

Chapter 1.1

The Blue Bulldog was blonde when I met her

Shirtless and dirty, Mach Courtenay exhaustedly dragged himself along the streets of Sanctus City's slums as the bright sunlight made him sweat like hell. Flies buzzed around his half-long, blond hair, and he was too exhausted to keep waving them away. In his pockets, the sound of around 20 Sanctus Dollars worth of coins chinked with every step he made. With that, he had once again secured himself dinner.

Sigh. The life of the homeless was rough, wasn't it? But everything was better than sharing a house with parents who degraded you for the one thing you were passionate about.

"Dancing is for girls and gays, is it? Ridiculous." He muttered to himself as he spat on the sidewalk he walked on. The idea just pissed him off. Sure, his dancing was flamboyant and his outfits were pretty revealing, but even so, what'd they want from him? Become a shoemaker like his father? That sounded like the most boring life he could possibly come up with.

Finally, he had arrived at heaven's door. Most people imagine the entrance to the kingdom in the skies to be a golden gate on a road made of clouds, but for Mach, it was the wooden front door to this small burger café.

"I'm back again!" He greeted the bartender and owner of the café as he walked in, quickly taking a seat on one of the wooden stools in front of the bar.

"The usual, I imagine?" The old man asked him.

"Naturally."

Arnold, the owner's name was. He'd pass for a lookalike of the mascot of that foreign chicken place. What was his name again? Mach thought, Colonel Sanders, right? He was an unmarried orphan taken in by the previous owner of this place, around fifty years ago. He had been running the place for a long time by now, to the point where Mach wondered if he was ever intending on retiring.

"Tired?" Arnold asked him.

"Of course. Dancing on the street isn't the fastest way to make bucks, you know? Especially not here in the slums, where everyone's poor."

"Hah! If it were, I wouldn't have to keep ya around sleeping in my attic, would I?"

"You have a point, unfortunately."

"Bwahahaha!!"

"One cheeseburger and a cola..." A guy in his early twenties called from the kitchen in the most unenthusiastic tone Mach had ever heard.

"You sound even more tired than I am, Archie!" Mach told him as he placed Mach's order in front of him.

"Because I am, smartass." Archie 'stabbed' Mach's forehead with his finger.

"Because you're chronically online and barely sleep, you fool." Mach laughed, "Touch some grass with me sometime!"

"There's barely any in this prison of a city."

"There's a park, you know?"

"Yeah, and it takes an hour and a half to walk there."

"Fair enough." Mach shrugged.

"Hey, Archie, it's not your break yet, is it?" Arnold joked, which was all it took to get him to hurry back into the kitchen he came from.

"You're a real pain sometimes, you know that?" Arnold chuckled as he patted Mach on his shoulder, "You distract my male employees with banter and my female employees with your chest! Get a shirt, at least!"

"With what money?" Mach sighed. "Want me to work here? You're the only one who'd hire me."

"Don't have a spot open for ya, kiddo. You'll have to wait."

"Figured as much."

"Go eat your burger, before it turns cold."

"Yes, sir!"

In silence, Mach ate his burger as Arnold served customers. Every day had been the same recently. He'd wake up, go on the streets, dance on the street in hopes of people throwing cash, and using that cash to pay for dinner. It didn't matter how hard he worked. He was stuck at the bottom of the economic food chain. He had a roof for now, but he couldn't occupy the café's attic forever. He couldn't exactly live off of burgers for eternity, either. What could he possibly do? He didn't have the money to attend school, either. It all came down to money, and he had none.

"Damn it..."

SLAM! Mach's little moment of reflection and thought was forcefully interrupted by the forceful opening of the front door. As he turned around, his eyes narrowed. Instead of a delinquent student or a gangster, what he saw was...

