inside of him once more. Oh, right, Becky had fucked them over, and now they had to confront her. Wonderful.

“Becky, please, just consider-” Steven was still trying to convince Becky to join up. He knew they
needed members, and he knew Becky was *ripped*. She could be a badass, and hell, even if she wasn’t, they still needed members. Becky, on the other hand, wasn’t having any of it.

“I’m not going to fucking join you when you fuckin trapped me down here.” Becky crossed her arms. At this point, the door opened, letting several people inside- one of which was Andrew. Becky’s eyes widened, worried that the big and scary rebellion man (that Steven knew was actually just an emotionless softie with a badass build) would hurt her.

Andrew explained the situation as soon as they were downstairs, “Becky told her friend, Holly, that she knew where the Rebellion HQ was, and then told her friend to meet her at Standrew’s bakery.”

Ned quirked an eyebrow curiously, confusion flooding his features, “Don’t we have the place protected, though? Why should it matter-?”

“It matters because she gave out our location over the phone to someone who is not part of the rebellion and lives in an unprotected house, and they can spy on us through the phones.” Zach explained quickly, turning his attention back to Andrew, “So what are the plans? Where’s Umbria?”

“Umbria went to the office to see what she could do to fix things up there, if she can do anything. If she manages to fix it up there, we’re in the clear.” Andrew said, voice as monotonous as ever despite the anger burning within him.

Keith, who someone else had managed to invite, spoke up after that, asking the question that hung heavy in the air. Nobody wanted to answer the question, nobody wanted to address the question, but now they had to. “What if she can’t?”

Silence filled the room for a few moments, only being broken when Steven spoke up from the corner of the room, “Then I guess we need to prepare to fight sooner than expected.”

Nobody liked the answer. Silence filled the room once more. Shane and Ryan walked into the room soon after, asking Andrew about the situation. The explanation they received sounded the same, but the mood of both the explanation and the room was vastly different. Shane nodded, accepting the explanation. Ryan asked if there was anything else she said.

“She said she wanted to join-” Andrew began awkwardly.

“That’s great!” Ryan perked up.

“-but I was pissed and told her off.”

“...Not great!”

Ariel quirked an eyebrow at Andrew and walked over, speaking quietly so Becky wouldn’t hear her, “Has she even been allowed out of the room yet?”

Andrew shook his head, “We wanted to make sure she wouldn’t tell anyone else-”

“So you kept her down here?”

“...yes?”

“...You’re a dumbass.”

Andrew sighed, “Ariel, I had to make sure she didn’t accidentally let anyone else know, and if she left, how could we fix it?”
“Okay, but do you think she’s going to want to join if Umbria can fix it now?”

Andrew shook his head, “Let’s just wait for her response, okay?”

After Giovanni left, Umbria walked up to the girls, “Are you two okay? Do you need anything?” Neither really replied, only giving small head shakes in response. Umbria sighed softly, “I’m so sorry for barking orders at you earlier, I just had something to protect- something I would actually like you two to join.”

Helen glanced up at Umbria, tears welling in her eyes as she rubbed Helen’s back calmingly. This was her way of saying Umbria could continue, which she did.

Umbria had the girls sit down in the chairs, whispering as quietly as she possibly could to both of them, “I know you two are supposed to track the rebellion, but I want to offer you a chance to do it for a group that wants to change the world. We want you to protect us in exchange for us protecting you, okay?”

Helen and Sara exchanged looks, Helen’s being more confused while Sara’s aired on the side of fear. Sara took in a breath and closed her eyes, her voice quiet and shaky, “What are you talking about?”

“I want you two to join the rebellion.”

Helen gasped. Sara’s mouth fell open. Helen broke into a grin. Sara’s eyes widened in fear. “I’d love to-!” “What if we get caught?”

Umbria nodded, understanding Sara’s concern, “I just told Giovanni off and that you didn’t have to report to him anymore. From now on, if you choose to, you can report all rebellion activity to me, and we can work from there.”

“But if anyone finds out-!” Sara was whisper-yelling, already fearful once more. Umbria understood why, but she also understood that she could protect them- the problem was letting them know she could.

“Nobody will find out, Sara, I promise. If you need, we can even offer you two a place to stay, free of charge, okay? We can protect you two.”

After some convincing, both girls joined. Umbria dialed Andrew’s number.

