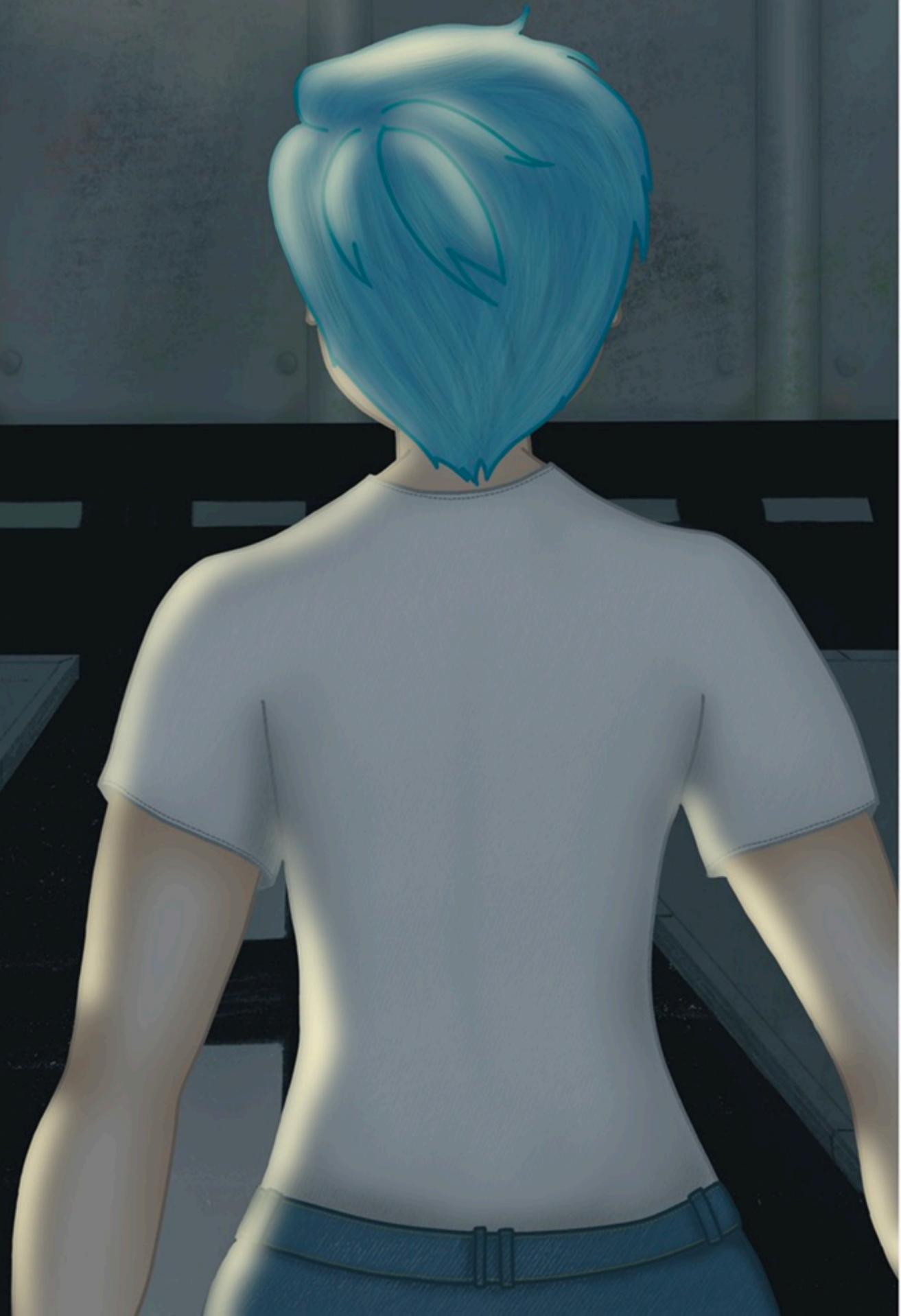


SHIKOBA



**MARIJN
LUNSING**

Chapter 1.1

Shirtless and sweaty, Mach Courtenay dragged himself through the streets of dirt that characterized Sanctus City's slums. Flies buzzed around his shoulder-length blond hair, and he was too tired to keep waving them away. The sound of coins, worth roughly 20 Sanctus Dollars, chinked from his pockets with every step he made. It was rough, making money by dancing on the street and hoping that people tossed him coins, but he had once again secured dinner.

