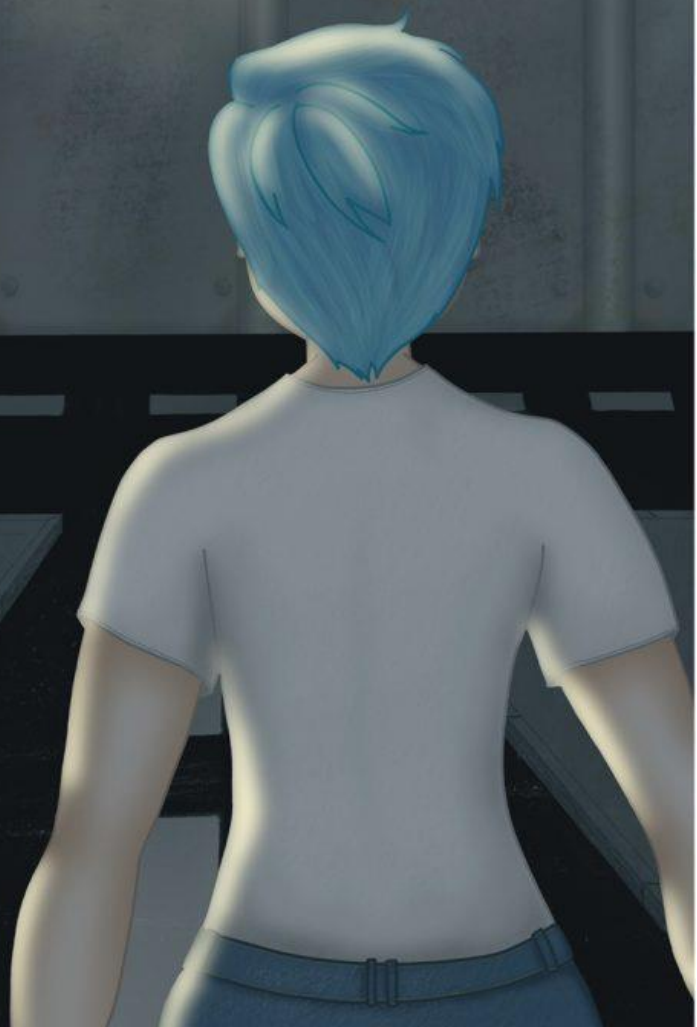


SHIKOBA



**MARIJN
LUNSING**

It was 4 AM on the night of Sunday to Monday, and virtually everyone in Sanctus was sound asleep. All but one individual; Ace, LISA's trusted anonymous night owl. Wearing a green tracksuit and white jogging pants, they stared endlessly at the five different monitors on their desk. One of them showed recorded security camera footage, another the live camera feed of a drone slowly flying upward. Unfortunately, it was once again running out of battery. This tactic for seeing beyond the city's walls wasn't going to work. Yet another monitor, however, showed something entirely different. It was an open tab on their custom messenger app. Isinachi had not yet answered their texts. Of course, he wouldn't answer them at this hour, but the wait worried them slightly.

Since Lisa's 'disappearance', Isinachi had cut all contact with them. He attended his basketball practice and matches, but otherwise stayed in his trailer. At least, that's what the school's website told them. This wasn't public information, of course, but that had never stopped Ace before.

Suddenly, their second phone rang. The one they used as 'Ace'. After making sure that the voice distorter was on, they picked up.

"I've written the column." The caller said.

"Good. Did it go far enough?"

"Yeah, I'm sure to get some complaints from the headmaster for this one. If I get fired, I'm blaming you."

"You won't get fired. To them, you're a land mine. Harmless unless stepped on. They'll continue to appease you so long as you don't share what you know with the world. You are the one person they cannot risk messing with."

"You sure are confident about that. What if they assassinate me?"

"Disturbing as it is, that man still sees you as his... you know."

Ace could hear a faint, yet agonizing groan. It hurt their soul. They couldn't possibly imagine her pain.