A girl of his age..? She looked rich, too, mostly because of the suit and skirt she wore. Not to mention, she looked absolutely stunning. Her long, blonde hair and pretty face essentially made for the perfect stereotype of an attractive young lady. Everything except for her expression, which was that of a raging pit-bull. She stomped her way to the front of the bar, and sat down on the stool next to Mach.

“Cheeseburger. Cola.” She grumbled as she slammed an excessive amount of money on the counter. She glanced at Mach for a bit, but as soon as he looked back, she turned the other way as quickly as she could.

“What’s a pretty girl like you doing in the slums?” Mach decided to ask. He had finished his burger and had nothing better to do, anyway. Besides, she piqued his interest more than a little bit.

“Ran from home.” She answered, “Dumb, I know.”

“I’d be a hypocrite if I told you that. I’m in the same boat.

What’s your name?”

“Shikoba. Yours?”

“I’m Mach. Nice to meet you.”

“Same.”

Something about her voice caught Mach’s attention. It was about the way she talked. It was like she was really trying to sound rude, or blunt, perhaps. How interesting.

“A cheeseburger and a co-...” Archie came back from the kitchen, but turned speechless as she saw Shikoba. He put the plate on the counter for her, but there was a bewildered look on his face.

“What?” Shikoba frowned at him, and so did Mach. What got into Archie all of a sudden?

“You’re... Shikoba Bullard, right?” Archie asked with more than a little bit of hesitation.

“Maybe.” She glared at him, though Mach could see suppressed panic in her eyes.

“What the hell are you doing here, then?”

“Mind your fucking business, cunt!” She slammed her fist on the counter. That was the end of their conversation if Mach had anything to say about it. In an attempt to diffuse the situation, he placed his hand on her shoulder.

“Calm, he’s a moron, but there’s no ill will in him.” Mach told her. Her muscles relaxed. Good.

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine...” Archie awkwardly replied before returning to the kitchen once more. Pfft, he looked like he pissed his pants or something.

“What’s the commotion over there?” Arnold showed up. Mach hadn’t even realized he was away from the counter.

“The conflict is already resolved, Colonel.” Mach assured him.

“Archie recognized this pretty lady here, and stepped on something sensitive.”

“Ever the flatterer, aren’t ya?” Arnold laughed before continuing his work. Mach simply shrugged. Looking to his side, however, it looked like he turned Shikoba bashful.

"You're red." He poked at her forearm.

"S-shut up."

Pfft.

"Can I ask why you got so mad, though?" Mach couldn't help but asking. Perhaps it was foolish of him, but somehow, he felt like he could get away with it if he asked it now. For some reason, he felt like he could read her mood.

"You don't know who I am?" Shikoba looked confused.

"I... don't think I do?"

"Bullard." She repeated again.

All of a sudden, it hit him.

"You're *that* Shikoba Bullard?? The daughter of..?"

"Of Gareth Bullard, yeah."

"The billionaire CEO?"

"The piece of shit, yeah."

"You must be in a lot of trouble right now, then!"

"No shit."

Gareth Bullard... commonly known as the richest man in the city, and as the CEO of HighLife, a pharmaceutical company with close ties to Sanctus' government. If Shikoba was his daughter...

"Why'd you run?" Mach asked. Obviously, money was not an issue for her, right? On paper, she could do whatever she wanted. Mach wondered why anyone would give that up willingly.

“You got time?” She chuckled, making Mach do the same.
“Of course.”

And so, on that evening, the most impactful friendship in the history of Sanctus was formed. It was a small gust of wind that would soon evolve and rage as a hurricane all over the city and beyond. This story is about this slowly but steadily growing storm, and its aftermath.

This is the story of Shikoba, the Delinquent Detective.

Chapter 1.2

I won't let you have your way, Luna

Sanctus, a city-state surrounded by big city walls so high, not even Mach himself knew what life was like outside. Ruled by dictators and their scummy business friends for over a hundred years now, any information about the outside world was thoroughly suppressed. For the sake of the people's safety, Governor Morsus, the current dictator, would say on state television every few days, but Mach had no idea what that outside danger could possibly be.