Mach sighed. Calling it 'rough' might undersell the misery. With the blazing sun shining upon the island mercilessly all year long, this kind of 'job' was definitely not easy on his stamina. Still, he preferred even this life of homelessness over living with his parents.

"Dancing is for girls and gays. Get a man's hobby!" Is what his father would always say. Ha, what did he want from him, to get really passionate about becoming a shoemaker? Like him? Not in a million years. What a soulless existence. It sounded like hell on earth for him, even by Sanctus' living standards.

But finally, for today, his suffering was about to come to an end, for he had arrived at heaven's door. Most people would imagine the entrance to the kingdom of heaven to look like a golden gate on a road of soft, white clouds, but for Mach, it was the wooden front door of this small burger café.

"I'm back, Colonel!" He greeted the bartender and owner of the café as he walked in, quickly hopping onto one of the wooden stools in front of the bar. Specifically, one made from a darker wood than the others. They were older, but more comfortable. Mach had been here enough times to know.

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

"You know me."

Arnold, the man's name was. To Mach, he looked like he would pass as the mascot for a fried chicken-focused fast-food chain, but that thought was a rather irrational one. Nonetheless, the nickname 'Colonel' stuck. Arnold was an orphan taken in by this place's previous owner, around fifty years ago. He was unmarried, and had been running the place for a long time now. Mach wondered if he was ever going to retire.

"Tired?" Arnold asked him.

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

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

"You got me there."

"Bwahahaha!!"

"One cheeseburger and a cola..." A guy in his early twenties called from the kitchen in a tone so unenthusiastic, you'd almost think he was talking in his sleep.

"You sound even more tired than I am, Archie!" Mach joked as he placed his food in front of him.

"Because I am, smartass."

"It's because you're chronically online, you fool!" Mach laughed, "Touch some grass with me sometime!"

"There barely is any, in this prison of a city."

"There's a park, you know?"

"Yeah, and it takes an hour and a half to get there on foot."

Mach shrugged. "Fair enough."

"Hey Archie," Arnold tapped his finger on the bar, "It's not your break yet, is it?"

He said it jokingly, but it was all it took for Archie to hurry back into the kitchen he came from. Arnold then turned to Mach again.

"You're a real pain in the ass, you know that?" He chuckled as he patted him 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? 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 onto the streets, dance in hopes of people throwing cash, and use that money 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 attic forever, could he? He couldn't live off of burgers for eternity, either. But what could he possibly do? He didn't have the money to afford an education. It all came down to money, and he had none.

"Damn it..."

SLAM!

Mach's little moment to himself was abruptly interrupted by the forceful opening of the front door. As he turned around, his eyes narrowed. Instead of a delinquent or a gangster, what he saw was...

"Huh..?"

A girl his age..? She looked rich, too. Mostly because of the suit and skirt she wore. Not to mention, she was absolutely stunning. Her long blonde hair and pretty face essentially made for the perfect stereotype of an attractive young lady. Everything except her expression, which resembled a raging pitbull more than anything else. She stomped her way to the bar and sat down on the stool next to Mach's. He wanted to tell her the stool to her left was comfier, but he stayed silent.

“Cheeseburger. Cola.” She barked, slamming down an excessive amount of money on the counter. She glanced at Mach for a bit, but looked away as quickly as she could when Mach looked back.

“What’s a pretty girl like you doing here?” Mach asked. He had finished his burger, and figured he had nothing better to do, anyway. Besides, she piqued his interest more than a little bit.

“Ran from home.” She said. “Dumb. I know.”

“I’m in the same boat, you know? I’d be a hypocrite if I thought that. What’s your name?”