“Everyone hush, okay? I’ll tell you if she fixed it after this.” Andrew answered the phone, “Hey Umbria-”

“Everything is fixed,” Umbria said quickly, “and Eugene won’t have to convince the girls next workday, I got them to join our bakery tonight. We’ll be over soon.”

Andrew nodded, guilt sinking like a stone in his stomach as he glanced back at Steven and Becky. Steven was trying to convince her to join, but Becky was angry. She didn’t end up doing any harm
whatsoever. “Alright. See you soon.” Andrew hung up, groaning in self-hatred. Ariel asked what Umbria said, concerned that it was something bad, but no, Andrew had to explain, “Umbria fixed it, and I messed up a possible recruit for nothing.”

Eugene had an idea, “Maybe not. Give me a second.” He walked over to Steven and Becky, the eyes of every member of the rebellion trailing him as he walked.

“I’m not going to join your rebellion after this!” Becky spoke harshly to Steven. Now it was Keith’s time to shine.

“Good.”

Becky quirked an eyebrow at him, backing up slightly. This man wasn’t quite as threatening, though, she knew she could take him down in a heartbeat. “What?”

“I said, ‘Good.’” Eugene repeated, kneeling by her. “If you can’t handle this, then you couldn’t handle the rebellion, so it’s a good thing you don’t want to join anymore- you won’t be joining something you can’t handle, and we won’t have to carry you if you don’t think you can do it.”

“I can handle it, but I’m not joining you!” Becky fought back tears.

“Okay, so is there another rebellion you can join? As far as I know, we’re the only rebellion. You can always make your own, I guess, but what would you fight?”

“I want to fight what you guys are fighting, but-”

“Then why won’t you just join?”

“Because you guys kept me down here for thirty minutes!”

“We had to protect ourselves. We don’t like doing this, at all, but we had to. Sometimes we have to do what we don’t like, and if you can’t handle it, again, it’s a good thing you don’t want to join.” Eugene shrugged, “And there’s always the chance you might be captured or something, it’s a risk we all have to take for this- there’s a lot of risks, actually, but if you don’t want to-”

“It’s not that I don’t want to, I want to, and I could handle it!”

“Then prove it. If you join, you’re not signing a contract or entering a blood pact or anything, and you can leave at any point. We’re not going to stop you. We’re not rebelling to hurt people. If you end up not wanting to stay, you can leave, okay?”

Becky seemed to consider it for a moment, finally nodding. “If I want to leave your rebellion, I can?” Eugene nodded, “Then I’ll do it, but I want you to let Holly in, deal?”

“Deal.” Eugene nodded, “Now come on, let’s go introduce you to everyone else.”

With that, Becky and Eugene stood and began walking over, leaving Steven there in bewilderment. However Eugene had done that, it was incredible- and the reason Eugene was the recruiter, usually.

The group had avoided a crisis that night, but it gave them an idea of what the rest of the rebellion could hold. It was terrifying. Their rebellion was growing. This was real. They couldn’t turn back.

They had to accomplish their goal.
Quick Update

I want you all to know that, despite not updating in over a year, I don't want this story to die. I know how many of you liked it, and I know how much it meant to me, and I genuinely do apologize for stopping the updates- especially as abruptly as I did. You guys, as readers, didn't deserve that. In all honesty, I fell into a slump. I got to a point where nothing brought me joy, and all I could do was sleep. I didn't have the energy or motivation to do anything. I almost dropped out of band when that happened, I nearly didn't apply for college, and I was extremely close to quitting my job. I had a lot on my plate, and I genuinely couldn't see a reason to go on with any of it. By the time it was over, I was ungodly busy, and I didn't have time to read or update or anything. I had fallen behind on Unsolved, on Try Guys, on everything, and I didn't feel like I could provide you with the content quality you deserved.

But that's over. I'm still busy, don't get me wrong, but I'm learning how to balance it. I'm going to keep updating this story, I promise you that, but I need time to read and watch things again. I need to reread what I had written and pick it back up where it left off. Expect an update in February. And from there, it might be weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly- I'm not entirely sure. I'm still learning how to balance things in my life, and I appreciate all of you who are still here after all this time, and I understand why the readers I've lost have left. Regardless of which type of reader you are, I appreciate you, and you all deserve to have your expectations met and even exceeded.

I hope you all understand. And I hope you choose to stick with this story.

I love you all <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!