

Chapter 9.1

For Archie, life in the daytime was the same every day. He woke up in his small apartment close to the slums, after which he took the bus to Ignis Academy to work as a waiter in Ignis Village. At the end of his shift, he ate dinner there, and then took the bus back. And finally;

“I’m here...” Archie called as he walked inside Arnold’s café, right on time for duty, his droopy and tired eyes catching the attention of a certain someone that was always there.

“You’re looking worse and worse by the day, man.” Mach said, seated on his favorite stool as per usual, with his back to the bar, facing the entrance.

“You’re not exactly in prime condition yourself, pretty boy.” He retorted, “I hope you didn’t bother any women looking like that. You look like you haven’t shaved in weeks. It’s only been a few days, how did you pull that off?”

“A few days since what?”

“I’m no fool, you weasel. Shikoba’s safe now, Time for you to return to normal.”

“I’ll look after myself when you do the same.” He dodged, “Pot blames the kettle or something like that.”

“Whataboutism, Mach?” Archie smirked, “Even your wit’s failing you now.”

“Archie! If you’ve got time for chit-chat, you’ve got time to prepare for work!” Arnold laughed from the kitchen.

“Yeah, yeah, coming...”

In the corner of his eyes, he could see Mach’s grin disappear for a moment. It wasn’t like Archie didn’t know about that mask of his, but it was rare to see it break like this. His heart ached for him, but if Mach wasn’t going to be honest, there was nothing he could do.

After he went to the back and put on his work uniform, a green polo shirt and a brown apron, he stood in the kitchen, waiting for his new colleagues as he placed some pans on the stoves in advance. This wasn’t just a burger café anymore.

“Good evening!” A cheery, ordinarily good looking guy his age with short black hair walked into the kitchen.

“Good evening, Donny.”

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you, but-..”

“Insomnia.”

“Hm?”

“You were gonna ask about how tired I look, right? I have insomnia. It’s just what it is.”

“I’m sorry, you must get that question a lot, huh?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry about it.”

“Good evening, you two.”

And there was a more familiar face.

“The star of the Sanctus Swans, reduced to a burger flipper!” Archie joked with a dramatic voice, “This city is headed to ruin!”

“There’s nothing wrong with being a ‘burger flipper’.” Isinachi chuckled, “but the slums deserve better food, and we’ll be making it from today onward.”

“The colonel struck a gold mine with you, that’s for sure.”

“I’m sure you could’ve made this possible too, had you not had bigger things to worry about.”

“Or some semblance of sleep to get.” Archie laughed briefly.

“Who’re the Sanctus Swans?” Donny asked them, furrowing his eyebrows at their conversation.

“One of Ignis Academy’s basketball clubs.” Isinachi answered, “I’ve been school famous for my skills since last year.”

“Interesting! My parents couldn’t afford to send me to higher education, so I don’t know much about Ignis.” Donny explained. “What are you two studying?”

“I do culinary arts.” Isinachi said. “Archie did the same.”

“Did?”

“I dropped out to work instead. It was a waste of my time.” He explained. “I hate the propagandistic narratives the school pushes. Culinary Arts didn’t have it as bad, but it still reeked of Maghnu-..”

Isinachi interrupted with a fake cough. Shit. Almost let something slip there.

“-of Morsus.” He corrected himself. Donny gave them an awkward look, but didn’t seem to look into it much.

...If only he could sleep more.

“Roxanne’s here!” Arnold then yelled as he came in through the kitchen door. “Ya know what that means!”

“Yeah, yeah, no more chit-chat.” Archie nodded.

Roxanne had succeeded Arnold as bartender ever since Madeline fired her. It was awkward for her at first, but by now she seemed to be getting the hang of it. Arnold himself now joined forces in the kitchen with Isinachi and Archie, allowing him to provide a new menu, with meals that the people of the slums could never afford elsewhere.

The colonel was truly a wonderful guy, he was one of the few people keeping hope alive for the people of the slums.

With that being said... it was time to listen in on his customers. If he stayed silent, the kitchen was close enough to the bar for him to hear the conversations the people there were having. Why did he feel the need to? Simple.

Mach worried him.

“Welcome!” Roxanne cheerily greeted the first guests of the day. In walked Booker, a tall man with a blond ponytail wearing a newsboy cap, brown sweater, torn jeans and worn out leather shoes, and with him was Amy, his young, adoptive daughter.