“Shikoba. Yours?”

“I’m Mach. Nice to meet you.”

“Same.”

Something about her voice caught his attention. It was the way she talked. He felt like she was trying really hard to sound rude, or blunt, perhaps.

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

“What?” Shikoba frowned. Mach did the same. What got into Archie all of a sudden?

“You’re... Shikoba Bullard, right?” Archie asked.

“Maybe.” She glared at him. Mach, however, saw suppressed panic in her eyes.

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

"Mind your damn business!" She slammed her fist on the counter. That was the end of their conversation. At least, if Mach had anything to say about it, and he did. In an attempt to diffuse the situation, he placed his hand on Shikoba's shoulder.

"Calm," He said softly, "he's a moron, but there's no ill will in him." He told her. Her muscles relaxed. Good. "Sorry."

"I-it's fine." Archie awkwardly replied, and then swiftly returned to the kitchen.

"What's the commotion over there?" Arnold showed up again. Mach hadn't even realized that he was away from the counter.

"The conflict is already resolved, Colonel." Mach assured him. "Archie recognized this pretty lady here, and made a fool of himself for a bit."

"Ever the flatterer, aren't ya?" Arnold laughed and resumed his work. Mach simply shrugged. It wasn't even meant that way. It looked like he turned Shikoba bashful though.

"You're red." He said, deadpan. "S-shut up."

Pfft.

"Can I ask why you got so mad?" He couldn't resist asking. Perhaps it was foolish, but he somehow felt like he could get away with it if he did it now. Maybe he had a sense for reading her mood.

“You don’t know who I am?” Shikoba looked confused.
“I don’t think I do...” He shook his head.
“Bullard.” She repeated.

All of a sudden, it hit him like a truck on a highway.

“You’re *that* Shikoba Bullard?! The daughter of..?!”

“Of Gareth Bullard.”

“The billionaire CEO?”

“That 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 Sanctus, and as the CEO of HighLife, a pharmaceutical company with very close ties to Sanctus’ government. If Shikoba was his daughter...

“Why’d you run?” Mach asked. Obviously, money wasn’t an issue for her, right? On paper, she could do whatever she wanted. He always felt like the rich in Sanctus were spoiled. He wondered why anyone would give that kind of life up willingly.

“You got time?” She chuckled, making Mach laugh with her.

“Of course.”

And so, on that evening, a small gust of wind had begun to stir up. A breeze that eventually would become a mighty hurricane that would rage through the city and beyond. This story is the story of this slowly but steadily growing storm, and its aftermath.

Chapter 1.2

Sanctus was a city state surrounded by big grey city walls of steel so tall, Mach himself didn't even know what life was like on the other side. Ruled by dictators and their scummy business friends for over a hundred years now, any information about the outside world was thoroughly suppressed. Governor Morsus, the current dictator, and all those who came before him, claimed that it was for the sake of the people's safety, 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, rather than what they were told. A paradise, and very much the polar opposite of Sanctus City in its current state; an ugly, urban surveillance state. He sighed. If only these kinds of dreams were his reality instead...

He turned to his side, but flipped back when he realized Shikoba was sleeping right next to him. Right, he remembered, she stayed over.

"I ran from home because I was nothing but a fucking prisoner." She told him yesterday, "I couldn't be myself, I couldn't do what I wanted, all because I had to look good for his public image or some horseshit like that. My father saw me as an accessory and nothing else."

It was a story that Mach could relate to, and to an uncomfortable degree. Of course, the parts about public images and all that weren't very relevant, but everything else was. When he still lived with his parents, there was no way he could ever pursue his dreams. There was a lot more that Shikoba told him yesterday, but it was mostly angry incoherent rambling that Mach couldn't properly remember.

Should he wake her up? Maybe not, she'd get mad, right? Probably.

As he moved to get out of the bed, he felt a soft hand grab hold of his wrist. Confused, he turned his head and looked into Shikoba's squinted eyes. It seemed like she did that on reflex..?

"What are you doing?" He asked dryly.