As the sun slowly rose, Mach woke up from a dream. A dream about the outside world. In his imagination, it was a vast, grassy land where the people were free from government interference in their private lives. He'd walk around and see happy people doing what they loved, not what they had to. A paradise, and very much the polar opposite of Sanctus City. He sighed. If only these kinds of dreams were reality instead.

He turned to his side, but flipped back when he realized Shikoba was sleeping beside him. Oh, right. She was here too.

"I ran from home because I was nothing but a fucking prisoner." Shikoba told him yesterday, "I couldn't be myself, I couldn't do what I want, all because it'd look bad to the public if I misbehaved, or some horseshit like that. My dad saw me as a doll and nothing else."

It was a story that Mach could relate to. Perhaps to an uncomfortable degree. Of course, the ideas of reputation weren't very relevant, but everything else was. When he lived

with his parents, there was no way he could ever act on his dreams.

There was a lot more that Shikoba had said yesterday, but it was incoherent, angry rambling that wasn't really anything that Mach could properly remember.

He wondered, should he wake her up? Maybe not. She'd get mad, probably.

As he got up, he felt a soft hand grabbing his wrist. Confused, Mach looked into Shikoba's half-opened eyes. It seems she did that on reflex..?

"What are you doing?" He asked.

"...Shit!" Shikoba immediately let go, "I... don't know why the fuck I did that, I'm sorry, I... argh! I'm so dumb!"

Yeah, that seemed pretty embarrassing, Mach chuckled. "Did you dream I was your boyfriend or something?" He joked, but the reaction was rather, uh, bashful. "...Seriously?"

"I didn't realize it was a dream for a second, okay?! Dreams are nonsense! You know it and so do I! Forget about this, please!"

If only dreams weren't nonsense, huh? Maybe then they'd be living free, in that green paradise he saw last night.

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone, nor think anything of it."

"Forget! I won't settle for less!" She insisted.

"Sorry, I had a sudden case of amnesia, what were we talking about?" Mach winked at her.

"That's more like it!"

The two of them laughed, and before he knew it, he was already back on the bed, sitting next to her, talking.

Considering how loud and angry she was, her looks were rather deceiving, weren't they? Despite her foul language, she looked like a posh young, well-mannered, rich lady.

"Hey, thanks." Shikoba said all of a sudden.

"Hmm? For what?"

"For treating me like a person. Nobody else ever does that."

It wasn't hard for Mach to tell that it meant a lot to her. Her voice had softened, and her expression turned a bit shy. How cute.

"You're welcome." Mach smiled back. It was nice for him, too. At the café he had people to talk to, but besides that, it had been rather lonely. He had just met Shikoba, but in the moment, he felt like he wouldn't mind if this morning lasted forever.

Of course, it didn't.

"Hey, Mach!" Arnold called for him from downstairs, "There's a Blacksuit here, lookin' for a blonde teenager with long hair!"

"What the-... I'll be downstairs in a sec!"

Blacksuits were what people in the slums tended to call special agents from the government. The name came from the fact that they all wore black suits. It was that simple.

"They're obviously here for me." Shikoba told me.

"I know," Mach nodded, "and I'm sure Arnold knows, too."

"The fuck are you on about?"

"There's an old, metal staircase leading outside to the café's backyard from the balcony, see there?" He pointed at a very old, almost rotting door behind the bed, "Go through there, and you'll be able to run away without the Blacksuits spotting you. Do you have a phone I can call you with?"

"You two are the best! Thanks so much!"

After quickly registering Shikoba's number in his way too outdated phone, Mach went downstairs and found Arnold at the bar, and a young lady, just a bit older than he was, sitting on his usual stool.

She was a rather odd looking woman. Her hair was as white as paper, her skin was pale, and her eyes were... orange? It was the only thing about her appearance that wasn't black or white. He could hear the sound her black leather gloves made as she picked up a glass of what appeared to be iced lemonade.