"...Are you sure this'll have the intended effect?" She then asked.

"There is no way Madeline is going to let Roxanne continue if you publish anything in which Lisa's name is directly mentioned. I think she hates Lisa's ghost more than she ever hated Lisa herself."

"I think you're right. She hates Lisa as a concept. A person is easy to suppress. An idea less so."

"Exactly."

"Still, I worry for Roxanne. Will she really join Shikoba? She's scared of authorities."

"Mach is not. He should be able to steer her."

"I've been meaning to ask."

"Yes?"

"How do you know Mach? Didn't he join LISA on the day she died? You told me you couldn't 'attend' that meeting."

“You should go back to sleep. You have a new member to register at your club tomorrow.”

Not waiting for a response, Ace hung up. So far, everyone had acted according to plan. This was now simply a waiting game. All they had to do was occasionally nudge certain people in the right directions.

They grinned. If it was those two, led by this woman, there was no doubt in their mind;

“This revolution shall flourish.”

Chapter 5.1

In silence, Isinachi hung back on his couch, it was Monday. He had school today, but he did not go. Basketball practice wasn't on Mondays, anyway. Without Lisa, there was no future to study for. He couldn't win over the masses himself, nor could anyone else. It wasn't rocket science to Isinachi what happened to Lisa. She was either dead, or locked up in a prison somewhere, far from his reach. Either way, LISA was defeated. The Bennington twins were already half-hearted members, and Ace remained unwilling to show their face to anyone, now even to him.

He must have received tons of texts from Ace by now. He didn't know for sure, since he deleted their app from his phone. He had no need for it anymore.

Just as he got up from the couch to make breakfast, he heard something banging loudly on his front door. Sigh. This again. Would she ever give up?

"Isinachi!! Open up, you bastard!!" Shikoba yelled at him from the other side of the door. "How dare you ignore us?! And you call yourself a member of LISA?! What would she think?!"

Tch. Bold words. As if Lisa was anything like her. He respected Shikoba's passion, but she clearly did not have the charm that Lisa had. After all, if she did, she would've never had to ram on his door.

He remembered the first time he met her so vividly. It was in a time when Ace still attended Ignis. The two of them walked onto the college area's plaza, where they spotted a freshman girl, their age, shouting things from a microphone that Isinachi had never heard anyone say out loud before.

"How much longer must the ruling elite of this city walk around in fancy suits while there are almost a million homeless people wandering through the slums and sleeping on the sidewalks?! Even if this school started teaching us facts instead of the governor's opinions, there'd still be thousands of people who couldn't pay the school fee!"

He just stood still and stared at her. Why was nobody listening to her? She was speaking truth after truth after truth. She was shouting, but she didn't sound like an attention seeker. She was like an angry mother, upset at an authority figure for the poor treatment of her child.

"I want to talk to her." He told his friend.

"Go ahead..." they yawned, "Tell me how it went. I'm way too tired to be introducing myself to people."

"Hard at work, hm?" Isinachi smiled.

"Day and night. I'm considering dropping out to focus on my part-time job."

"You'd probably learn more."

"Water is wet, Isinachi."

Leaving Ace behind, he approached the girl with the megaphone as she hopped off the podium.

“Hey, nice speech.” He raised his hand to gesture a ‘hello’.

“Oh, you were listening? Thanks a bunch! For the time and the compliment! Who’re you?”

Her eyes had the intensity of some of his basketball rivals’ during heated games. Yet, at the same time, she was smiling, as if she didn’t have a care in the world. He had never seen such an expression before.

“I’m Isinachi, from the high school basketball club. It’s my first year on the college area today.”

“Oh, a fellow freshman! Nice to meet you! I’m Lisa Jackson! Let’s get along!”

And that they did. Days later, the two of them jokingly formed LISA together. She never had to ask him to do anything. Her charisma pushed him onwards on its own. As long as she was around, he could believe in a better future, against all odds.