"...Shit!" Shikoba immediately jerked her hand away,

"I... don't know why the fuck I did that, I'm sorry, I... argh! I'm so stupid!"

Yeah, that seemed pretty embarrassing, Mach chuckled.

"Did you dream I was your boyfriend or something?"

He teased, but the reaction was rather, uh, bashful.

"...Seriously?"

"I didn't realize it was a dream for a sec, okay?! Dreams are nonsense! Please forget about this!"

If only they weren't. He'd kill to live in that green paradise for real.

“Don’t worry, I’ve had my fair share of silly dreams. I won’t tell a soul.”

“Forget! I won’t settle for less!”

“Sorry, I had a sudden case of amnesia, what were we talking about again?” He winked.

“That’s the spirit!”

The two of them laughed. Before he knew it, his butt was already back on his bed, sitting next to her and talking about nothing. Considering how loud and angry she often was, her looks were rather deceiving, weren’t they? Despite her foul language, she looked like a well-mannered rich lady.

“Hey, thanks.” Shikoba said suddenly.

“For what?”

“For treating me like a person. Nobody does that.”

It wasn’t hard to figure that it meant a lot to her. Her voice had softened, and her cheeks turned red. How adorable.

“You’re welcome.” He smiled back. It was nice for him too. At the café, he had Arnold and Archie to talk to, but overall, it had been rather lonely recently. Or all his life, for that matter. He had just met Shikoba, but he felt like he wouldn’t mind if this moment lasted forever.

But of course, it didn’t.

“Hey Mach!” Arnold called from downstairs, “There’s a Blacksuit here, lookin’ for a pretty, blond teenager with a slim build and long hair!”

“What the-..? I’ll be downstairs in a sec!”

“They’re obviously here for me.” Shikoba said.

Mach nodded. “I know, and I’m sure Arnold knows, too.”

“The fuck are you on about?”

“There’s a rusty old 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 escape without the Blacksuits spotting you. Do you have a phone I can call you with later?”

“You two are the best! Thanks so fucking much!”

After quickly registering Shikoba’s number in his old flip phone, Mach went downstairs and found Arnold behind the counter. Also, there was a young lady in a black suit, probably a few years older than himself, sitting on his usual stool.

She was an odd-looking woman. Her hair, which she wore in a high ponytail, was white as paper, her skin was pale, and her eyes were... bright orange? It was the only thing about her appearance that wasn’t black or white. Her black, leather gloves creaked as she picked up a glass of what appeared to be iced lemonade.

“There you are!” Arnold greeted Mach as he walked up to them, sitting down next to the woman, leaving one stool in-between them. That one was less comfortable.

“Good morning, Colonel.” He smiled and turned to the woman. “And you are...?”

"I am Luna Snowfield. I'm with the SSA." She introduced herself. "I'm certain you are aware, but 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. Every word she said was accompanied by an eerily confident grin on her face. It gave her an air of invincibility, and it bothered him. Cocky bastard.

"I know what the SSA is, yeah." Mach nodded. "I would assume so." Luna repetitively tapped her finger on the counter, "And yet, you're your host behaves as if my visit is nothing to worry about. It seems that he thinks he can just call you here and pretend he thought you were the one I was looking for." "Make sense," Mach shrugged nonchalantly, "it wouldn't be the first time that ladies came looking for me here."

Luna's confident grin disappeared, and Mach's smile followed suit. Both were replaced by hostile looks as a tense atmosphere filled the room.

"Cut your nonsense." She said, taking another sip from her glass, "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, right? You never need any. Blacksuits like you can just say whatever you’re doing is an order from the Governor, and that’s the end of it.”

“That *is* the end of it.”

Arnold looked on with sweat all over his face as Mach and Luna got up from their seats and stared each other down. If she had worn heels, she’d have been taller than him. Neither of them was budging. For about a minute, a cold war between the two ensured absolute silence as their hostile gazes refused to let up.

“I don’t have time to deal with you. I’ll look upstairs myself.” Luna finally budged, walking up to the staircase. “Don’t consider yourself lucky, this is going on your record.” She said before walking the stairs.