"There you are!" Arnold greeted him as Mach walked up to them, taking a seat next to the young woman.

"Good morning, Colonel." He returned the favor, before turning to the woman. "And you are..?"

"I am Luna Snowfield, I'm with the SSA." She introduced herself. "That stands for Sanctus Special Agency, just to make sure you understand the severity of *lying* to me before you attempt anything."

She unnerved him. She wore a permanent, gentle smile, and her voice was calm, but the words she spoke were nothing short of a threat. It was quite clear that she was certain Shikoba was here.

“I know what the SSA is, yes.” Mach nodded.

“I would assume so.” Luna repetitively tapped her finger on the counter, “And yet, your host behaves as if my visit is nothing to worry about. It seems he thinks he can just call you here and pretend he thought I was looking for you.”

“Makes sense,” Mach shrugged nonchalantly, “it wouldn’t have been the first time that ladies came looking for me.”

Luna’s smile disappeared, and Mach’s quickly followed. Tension had rapidly increased as Luna learned that Mach was not much of an honor citizen, and not very intimidated by her or the SSA.

“Don’t be foolish.” She shook her head, “I know Shikoba Bullard was here. I would prefer not to arrest you for obstruction of law enforcement.”

“And what law, exactly, are you enforcing right now?”

“That is none of your business.”

“You don’t have an answer, do you?” Mach stood up from his seat, “You Blacksuits never do. You’re mindless puppets who’ll do whatever is asked of you. No matter what. No matter who it benefits. As long as the Governor commands it.”

Arnold looked on with sweat all over his face as Luna also got up and stared Mach down. If she had worn heels, she’d have been taller than him. Neither of them was budging. Not Mach,

nor Luna. For about a minute, a devastating silence made a wave of fiery tension fill the room.

"I don't have the time to deal with you. I am going upstairs myself." Luna eventually budged and approached the staircase. "Don't consider yourself lucky, this is going on your record." She added before she headed for the attic.

Mach didn't reply or attempt to stop her. She was significantly delayed. Shikoba should have been able to leave. Not that she wouldn't eventually be found, but at least he helped her make the attempt. Maybe he could help some more if he knew where she was...

Thankfully, he got her number. He wasn't done messing with Blacksuits just yet, then. Nor was he done with Shikoba. Not even close, in fact. What an intriguing person she was. Of course, her being a pretty girl wasn't irrelevant, but... there was something more to her. He could relate to her.

"You've got some balls, kiddo!" Arnold said. His voice sounded like he had been holding his breath or something. "I knew I could trust ya."

"Quiet, she might hear you." Mach put his finger on his mouth. He sat down on his preferred stool again, now that Luna was no longer occupying it. Smugly, he leaned forwards on the counter and smirked. "Perhaps you could reward me for my great performance with a free breakfast, though?"

"You're quite the opportunistic fella, y'know that?"

"I do, Colonel."

"Self-aware too, I see!"

The two laughed. At their own banter, but also in the face of the Sanctus government, who they had successfully inconvenienced. Served them right. The people didn't choose them, nor have they ever been polled on approval in any meaningful way. Governor Morsus was a dictator, and so were his predecessors. Mach didn't exactly have the best experiences with authority figures.

The squeaky sound of leather shoes stepping on old wooden stairs got louder again. It seemed Luna had come back.

"It appears she is not here, or at least, not anymore." Luna stated.

"It's hard to admit you were wrong, I get it." Mach winked. Luna was clearly suppressing her anger. What a wonderful sight, Mach thought.

"I hope we never cross paths again." She said as she walked away and opened the front door.

"Same." Mach replied, and like that, Luna closed the door behind her. Seconds later, Mach and Arnold heard the sound of a car driving away.

"Bah! The audacity!" Arnold scoffed. "Anyway, you go do something! I dunno what, but I know you're not gonna do nothin'!"