But then, she vanished.

“I’ll be back tomorrow, Isinachi!!” Shikoba yelled. Seemed like she called it quits for now.

Finally.

It was quiet. So quiet that it distracted him. It was always like this after Shikoba left. He still longed for the motivation that Shikoba still had. Her yelling was frustrating, but not hearing it crushed his soul.

In absolute silence, he smeared some peanut butter on a piece of toast, sat down on his couch again, and ate. In absolute silence, he just lied down again, loafing around for hours and hours.

...

"How do you do it?" He asked Lisa, walking through the streets of Ignis Village, on the way to his home.

"Do what?"

"Nobody pays attention to what you say, unless you're being demonized. But you're still motivated. How?"

"Hmm, sometimes it's discouraging, yeah." She nodded, "But there's many people out there in the city who silently believe what we believe. If I threw in the towel, imagine how discouraging *that* would be!"

"You're really something."

"All I can do is inspire others. The true action will have to come from the people. Until they act, I want to be their voice. I want them to know that they're not alone."

"You've already convinced me."

"That's motivation enough for me to yell at the governor again tomorrow! It's as simple as that!"

...

He could no longer hear her voice. Silence took her place. Could Shikoba's Investigation Club really hook people the way Lisa hooked him? He wanted to believe, but he didn't. Lisa's charm wasn't there.

He was starting to think that, if even LISA couldn't get off the ground, the people of Sanctus could never rise up at all. With that fear remaining in his head, he closed his eyes.

...

"Thanks for everything!" Lisa called from behind him, standing still on the crosswalk.

"Light's red." He told her. Startled, she immediately rushed to the other side of the road, dashing right past a car that almost ran her over. "Phew!"

"You should thank me for that instead." Isinachi bumped her shoulder again, "Instead of something that is not over yet. We still have a way to go before the first election of our time."

"I know, I'm sorry! I just felt like I haven't shown you enough gratitude!"

"Not all gratitude is expressed through words. I know you're grateful. I am too."

"Thanks, I mean it."

"You too." Without you, there wouldn't be a movement to work hard for."

...

Tears rolled down his cheeks. It was unfair.

Chapter 5.2

It was Tuesday, so it was time for after-school basketball practice. Though Isinachi didn't show up for school, he still attended practice and games. After all, they were always his distraction from misery and hopelessness. The squeaking of his shoes against the shining court, the thrill of outsmarting the defense with a feint and dribbling past, and the satisfaction of slam dunking a ball into the basket from a height nobody else could touch were all experiences that he could never go without. So long as he wore the Sanctus Swans' jersey, there was nothing to worry. Victory was not just feasible, it was likely, and he, not his opponents, were in control.

On the court, he was strong.

"Sheesh, could you hold back on us for once, Isinachi?" His teammate, Noah, a tall, but not even close to his height, senior year with short, blond-dyed hair, slapped his back, "How is a man even s'posed to block a two meters tall guy who jumps like a rabbit?"

"Two meters and eleven." Isinachi corrected him with a slight grin.

"If you weren't on my team, I'd hate you dude."

"Good thing I am."

He was about to collect the ball, but Noah wasn't done talking, apparently. Well, he did like to talk.

“Say, I’m not great at starting these kinds of questions n’ all, but, you’ve not been showing up to school anymore, have you? I get that it’s not my business n’ all, but y’know,-..”

“It isn’t, you’re right.” He cut him off. Not here. He was not going to talk about that here. This was his sanctuary. Real world troubles didn’t exist here.

“Dude...”

“You should be worried about my next attempt to score on you.” Isinachi said, picking up the ball he dunked earlier. “Here I come again.”

Practice went on as before, but now, Isinachi felt pressure. He was sweating, but not from exertion. Gritting his teeth as he played, an uneasy feeling creeped ever closer from the back of his mind.