Mach didn’t reply or attempt to stop her. She was significantly delayed by now. Shikoba should’ve been able to leave. It wasn’t as if she could run forever, but he wanted to help her try. Maybe he could help her some more if he knew where she was going...

Thankfully, he had her number. That meant he wasn’t going to be done messing with Blacksuits just yet. He wasn’t done with Shikoba, either. Of course, the fact that she was a pretty girl wasn’t irrelevant, but... there was something more to her. He was hooked.

“You’ve got some balls, kiddo!” Arnold said, his voice sounding like he had been holding his breath or something. “I knew I could trust ya.”

“Quiet, she might hear you.”

Now that Luna wasn't occupying it anymore, Mach sat down on his preferred stool again. Smugly, he leaned forward on the counter. "Perhaps you could reward me for my great performance? Maybe with free breakfast?" "You're quite the opportunistic fella, y'know that?" "I do." "Self-aware too, I see!"

The two laughed. At their own banter, but also in the face of the Sanctus government., which they had successfully inconvenienced. Served them right. The people didn't choose them, nor have they even been polled on approval in any meaningful way. Governor Morsus was a dictator, and the SSA was just a collection of his most loyal lackeys. He hoped he'd witness a freed Sanctus one day.

The squeaky sound of shoes stepping on old wooden stairs got louder again. Luna was back.

"It appears that she is not here, or at least, not anymore." She said.

Mach winked at her. "It's hard to admit you were wrong, I get it."

"I hope we never cross paths again." Luna said, clearly suppressing anger. Mach loved to see it.

"Same." He said, and like that, Luna headed for the door.

"And buy some clothes." She finally said as she closed the door behind her. Mere seconds later, Mach and Arnold heard a car driving away.

“Bah! The audacity!” Arnold scoffed. “Anyway, you go do something! I dunno what, but I know you’re not gonna sit here!”

“I will, actually. Until I’ve had my breakfast.”

“Yeah, yeah, one free sandwich, comin’ right up!”

“Only one? I’m a growing boy, y’know?”

“You’re twenty, don’t push your luck kiddo!”

Chapter 1.3

With a scheming smirk on his face, Mach stepped into a bus and sat down on a softly cushioned couch, before he was shooed out of the 1st class and was forced to settle for an uncomfortable, rock-solid regular seat further in the back instead. His grin returned soon after though, for he knew that this would happen anyway. Outside of the slums, he didn't expect an ounce of sympathy from anyone. He was from the slums, and it was clear to see. The average middle-class citizen of Sanctus was allergic to trouble, and given the slums' reputation, this meant hostility.

"Oh well." Mach shrugged. What mattered was getting in the way of Luna Snowfield and her objective as long as possible. Without further delay, he called Shikoba.

"Hey, where are you right now?" Mach asked as soon as she picked up.

"Who the fuck is this?"

"It's Mach. I gave you my number. Did you forget to register it?"

"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, gotta hang up, I'm in the middle of something! Meet me at the fountain or whatever!"

"The fountain at Market Hall?"

"Duh! See ya there!"

She sounded a bit livelier than earlier. Mach wondered why, but speculating about why that was would be pointless. What was more important 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 call that stop. What he saw looked more like a fortress than a school. It was enormous, too, and certainly everything but welcoming, with armed soldiers guarding the front gate. It was one of the only two schools in the whole city, the other being an elementary school of a similar size. Whether you were still in high school or if you were studying business, law, agriculture or science, you'd have to do it at Ignis Academy.

The bus stopped, and a familiar face stepped in. Their body language screamed 'tired', but that wasn't anything new.

"Archie!" Mach waved, startling him. He did as Mach hoped, though, and sat down on the seat next to him.

"What are you doing here?" Archie asked him.

"I could ask you the same thing. You never leave your home when it's not for work."

"A friend still attends that school. I had to give him something."

"You have friends?"

"Shut up, Mach."

Mach chuckled. "Seriously though, I didn't know you had other friends."