With her slightly oversized overalls shaking up and down, Amy ran up to the bar with her arms in the air like a penguin and got lifted up onto her stool by Mach as Booker sat down next to her. "Where is Bar Man?" Amy asked.

"He is in the kitchen!" Roxanne leaned forward and smiled dotingly at the young girl.

"So I heard." Booker said, "Makes me look forward to dinner.

Amy was a five year old girl whose parents couldn't afford to care for her. Several people had been her caretaker in the slums since, but last year, after her last caretaker disappeared, Booker adopted her. He was once a teacher at Ignis Academy, who got fired for 'speaking out of line'. He now worked as a cleaner at Gareth Bullard's private mansion, among other places. Archie knew the two of them well.

His eavesdropping was interrupted when Isinachi planted a hand on his shoulder. "How have your cooking skills aged?" He asked.

"We're about to find out." He shrugged with a cocky little chuckle, "It'll seem like it came straight from the Great Dragon's menu to the people here regardless."

"Hah! I did work there in my heyday, I'll have you know!" Arnold interjected.

"Wait, really?" He asked, catching the attention of everyone in the kitchen.

“Bwahahahaha! Of course not!” He laughed loudly,
“They’d never have hired me!”

Right.

“Too prestigious?” Donny asked.

“They want by-the-book, Ignis Academy-produced robot chefs! I’d never even wanna work there! It’s where good, authentic food goes to die, boy!”

“So, were you good enough for it otherwise, or?”

“How about we let our dear guests judge that one? I’ve still got it, I’ll tell you!”

Well, they were going to say ‘yes’, as Archie already said.

As Booker and Amy’s orders came in, it was time to get to work.

And to eavesdrop. Multitasking came natural to him.

“Hey, Dance Man!” Amy tugged Mach’s shirt, “What are you eating?”

“Oh me? I’ve already eaten, don’t worry.”

“But your tummy rumbled!”

“You’re imagining it.” He said, clearly in hopes to cut the conversation short.

“Am not!”

“Mach?” Roxanne entered the riveting debate after handling another customer, crossing her arms sternly as she spoke, “Do not lie. Tell me if you have eaten or not.”

He waited a few seconds before answering. "Don't worry about me," he said, "it'd be a shame if you wrinkled your pretty face."

"Humph! If you do not want me to worry, then stop making me." She told him off in an uncharacteristically stern voice. Was she mad? Heh, serves him right. She was entirely justified. He was all about being there for others, but he'd never allow a role reversal. That man's loner habits were persistent as all hell.

"I've got places to be, see you later." Mach, no longer able to mask his emotions at all it seemed, got up and walked away.

"Hey! Mach!" Roxanne called after him, but he closed the door behind him.

"First time I've seen him like that." Booker said, walking up to the bar.

"Likewise." Roxanne nodded, "He has been like this ever since... you know."

"I know?" Amy looked confused, but Roxanne shook her head; "It is nothing important, no need to worry, okay?"

"Okay!"

Time passed, and before Archie knew, his shift was ending. But there was still something here he should probably do.

“Colonel?” Archie called Arnold.

“What is it?”

“Can I use the kitchen to make a burger for Mach before I leave? He’s starving himself.”

“Hah! Of course! I trust you’re the only one to get him back to his senses!”

“Heh, you might be right.”

“Mach’s really a household name in the slums, isn’t he?” Donny asked Archie as he was packing his stuff.

“You didn’t know?”

“My mother and I recently moved here. We couldn’t afford the rent anymore, so we moved here. I don’t know anything about this place yet.” He explained.

“Working to sustain your family, then?” Isinachi asked.

“To help my mom pay rent!” He pumped his fists, “Everything to make her life a little easier!”

“Well, go back to her then.” Archie smiled as he dropped a patty onto a frying pan, “Good work today.”

“Yes, sir!” He saluted him, making the others laugh.

“No need for that, right? I’m not your boss.”

“I guess that’s true, haha!” He awkwardly scratched the back of his head, “Well, I’m off!” Donny added, and left before Archie could even reply. Energetic guy.

Roxanne then walked into the kitchen. “Everybody is gone, we can close!”