“Hmpf!” Isinachi grunted, aggressively slamming the ball into the net, as if Noah’s marking was naught but a fly buzzing in his face. He didn’t talk, he didn’t communicate. He didn’t even shoot. All he wanted to do right now was maneuver past Noah and dunk. It was the most satisfying thing he could do in the sport, and above all, he just wanted to feel an oomph. Something to get fired up over.

Nothing else mattered.

As practice ended with Isinachi having done nothing but the same thing the whole time, he silently walked into the dressing room, with Noah trailing behind.

“Something’s gotten into you, man.” Noah called him out. Their teammates remained silent as the tension in the room skyrocketed. “Is something bothering you? Talk to us! Is this because of Li-..”

“Don’t finish that sentence.” Isinachi glared. “I already told you, it’s none of your business.”

“It is, though! We gotta work together on the court, don’t we? If you won’t talk, how can we do that?!”

“My personal life won’t affect your plays.” He told him. Please, he thought, just shut up.

“Of course it will! What happened to team spirit, man?”

“Noah,” Isinachi said, approaching and towering over him, “if you want team spirit, you give me the space I’m asking for. Shut up.”

“Fine... but I just want to help, dude.”

“You’re not doing that.”

Nobody talked as everyone put on their tracksuits and went home. Sadly, the shower was out of commission, so they would have to do so at home.

Still sweaty and bothered by the tension during practice, Isinachi walked home with his heart beating. He was never safe. Everything had to remind him of Lisa. Why couldn’t he just mourn in peace?

As he thought that, he approached a crossroad, with a familiar face on his path. Sigh. It was Mach.

"I'm not going to join your club." Isinachi told him immediately, but he did stop for him. Part of him wanted to hear what he had to say.

"I wasn't going to ask you to." Mach shook his head. "I just wanted to check up on you."

"Why?"

"I may not know you very well, but I have a lot of respect for you, you know? And you're going through some rough times, so..."

"I see."

"You must be hungry from practice. Want to eat somewhere?"

He seemed genuine. Despite the fact that there was an obvious ulterior motive, Mach still seemed genuine. He was a crafty person, good at steering others, but he also cared. The respect he had for him was mutual. However...

"I'd rather be alone."

He didn't want to remember. He wanted a safe haven. He wanted so desperately to forget about his misery and live life in blissful ignorance like most people. Being a rebel was a hopeless existence.

"I get that. I'll leave you be."

"Oh," he raised his eyebrows, "thanks."

He expected Mach to convince him otherwise anyways. Apparently not. He guessed Mach wasn't kidding when he said he respected him.

“Oh, before I forget!” Mach called from behind him, “Are you interested in playing a bit of basketball with a friend of mine tomorrow?”

“Hm?” He turned around, “You have a friend who plays?”

“She’s a rookie, and not a member of either basketball club, but she’s not bad. It’s fine if you don’t want to, but I thought I’d ask for her.”

Teaching basketball to a rookie, huh? Without Noah around, maybe this was the distraction he was looking for.

“Sure. Tell her to be on the Swans’ men’s court by 3 PM. I have the keys.”

“You’re a good guy, Isinachi.”

What a pretty smile, Isinachi caught himself thinking. Was he falling for some kind of bigger plan? He didn’t know, nor did he feel like thinking too hard about it. Playing basketball was all he wanted to do, so an opportunity to do so wasn’t something he was going to miss out on.

“Thanks.” He answered.

As soon as he got home, Isinachi walked into the bedroom and fell face down onto his mattress. The afternoon had barely passed, but he was done for the day. He was going to shower, but it didn’t cross his mind in the moment. He just wanted to rest. To not think about anything. Because all his thoughts eventually trailed back to...

...

"Say, Isinachi." Lisa poked his shoulder as they sat side by side on a wooden bench as people played basketball on the court in front of them, "What will you do if we succeed?"

"After we have a democratically elected government?"

"Mhm."

"I'd play basketball."