"After breakfast, thank you!"

"Yeah, yeah! One free sandwich, comin' right up!"

"Only one? I'm a growing boy, y'know?"

"Don't push your luck, kiddo!"

Chapter 1.3

And thus, my life was forever changed

With a scheming smirk on his face, Mach stepped into a bus and sat down on a softly cushioned chair, before being shooed out of the 1st class area by an ungracious businessman and was forced to settle for an uncomfortable, rock-solid regular seat instead. His grin returned shortly after however, for he knew that was going to happen anyway. Outside of the slums, there was no way he was going to find any kind of sympathy from the average passerby. It was obvious that Mach was from the slums, and the slums had a bad reputation. The last thing the average middle-class citizen in Sanctus wanted to risk, was trouble.

“Whatever.” Mach thought. What mattered was getting in the way of Luna Snowfield and her mission as long as physically possible. Without further delay, he called Shikoba.

“Hey, where are you right now?” Mach asked as soon as Shikoba picked up, which was immediately.

“Who the fuck is this?”

“It’s Mach. I gave you my number, didn’t you put it in your phone?”

“Oh, Mach! Hey!” Her tone shifted instantly, “I just answered without looking. Anyways, I’m at Market Hall! Get over here!”

“Market Hall? You move fast.”

“You bet! Anyway, I gotta hang up, I’m in the middle of something! Meet me at the fountain or whatever!”

“The fountain at Market Hall?”

“Yeah, duh! See ya there!”

She sounded a bit more lively than earlier. Mach wondered why, but quickly decided that thinking about that now would be pointless. What was more relevant, was that he now knew what his stop was. A few more stops, and he’d arrive at Market Hall.

“Next stop, Ignis Academy.”

Mach looked out of the bus’s window as he heard the robotic voice called that stop. What he saw looked more like a fortress than a school. It was enormous, too, and certainly everything but welcoming, with soldiers with laser swords guarding the gates. It was one of the only two schools in the entire city, the other being an elementary school. No matter if you were still doing regular high school studies, or studied business, law, agriculture, or science, you’d have to do it at Ignis Academy.

Mach, however, did not see it as a massive learning institution, but rather as one of the primary cogs in Governor Morsus’ propaganda machine. In that prison of a school, there was no way you were going to learn anything about the problems in Sanctus that caused the slums to exist, let alone anything about the outside world.

“Next stop, Sanctus State Hospital.”

Another fortress of a building. Mach couldn’t criticize its functions, though. After all, it was a hospital. The technology

there was crazy, he didn't need a comparison with another country to understand that Sanctus' healthcare was among the best in the world. That is, assuming you had the money for it. That was the problem with it. Mach couldn't even afford to buy a shirt if he wanted to eat. Getting treatment at Sanctus State Hospital was absolutely out of the question. If he were to get injured or sick, he was screwed.

"Next stop, Market Hall."

Finally, his stop. Mach placed his ID on the scanner until the light below turned green, and put it back in his pocket as he hopped out of the bus. At least public transport was free. At the cost of the government being able to track exactly where you were headed. Sigh. What a shithole, this place was.

Well, at least he had arrived where he needed to be. Market Hall. Compared to the other big buildings he had come across, this place was as welcoming as walking into the open arms of your lover. It was just a very big commercial complex, but the bar was very low.

As the automatic see-through doors opened, Mach stepped right into Market Hall. It was crowded! Well, of course it was. There was no legal indoor service you could think of that this place did not have. The fountain Shikoba wanted him to meet her at was at the center of the building's bottom floor, so he made his way over there. Given the size of this place, Mach guessed it'd take him ten minutes to get there.

It took him fifteen. His estimates did not take into account that he would be shoved around and slowed down by the thick sea

of people that permanently flooded the indoor market streets. The sign saying 'do not touch the fountain' did not stop Mach from sitting down on the fountain pool's edge.