"He was a classmate at Ignis." He explained, "I dropped out, he didn't."

"I see. Good on you for dropping out. That place isn't a school, it's a cog in the propaganda machine."

"It is. Not that you've actually seen. You never went."

"And never will!" He said proudly. "Couldn't afford it, anyway."

"Next stop: Sanctus State Hospital."

Another fortress of a building, but at least it actually did what it was supposed to; heal the sick.

"Speaking of things you can't afford." Archie sneered lightheartedly.

"If I ever get injured, my life depends on my dear friend and a generous gift of a couple thousand dollars." Mach winked.

"May you rest in peace."

"I knew you were heartless, but I am shocked!"

"If you get injured like that, it'll be for some dumb avoidable reason. I'm your friend, not an insurance company."

"You're not?"

The two laughed.

"At least the weather's warm enough here for you to not freeze to death." Archie gestured at Mach's bare chest. Mach nodded. "If the climate here was different, I'd probably have died by now."

"Next stop: Market Hall."

"That's my stop." Mach said, getting up from his seat.

"What the hell is a broke guy like you gonna do at Market Hall?"

"Don't worry about it. See you around!"

Mach placed his ID on the scanner until the light below turned green, and hopped out of the bus, putting the card back in his pocket. At least public transport was free. At the cost of the government tracking exactly where you get on and off. Sigh. Sanctus was such a shithole.

Well, at least he arrived where he needed to. Market Hall. Compared to Ignis and the hospital, this place looked as welcoming as the embrace of a lover! It was just a very big commercial complex, but the bar was very low.

As the automatic glass doors opened, Mach stepped right into Market Hall, and was met with bright ceiling lights, endless noise of people talking, and an ocean of sale-hungry shoppers. It was crowded! Well, of course it was. It wasn't just a supermarket! There was no legal indoor service that you could think of that this place didn't have! It served as the commercial center of the whole city. The fountain Shikoba wanted him to meet her at was at the central plaza, so he made his way over there. Given the sheer size of the hall, 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 shoveled around and slowed down by the thick sea of people that permanently flooded the indoor market streets. But he made it. The sign saying 'do not touch the fountain' did not stop Mach from sitting down on the fountain pool's edge.

Now, it was time to wait. Constantly, passersby would give him looks, and it was starting to annoy him. It was inevitable, of course, he was shirtless, idle, and alone. It wasn't often that people as poor as him would wander around the big central hubs of the city, unless they were beggars.

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

"Yo!" She waved and sat down next to him. "What do you think?"

"I've never seen a guy as cute as you before!" He chuckled.

"Oh fuck you!" She laughed. She seemed a bit nervy, though. She probably cared about what he thought of her makeover.

“I wanted to get rid of everything that reminded me of my stupid old man.” She said, subtly moving a little bit closer. “So I sold my clothes and bought this shirt, these shorts, and this pair of sneakers. And, well, I went to a barber shop, obviously! Do I look fucking cool or what?” Shikoba’s smile was almost brighter than the eye-blinding ceiling lights above them.

“You look more like yourself.” Mach smiled. Her happiness was contagious.

“Y-yeah! I agree!”

She was so easily flustered, he thought to himself. It was adorable. Just saying anything she wants to hear does the trick already. He wasn’t lying though. The jarring disconnect between her appearance and personality that Mach noticed that morning and yesterday was no longer there.

“Shit!” Shikoba suddenly shouted, “I almost forgot!” She reached her arm into her shopping bag and pulled out a black blouse in plastic packaging. It definitely looked too big for her to wear. Smiling, she pressed the package into my chest, making me take it. “This is for you!”

“For... me?”

“Damn right! Now c’mon, try it on! Not that I mind seeing you shirtless, but...”

“What was that?” He gave her a smug look.

“Nothing you couldn’t’ve already guessed!” She blushed, “Just try it on already!”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll try it. It’s just hard not to tease you.”

“Nothing hard about it!”

Mach let out a chuckle as he opened the package and finally tried the blouse on.