"For a living?"

"Yeah. What about you? Do you want to be governor?"

"Who, me? No, no, no. No way." She giggled.

"Why not?"

"Well, why don't you do it?"

"Definitely not."

"See? Pot blames the kettle!"

"...Lisa." Isinachi's eyes suddenly widened. This was a dream, wasn't it?

"Yeah?"

"Did we fail because we're not fit to take Morsus' place?"

Lisa's smile faded, and she looked him dead in the eyes.

"Maybe we failed because we didn't do anything?"

...

"Aah!" Isinachi woke up in cold sweat, breathing heavily as he took his now sticky shirt off. Fuck! Hearing those words come out of Lisa with an expressionless face...

Not funny.

Chapter 5.3

It was Wednesday. Light shone down from the high windows of the gym onto the court and the empty stands. The floor shone from being cleaned just that morning, and naught but a single basketball and a by now very familiar figure, this time wearing high quality sports attire, were to be seen as Isinachi walked in. He should've known. Mach trapped him here with her. He was such a sly little weasel.

"Don't worry, don't worry!" Shikoba smirked, "I'm actually serious about playing basketball! C'mon, teach me!"

She walked up to the ball and tossed it to him. "The goal's to beat you one on one once by the end of today! Let's play!"

Beat him? In a one on one? Heh, as expected, Shikoba was a naïve soul. A complete rookie wasn't going to be able to beat him without help.

"Let's tackle some basics first."

"Aye' aye!"

And so, they began. To Isinachi's surprise, Shikoba was a decently athletic person, despite her very corporate, enclosed upbringing. Her shooting was solid, for a newbie anyway, and she seemed to at least understand dribbling a little.

Still, they were the moves of an absolute newcomer, while Shikoba's own perception of her skills seemed to be that she was some kind of prodigy. As an hour passed, however, there was one element of her plays that stood out; she was incredibly persistent.

He approached again. A step to the left was immediately followed by a step of her own. It was a feint, designed to shrug her off of him as he went the other way instead, but it wasn't enough. She was able to follow. She couldn't fully stop him, but every so often, he genuinely struggled to fully get past her, too.

"I'm pretty good at this, aren't I?" Shikoba wiped some sweat off of her forehead. "Gimme another hour and I'll stop you for real!"

"Don't get ahead of yourself." He smiled a little.

"Where's your Blacksuit, by the way?"

"Luna?" She slyly grinned, "Mach's keeping her occupied with something stupid. Roxanne's tagged along, too. They're handing out weird flyers for our club or something? I dunno."

Roxanne? He had never heard that name before. Did their club gain members?

"Who's that?"

"Roxanne, you mean? She's our newest recruit! She was the director of the Ignis Times, but Madeline got rid of her. She's pretty great!"

"How'd you get her to join you? Does she know that your club is-.."

“Basically LISA 2.0? Yeah, she knows. Well, she knows that we’re a rebel group in disguise. It’s easy to see, hard to prove!”

“What do you guys do?”

“Officially, or really?” She laughed.

“Really.”

“Right now we’re trying to get all of LISA back together with us.”

“No, what do you *do*?” His look turned serious. His dream last night woke him up, both literally and figuratively. He admired Lisa, but he also realized, no, he knew already, that she never actually did anything. Not that she didn’t want to, but she couldn’t. Of course she couldn’t. The government was far, far too powerful.

“Hold authority accountable! As much as we can, anyway! We have great plans for how best to do that, but I can’t tell you yet! You haven’t joined us yet, after all!”

“It’s pointless.”

Shikoba’s face soured instantly. “Excuse me?”

“It’s pointless. The government’s too strong. You’ll get yourself killed.”

For a moment, the court was silent. Isinachi and Shikoba stared each other down for a solid minute. He could hear her breathing. Somehow, even that sounded passionate. What was up with this persistent little...

“Let’s play some one on ones.” She rammed her fist into the palm of her other hand, “I’ll teach you some shit, too.”