And now, it was time to wait. Constantly, passersby would look at him, and it was starting to annoy him. He knew it was inevitable though. He was sitting there alone and shirtless. It wasn't often that people as poor as him would wander around the big city areas.

"Mach!!" An extraordinarily loud voice called out for him. It sounded very familiar, but as he looked for who was coming for him, he didn't recognize them. A... guy..? It was hard to tell from this distance. Standing out was their half-long, dyed blue hair, though. As they got closer, however, Mach's eyebrows were raised, and his jaw dropped. It was Shikoba.

"Yo!" She waved before taking a seat next to him on the fountain's edge. "What do you think?"

"I've never seen a guy this cute before!" Mach chuckled, getting him rocked back and forth by her.

"Oh, fuck you!" She laughed, but she seemed rather nervy. Maybe she wanted to impress him? "I wanted to get rid of everything about me that made me who I was before I broke my chains, y'know? So I sold my clothes and bought this simple shirt, these short pants, and a pair of sneakers, and I went to a barber shop! Do I look fucking cool now or what?" "You look more like yourself." Mach smiled. Shikoba's happiness was contagious.

"Y-yeah! I agree!"

She was so easily flustered, Mach found it fun to do it on purpose. Saying anything she wanted to hear did the trick, it seemed.

“Shit! I almost forgot!” Shikoba suddenly said as she grabbed into her shopping bag and pulled a black blouse out of it. It was still inside plastic packaging, but it definitely seemed too big for Shikoba to wear. “This is for you!” She pressed the package into my chest.

“For... me?”

“Hell yeah! Try it on! I kinda just randomly guessed what your size must be, so it might not be perfect, but I had to do something after you helped me out!”

She was a surprisingly pure soul, wasn't she? Mach's heart had a bit of trouble staying calm.

“Thanks..!”

“No problem! Now c'mon, try it on! I don't mind seeing you shirtless, but-..!”

“What was that?” Mach looked her in the eyes, all smug.

“Nothing you couldn't've already guessed!” She raised her voice, but not out of anger. “Just try it on already!”

“Yeah, yeah, it's just hard not to tease you.”

“Nothing hard about it!”

Mach simply laughed in response, and proceeded to open the plastic package and try on the blouse Shikoba had bought for him.

“Huh, it fits perfectly.” Mach's excitement was hard to hide.

“Damn, lucky me!” Shikoba cheered, “Well, lucky you,

actually! Lemme take a photo so you can see how you look!" She suggested. She didn't wait for an answer, however, and just took a picture immediately.

"Here!" She proudly presented her phone's screen to him.

"You like it?"

"It's a bit blurry."

"Wait, shit, really?" She quickly looked at the photo herself, only to find that it was a perfectly normal photo. "Damn you, Mach!"

"You're welcome!" He laughed again. "It's a great blouse, Shikoba. I love it, thank you."

"Y-yeah, you're welcome..!"

Flustered again. He never got tired of this. However, the two of them had been spending a lot of time idling around in a very public place... it was only a matter of time before Blacksuits would find them at this rate.

"Maybe we should-.." Leave, Mach was about to say, but he was interrupted by Shikoba's ringing phone. Without pause, Shikoba picked up, much to Mach's dismay.

"Who the hell is this?" Shikoba stood up and walked back and forth a bit, but before she could even reply, the caller hung up already. She didn't look pleased.

"Who was it?" Mach asked.

"Some fucker from the SSA." She growled, "Told me that they

knew where I was. I'm supposed to head to the pharmacist on the second floor, or they're throwing you in jail."

Crap.

"Sorry, this is my fault." Mach bit his lip, "I took the bus, they probably guessed where you were because of me. Either that, or you were spotted. Perhaps both."

"Who cares?" Shikoba shrugged. "Not much we can do but do as they said. I'm not abandoning your ass!"

Phew. That was all Mach needed to hear right now.

"Thanks." He told her as he got up from the fountain's edge as well. "What are you going to do?"