“Does it fit?” Shikoba asked, “I made a random guess at your size, so it might not be perfect, but after all you did for me, I couldn’t do nothing!”

“It fits perfectly!” Mach’s excitement was hard to hide.

“Damn, lucky me! Well, lucky you, actually! Lemme take a photo so you can see how you look!”

Click! Shikoba didn’t wait for his response.

“Here!” She proudly presented her phone’s screen to him. “You like it?”

“It’s blurry.”

“Wait, shit, really?” She looked at the photo herself, only to find that it was perfectly fine. “Damn it Mach! Stop messing with me!”

“You’re welcome!” He laughed. “It’s a great blouse, Shikoba. I love it, thank you.”

“N-no problem!”

She was red 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 and that you’re with me. I’m supposed to head to the pharmacist on the second floor, or they’re throwing you in jail.”

Crap.

Chapter 1.4

“Sorry, this is my fault.” Mach bit his lip. “I took the bus. They probably tracked me and found us that way.”

“Who cares?” Shikoba shrugged, “Not much we can do but do as they said. I’m not abandoning you!”

Phew. That was all he needed to hear.

“Thanks.” He got up from the fountain’s edge. “What are you going to do?”

“No clue! But I’m definitely not gonna go back home! I’d rather die!” She declared, “Seriously!”

He didn’t doubt her sincerity. A life as nothing more than a doll seemed like torture. Besides, if he was in this situation with his parents, he’d say the same.

“Let’s hope they don’t ask that of you then.”

“I’d punch their lights out! Or die trying!”

Mach chuckled. “Let’s just go, shall we?”

“Yeah, no choice in the matter.” She nodded. Mach was just glad that Shikoba didn’t see ‘Ditch Mach and dip’ as an option.

Once again, Mach was reminded of how damn big Sanctus Market Hall was. Despite taking fifteen minutes to walk halfway through the building, there were actually elevators at the sides that could take you to two more equally sized floors!

The third floor wasn't accessible to anyone except those with a government-issued permit, though. The rumor was that the government stored dubious projects and weapons there, but honestly, there was no way to know what its use was. Regardless, their destination was on the second floor.

Mach and Shikoba swiftly made their way to the nearest elevator, and managed to rush inside right before the door closed. To their surprise, there was only one other person inside. It was a young woman with kind of short, black hair. Usually, Mach wouldn't object to more ladies for company, but this one wore a black suit.

"Mach Courtenay, 20 years old, homeless, jobless, son of Maurice and Joanna Courtenay, correct?" She patted his shoulder, "I'm Alba Greene, SSA. I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Her bratty voice and smug grin already pissed him off. He wasn't alone, either.

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

"And who might you be? Some delinquent friend of his?"

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

“And there you have it!” Mach shrugged with a triumphant, high and mighty smile. “Would you mind showing us the way, Alba?”

“That’s... why I’m here,” She grumbled, “To show Shikoba Bullard the way. But it appears the influence of the people of the slums grows quicker than I imagined.” She sneered at him. Shikoba set a step forward, but Mach was just in time to grab her wrist. She was already about to punch her.

“Violence will only make this worse.” Mach quickly whispered.

“Tch! She deserves violence.”

Ding-dong!

That elevator took its sweet time, Mach complained in his thoughts as he let go of Shikoba and left the elevator.

“Come with me, my rebellious little troublemakers!” She mocked them in a singing voice as she walked on ahead. 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 off the elevators for anyone without a government pass as soon as young Mr. Courtenay got off his bus.” Alba explained obnoxiously. “I was about to come get you, but you barged into my elevator on your own already.”

That explained why it was so unusually crowded downstairs. Damn, they really kept an eye on his movements the second Luna left the café, didn’t they?

“Here it is!” Alba showed them the door to the pharmacy. “Walk all the way to the back and open the door to the staff room there. Luna is waiting for you.” “Sure...” Shikoba said, muttering something afterwards that Mach couldn’t decipher, but it couldn’t have been anything flattering. It made him snicker a little.