“Fine.” He grunted, “I’ll lay your illusions of grandeur to rest.”

They began. Easily, Isinachi stole the ball from Shikoba and scored. They began again. Isinachi moved past Shikoba and scored. They began again. Isinachi stole the ball from Shikoba and scored.

They began again.
And again.
And again.
And again.
And again.
And again.

“You can’t beat me.” Isinachi grumbled, “You’ve only practiced for an hour. This is pointless.”

“Just because I’m weak doesn’t mean I shouldn’t fight!”

In one quick motion, he got past her, and scored.

They began again.
And again.
And again.
And again.
And again.

Why did her persistence frustrate him so much?

After dunking yet another ball into the net, Isinachi didn’t give Shikoba the ball again. Instead, he tossed it to the side, letting its bounces echo through the gym until it silently stopped.

“Why do you do this?” He asked. It was so pointless. Did she think she could just waltz in, become a basketball star in an hour, and surpass him just like that? “You can’t win against me on your own. You know that, right?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then why?”

“There’s no point in playing if you’re not trying to win.”

“No amount of effort made on your own will be enough to become good enough to beat me. You need a team to grow stronger.”

“I know that better than anyone. That’s why I’m recruiting teammates right now! I know more than anyone else what a hopeless fight feels like!” She stomped the floor as she shouted. This wasn’t about basketball anymore.

No. It never was about basketball. All this time, she was..!

“What’s giving up and running away ever accomplished for anyone?! I wouldn’t know!”

“You wouldn’t know! That’s right!” Isinachi yelled back, “You can’t expect me to just copy your naïve and optimistic attitude, shrug off my friend’s death, and join your damn club!”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t know! I wouldn’t, because I’ve fucking tried it for twenty years, that’s why!!”

Shikoba's bellowing echoed through the gym. "Look at me! Look at me and my short, blue hair! Listen to me! Listen to me cursing, shouting, and protesting! This is who I am! You know what isn't who I am?!"

Isinachi's eyes widened.

"I've spent twenty fucking years! Twenty damn fucking years, as my corporate father's trophy! I looked and dressed like Madeline! I kept my damn mouth shut! I studied business! Business! Me! You know why? You fucking know why, Isinachi?"

"...Your father's too powerful."

"When I finally ran away, I was put under surveillance! I am alone, demonized by the government, stalked 24/7, with a target on my back!"

She took a moment to regain her breath. Isinachi got goosebumps looking at her. She wasn't naïve at all. He underestimated her.

"I know I can't change Sanctus on my own, and that any impact I'll have right now is not worth the risk. I fucking know that already!"

"So then-.."

"So HELP ME!! HELP ME, ISINACHII!! YOU WANT TO LIVE IN FREEDOM TOO, DON'T YOU?!!!"

She was... like him. She wasn't an ideologue. She wasn't a leader with some kind of new vision she would give it all away for.

She was a victim of this city. A prisoner that's had enough. She also lived in the same misery he was living through before. She probably had it worse, even.

It was her rebellion that set her free. Rebelling let her feel alive.

When was the last time he did?

...

"Oi, Lisa," Eugene looked her way from the counter, "If you make us meet this early in the morning on a weekend day one more time, I swear I will get rid of you before the government does."

*Lisa couldn't help but laugh. "You're such a baby, Eugene."
"Not true! Babies actually get to sleep!"*

"You really are a baby." His brother teased him.

"Eric, I swear, you're supposed to back me up!"

"Well, I do hate getting up early, but I hate your whining more."

"Sorry? Who was it who had to be dragged out of bed by their brother today?"

"I said I hate getting up early, right?"

"LISA is in harmony once more." Isinachi sighed.

...

Were those... tears? Covering his eyes with his forearm, he silently... cried. He had allowed himself to become a prisoner again. He gave up again.