"No clue! But I'm definitely not gonna go back home! I'd rather die!" She declared, "Seriously!"

Mach didn't doubt her sincerity. A life as nothing more than a PR tool sounded like torture. Besides, if he were put in this situation with his own parents, he'd probably say the same.

"Let's hope they don't ask that of you, then."

"I'd punch their lights out! Or die trying!"

"Let's go, shall we?"

"Yeah. No choice in the matter." Shikoba nodded. Mach was just glad that Shikoba didn't see 'Ditch Mach and dip' as an option.

Market Hall was a very, very big building. Even though it took Mach fifteen minutes to walk to the center, there were actually elevators that could take you to two more similarly sized

floors, although the highest floor was not accessible for most people. The rumor was that a group of powerful companies stored things there, but honestly, there was no way to know what exactly its use was.

While the first floor has mostly entertainment and lifestyle & luxury stores, with some exceptions, the second floor was home to mostly health and fitness establishments. But considering the place's size, there was of course a lot more.

It did mean, however, that they'd have to go there to get to the pharmacist. Mach and Shikoba swiftly made their way to the nearest elevator, and managed to rush inside right before the door closed.

It was surprisingly empty inside. A young woman with kind of short, black hair was the only other person in the elevator. Usually, Mach wouldn't complain about more lady company, but this particular woman wore a black suit. The same as Luna's. She wasn't going to stand there idly, either, and pat him on his shoulder as soon as he stood still.

"Mach Courtenay, 20 years old, homeless, jobless, son of Maurice and Joanna Courtenay. Correct? I'm Alba Greene. I'm with the SSA. I'd have to ask you to leave." She smirked. God, her bratty voice already pissed him off. He was not the only one, either.

"Oh shut the fuck up!" Shikoba pushed her away from him.

"Leave him alone."

"And who might you be? Are you some delinquent friend of his?"

"I'm Shikoba Bullard, you fucking idiot." She crossed her arms. "He's my company! If ya don't like it, you can suck it!"

"And there you have it!" Mach shrugged with a satisfied, smug grin on his face, "Would you mind showing us the way?"

"That's... why I'm here. To show Shikoba the way. But I suppose the influence of the slums grows quicker than imagined." She sneered at him. Shikoba set a step forward, but Mach was just in time to grab her wrist. She had already made a fist.

"Violence will make this worse." Mach quickly whispered.

"Tch! She deserves violence."

"Now's not the time, calm down." He loosened his grip on her wrist and made relaxed eye contact to calm her. It took a few seconds, but Shikoba finally took a deep breath, and nodded.

"Thanks."

Ding-dong!

That elevator took its sweet time, Mach complained internally as he let go of Shikoba and walked behind Alba.

"Come with me, my rebellious little troublemakers!" She mocked them as she made her way to their destination. Reluctantly, Mach and Shikoba followed.

The second floor seemed suspiciously empty... did they lock it from the public?

"It's like a damn ghost town here." Shikoba took the words out of his mouth.

“We shut it off as soon as young Mr. Courtenay got out of the bus.” Alba explained obnoxiously. “I was about to come get you, but you rushed into my elevator on your own already.”

That explained why it was so unusually crowded, Mach thought to himself. Damn, they really kept an eye on his movements the second Luna left the café, didn't they?

“Here it is! Walk all the way to the back, Luna will be waiting for you.”

“Sure...” Shikoba said before muttering something Mach couldn't decipher, making him snicker a little.

The store was rather big. The floor was marble of a light pick color, and the walls were baby blue. Mach vomited internally at the sight of it. It looked horrible.

“Every single product you see is made by my father's company.” Shikoba grumbled.

“He basically has a monopoly on pharma, right?”

“Yup. He's hella proud of it, too. Even though I doubt he's pulled it off in a moral fashion!”

“Of course he didn't.” Mach said. “He's a CEO in Sanctus.”