Stepping into the pharmacy, Mach almost immediately felt disgust. Not by the prices, no, he hadn’t even *looked* at those yet. No, it was the baby blue walls paired with the light pink marble floor. He vomited internally at the mere sight of it. It looked atrocious. Only a psychopath or a five year old girl could ever think this kind of design was a good idea.

“Everything you see here from the store to the drugs are all my fathers’.” Shikoba grumbled. Psychopath it was then, Mach thought.

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

“HighLife does, yeah. He’s hella proud of it, too. Not like he’s done anything to deserve it.”

“Of course he didn’t. He’s a CEO.”

“Ha, damn right!”

They walked up to a small, metal door in the back, which automatically opened when they were in arms’ reach of the doorknob. The room now unlocked before them was small and barren. The walls and floor were grey, and a table with three chairs was all the interior consisted of. One chair was on the other side of the table, and looked considerably more comfortable than the other two. Naturally, Luna sat on that one.

“I would bid you welcome, but one of you came here uninvited.” Luna greeted them. “Hello. That seems more appropriate for a greeting. Sit down.”

“Aye’ aye...” Shikoba sarcastically cheered. She and Mach took their seats on the budget chairs Luna had arranged for them, and a tense atmosphere filled the room.

“What are we even supposed to discuss?” Mach asked, “I expected you to 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 the happenings surrounding you two, and had deduced that Shikoba has become ‘unhinged’, in his words. He does not want her back.”

“Good!” Shikoba shouted, “So what’s the damn problem then?! Leave me alone!!” She slammed her fist on the table, leaving a dent in it. Looked like the table was as low budget as their chairs.

“The problem is, you know too much. The past few days, 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 then! I don’t want to go back either! And I won’t!

“Please let me talk.” Luna grew impatient. Mach enjoyed every second of her struggle.

“Okay, so what’s the point you’re making, Puppet?” Shikoba asked.

“Two options.” Luna ignored her insult, “Either you and Mach live together in a suburban apartment of the governor’s choosing, where you will be surveilled by Alba and I for as long as he deems it necessary, or you both go to jail. These are your only options, and there’s no room for negotiation. Pick one.”

Hearing this, Mach stood up. “Huh?! Why am I supposed to be surveilled?! What did I do?!”

Luna giggled triumphantly. “We in the SSA have this thing called honor. Nobody messes with one of us and gets away with it unscathed. I may have exaggerated your behavior in my reports to make you look worse. You do not have any proof for that, though.”

“Wow.” Mach’s voice trembled in anger, “You seriously went that far, didn’t you?”

He could almost *feel* his blood boiling. What an insufferable witch! He was on a government list now? Just because he inconvenienced Luna for a few hours? Holy shit.

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

"What a load of horseshit!!" Shikoba punched the table again, this time actually leaving a hole in it as she stood up as well. "He's got YOU to blame for it, bitch!"

"So I take it you want to go to jail together?" Luna mocked them. "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 sigh.

"It is. How are you still unaware of this? You sing to my tune. Not the other way around. In my report, reality can be whatever I want it to be. The governor gave me these two options for you. Pick one, or I pick one for you. 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 again. "I have one more requirement for you, however. You are both to attend Ignis Academy. Pick an education course of your choosing, and learn to become a productive member of society by the time you are no longer under surveillance. The government will sign you up and pay for everything, including the apartment, so be grateful."

That sealed the deal, then. Starting today, Mach would have a roof of his own, and a pretty girl for a roommate to boot. Of course, he'd only ever describe this as a positive situation as a joke, but it was definitely not as bad as jail.

His chance encounter with Shikoba changed his life forever.

"So, we got off pretty well, didn't we?" Shikoba contently lounged in the back of a limousine. Mach sat next to 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!"

"It wasn't too hard to do so today." Luna interrupted from the drivers' seat. "Don't expect privacy. The SSA is not to be messed with, as you've learned."

"Neither am I!"

"You are a clown, but I respect your confidence. Still, you'll adapt soon enough."

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

He would never be bored ever again.