And he had no right to. How dare he throw in the towel! If even Shikoba was still fighting the good fight, what excuse did he have to quit?

“Shikoba.” He lifted his head, and walked up to her. “You win. I’ll help you.”

Shikoba, also a bit teary eyed from her passionate outburst, reached out her hand. Luna stepped onto the court while she did, but it looked like Shikoba couldn’t care less. “This’ll be your hardest match yet! Let’s win, together!”

Isinachi shook his head. “In basketball, before a game, you shake the hands of your opponents, not your teammates.”

He smiled, and turned to Luna, who already walked up to them. With a confident smirk on his face, he reached out his hand to her.

“...Luna Snowfield. Nice to meet you.” Luna confusedly shook his hand.

“Isinachi Kayode. Here’s to a good match.”

“I’m not here to play basketball.”

“Neither am I.”

“Ah, I see how it is. Good luck with that. You will need it.”

“At least you’re a good sport.”

“She’ll disappoint you on that one!” Shikoba laughed.

Lisa was never going to come back, and that hurt. It really, really hurt. His heart still ached when he was reminded of that fact. But he couldn't go on feeling sorry for himself and running away. Even if it felt pointless, he wasn't alone. Maybe Shikoba was better fit to grow this movement than he gave her credit for.

He looked into her eyes, and saw himself.

"Thanks, Shikoba." He told her as the two of them left the gym.

"That's a bit soon, don't you think?"

"Hm?"

"Well, we haven't elected our governor quite yet! We've got way more work to do!" She beamed.

Isinachi whispered to himself as his arm quickly moved to hide the waterfall emerging from his eyes.

"Ah, fuck..!"

Chapter 5.4

“So, you’re resigning from the Sanctus Swans?” Isinachi’s coach asked him. With this resignation letter placed on his coach’s desk, it was official. He was no longer going to try to balance basketball with the democratic movement.

“Yes. I’m joining the Investigation Club.” He told the bald old man.

“I must formally advise against it. I know you are Lisa Jackson’s friend, but-..”

“I am more Lisa’s friend than I am a basketball player. I’ll fight today to play tomorrow. That’s what I’ve decided.”

“I see. Just between us, the school won’t be happy with this. I am worried for you.”

“I’m worried too. But this is something I have to do.”

“I understand. Let me just tell you now before you go, you have been an absolute pleasure to work with. I hope you return to the sport someday, and learn to handle what you are feeling better with time.”

“Likewise.”

That was about the most support he could’ve reasonably gotten from a teacher at Ignis Academy. Coach talked about his revolutionary beliefs as some kind of illness, but it was what it was. He seemed genuine still.

But this was the easy part.

Noah wasn't going to be happy about this. None of his teammates were going to be, in fact. But it was a small price to pay.

"Yo, resigned without a hassle?" Shikoba asked him.

"Yeah." He nodded.

"Hey, turn that frown upside down! You'll get to play plenty of basketball after we're done!"

Heh.

"Say, Shikoba."

"What's up?"

"When Morsus is no longer governor, do you intend to be the one to replace him?"

"Haven't thought about that." Shikoba threw her arms behind her head. "I think I'd suck, but if everyone wanted me to, maybe I'd be down to try for a while."

"Am I right to assume that you're more *against* the status quo than *for* your own ideas?"

"Duh!" She chuckled, "Do I look like the type to have the solutions at hand? I just want Morsus in jail, get rid of the surveillance state and its propaganda, and let people choose their own damn governor. Not much goes on in that thick head of mine!"

"You sell yourself short." Isinachi smiled. "You're smarter than both you and others think. That's the impression I get."

"I don't agree at all, but hey, I'm not complaining!"

The wide smile Shikoba showed as she said that stung Isinachi's heart. She was different from Lisa, but she reminded her of her all the same.

He chuckled. Maybe it was just the blue hair.

"What're you smiling to yourself for? Your new clubroom's this way!" Shikoba dragged him along. Well, at least her enthusiasm rivaled Lisa's.