“You're right.”

The two of them walked up to a metal door in the back of the store, which automatically opened when they were close to it. The room that was unlocked for them was a small, barren room with nothing but a table and three chairs.

"I would bid you welcome, but one of you came here uninvited." Luna greeted them. "Hello. That would be the appropriate greeting. Sit down."

"Aye' aye..." Shikoba cheered sarcastically, and sat down on one of the chairs opposite to Luna. Mach followed soon after.

"What are we even supposed to discuss?" Mach asked, "I expected you would just take Shikoba to her father and leave."
"That was the plan." Luna nodded, "But you see, Mr. Bullard has been kept up to date with everything that has happened, and described Shikoba to have become 'unhinged', in his words. He does not want her back."

"Good! So what's the damn problem then?! Leave me alone!" Shikoba slammed her fist on the table, making a dent in the old wooden furniture.

"You know too much. The governor has repeatedly tried to convince your father to take you back, but he refused every time."

"Glad we're in agreement for once! I'm not going back!"

"Please, let me talk." Luna's tone grew impatient. Mach enjoyed every second of her struggle.

"Okay, so what's the point you're making, puppet?"

"Two options." Luna ignored her insult, "Either you and Mach live together in an apartment of the governor's choosing, where you will be surveilled by Alba and I for as long as he deems that to be necessary, or you both go to jail. These are your only options. Pick one."

"Huh? Why am I supposed to be surveilled What did I do?" Mach stood up. Luna simply let out an annoying, triumphant giggle in response.

"We in the SSA have this thing called pride. Nobody messes with one of us and gets away unscathed. I may have exaggerated your behavior in my report to make you look bad. You do not have proof for that, though."

"Wow. You seriously went that far, didn't you?" Mach could almost *feel* his blood boiling! What an insufferable witch! He was on a government list now? Just because he inconvenienced Luna for an hour or three? Holy shit.

"I did. You have only yourself to thank for that, though."

"What a load of horseshit!" Shikoba stood up and slammed the table again, punching a hole in it this time, startling both Mach and Luna for a bit. "He has YOU to blame for it, bitch!" "So I take it you want to go to jail together?" Luna grinned mockingly, "Make up your mind, I have other things to do today."

"That's not my problem!" Shikoba yelled back, but all it made Luna do is let out a deep sigh.

"It is. How many times do you two need to blunder around before you realize that it is you who are the puppets? You have no power around me. In my report, reality can be whatever I want it to be. The governor gave me two options to give you. Pick one or the other, or else I decide your fate myself. I hold no sympathy for either of you, so I recommend you make up your mind."

“So?” Mach turned to Shikoba. “Roommates, then?”

“Guess so!”

“See, that wasn’t so hard.” Luna mocked them. “I have one more requirement for you, however. You are both to attend Ignis Academy. Pick an education of your choosing, and learn to become a productive member of society by the time you are no longer under supervision. The government will sign you up and pay for your school fees, so be grateful. It is not what I would have-...” Luna interrupted herself. “Never mind. What I would have done is not relevant, nor should I think about such things. I apologize for making things personal.”

A bit late, wasn’t it? But considering he had been provoking her too, Mach felt like he shouldn’t judge her apology. He could never forgive ruining his record out of spite, though.

“So, we got off pretty well, didn’t we?” Shikoba contently lounged in the back of a limousine, Mach sitting behind her. “Honestly, yeah. We’ll have to deal with Blacksuits constantly, though. Not looking forward to that.”

“Fuck them! They’ll learn soon enough that I’m not easily tamed!”

“Don’t be so sure.” Luna interrupted from the driver’s seat. “Don’t expect privacy. SSA surveillance is not to be messed with.”

“Neither am I!”

“You are a clown, but I respect your confidence. You’ll adapt soon enough, however.”

Shikoba laughed at her, and Mach smiled. There was one thing he absolutely knew for certain;

He would never be bored ever again.