As they arrived at the clubroom's front door, Shikoba stopped.

"This'll be your new home court!" She laughed.
"Excited?"

"Show them to me." Isinachi grinned, "The new generation of freedom fighters."

"My pleasure!"

And so, the door opened.

"Skye!" Shikoba immediately shouted, "Did you catch Mach flirting with Roxanne while I was away?"

"What? Of course." She answered as if it was silly to ask.

"Mach, you son of a bastard! Get over here!"

"Hey, it's not my fault she's pretty!" He dodged Shikoba's incoming shoulder bash.

"Get him, Shikoba!" Roxanne chuckled.

"H-hey! Who's side are you on?!"

“Cut the crap!!” Skye slammed her desk, and the clubroom froze. “What a terrible first impression to give a new member!”

Isinachi couldn't help but laugh. When was the last time he audibly did? He couldn't remember. “Seems like you've got yourself a nice club going, Shikoba.” He said as he grabbed the door opening's ceiling and ducked under it to enter the clubroom. Sometimes his height was a pain.

“You're a real schemer, Mach.” He then said.

“You're welcome.” Mach winked, “I knew Shikoba could light up a spark in you again.”

“I admit, that is what happened.” He shrugged with a smile.

“She is a special one.”

“You're embarrassing me, Mach.”

“You love to hear me say that. Admit it.”

“Nevernevernever!”

“Excuse their rowdiness, please.” Roxanne walked up to Isinachi.

“You must be Roxanne, then.”

“Y-yes! And unless I'm grossly mistaken, you are Isinachi Kayode, from the Sanctus Swans!”

“From the Investigation club.” Isinachi corrected her.

“In a minute, anyway.”

“A-ah! Right! It is a pleasure to have you!”

“Likewise.”

“Isinachi,” Skye interrupted them, “can you come here, then? If you want to join, you have some paperwork to do.”

Without basketball, he worried that life would become draining. He couldn’t imagine a life without an escape from reality to fall back on. But he was doing that too much now. Shikoba woke him up. There’s a difference between distracting yourself and running away. He’d find something else to do to take his mind off things.

Playing the Ignis Eagles again and again was boring, anyway.

“Are you not in trouble for supervising this club?” Isinachi asked Skye as he filled in some mundane paper questions.

“I’m being watched, but I’m not in trouble. Let’s say they have a reason to be scared of leaving me with nothing left to lose.”

“That sounds like your life’s in danger.”

“It’s complicated. I’m not going to elaborate.” She said. He noticed her hands trembling. He couldn’t imagine what her situation was.

“That’s fine.”

After writing down the last of the required information, he stood up. “Done.”

“Any ideas for us, now that you’re here?” Shikoba asked.

“I have new member ideas. A pair of twins. It’s time to remind them of their own ideals.” He grinned.

It was 4 AM, on the night of Wednesday to Thursday. Virtually all of Sanctus was asleep, except for LISA's anonymous night owl. Ace smirked as they saw the news on one of their monitors. Isinachi had joined the Investigation Club. Right on schedule. Now they were content with just checking the financial transactions of businesses involved with the government for the day, and then they could make an attempt at sleeping.

Their entire existence was in the name of intel collection. Without a resistance movement, they were useless. Still, even when there wasn't one, they needed to know. They needed to know everything. They may not be able to resist on their own, but this was the one thing they were capable of doing. It was a matter of time before a genuine resistance would form. When that time came, they'd have information of a quantity these elite scumbags couldn't possibly fathom.

And all at the cost of nothing but one person's energy and health.

Suddenly, their eyes widened. An irregular, expensive purchase by the CEO of HighLife. Bought from... the ministry of defense? Now *that* was unusual. Generally, HighLife as a company could request anything from the government itself, and the government would grant it. Yet here was the CEO, making a purchase on his own name. Now, what did the man buy...

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It was time to make some calls. Urgently.