“Alright!” Arnold slapped his hands together, “Good work everyone! I’m going home, you two can keep Archie company until he’s done, I take it?”

“Of course!” Roxanne agreed, and Isinachi nodded along with her. That was settled, then. Not that they had anywhere else to go, they lived in the attic of this café. Or restaurant, Archie supposed it was now.

And with everyone else gone, it was just the three of them left.

“How do you know where Mach went?” Roxanne asked Archie, who simply shrugged.

“I know the guy. Whenever he comes to the slums, there’s one place he has to visit before he leaves.”

“You better report back to us after you see him!” She urged him.

“Will do.”

“I get being worried for Shikoba,” Isinachi said, leaning his back against the wall, “but the assassination attempt was stopped. I don’t get why he’s like this.”

“It’s a long story.” Archie said as he pressed the off button on the electric stove and placed the patty on the bread.

“We have time.” Roxanne told him. Sheesh, Mach was gonna kill him for this, but he couldn’t resist them.

“Alright, fine, fine.” He chuckled, “I’ll tell you when I’m back.”

Chapter 9.2

“Brace yourself, Archie!” A tomboyish girl with short, dyed pink hair called as she hopped in place on the cheap-looking dojo floor. He had let himself be convinced by Mach to join him and Vic in kickboxing practice. Wearing her black fist guards, a cyan-colored worn down tank top, and pants that were clearly once part of a martial arts uniform, Vic was ready to pulverize the punching bag that Archie was holding. All he could do was do as she said; brace for impact.

“You’ll be fine, Archie!” Mach ‘encouraged’ him.
“Easy for you to say, you little-..”

Archie was interrupted by a brutal standing kick right into his punching bag! “Gah!” He cried. Such force! Couldn’t she at least warn him? She was brutish as always. Why did he agree to this again?

Heh, well, after being accused of lacking guts by a certain little street rat, what else could you do? With a teeth-clenching smirk, Archie endured Vic’s onslaught of powerful attacks, and then a bit later, putting on some fist guards himself, did the best he could in unleashing a hell on Vic’s punching bag. Unsurprisingly, she didn’t struggle all that much to endure his wimpy punches and kicks, but, giving his all, he could at least shut Mach up for a sec!

This all played straight into that rat's plan, of course, but he couldn't care less in the moment.

"Haah... haah..." Archie panted, leaning his hands on his knees as sweat rolled down his body and drenched the mat he stood on, "how's that for guts, you little... brat? I'd say... my case is proven... right?"

"Case proven indeed. I stand corrected." He shrugged, teasingly bowing before him; "All hail Archie Padmore, bearer of a true warrior's spirit!"

All Archie could do was give him an 'I'm so done with you' look before Vic interjected.

"Hehehe, don't tease him, Mach!" She told him off, "Instead, how about you and I spar a bit?"

"Any time!" He turned to her, "Think you can take me?"

"Of course I can!"

"In a fight, or..?" Mach winked, making Archie roll his eyes as Vic laughed.

"Yeah, in a fight! If you wanted to 'spar', we can talk about it after I kick your butt!"

"Nothing wrong with that kind of woman!"

Archie walked to the corner of the dojo and sat down as the lovebirds took center stage. From his bag, he took a bottle of water that he proceeded to down half of in one go. Aah... that was exhausting. Well, at least he had a good show to watch. Vic was a much better fighter, but Mach was extremely hard to actually hit, for he was nimble and good at reading Vic's attacks.

In silence, Archie watched Vic's fierce-looking onslaught of punches and kicks be flamboyantly dodged by Mach and his amazing footwork. Whenever the two of them faced off, Archie was never able to tell if they were actually fighting, or doing something more akin to dancing. Only occasionally did Mach ever respond to Vic's offense with a kick of his own, and when presented with the opportunity to actually attack, he'd instead move into Vic's range to bait her into attacking him, instead. It was like a conversation without words, one that Archie couldn't hope to understand.

His attention was then drawn away when a little girl toddled into the dojo and let her butt fall down next to him. "Sleepy Man! Hello!" She said. Heh, cute.

"Hey Amy."

"Sleepy again?"

"Tired, more like."

"That is the same!"

"Well, no-.. eh, you're right." He shook his head and smiled at her. There was no point in explaining that to her right now.

Amy pointed at Vic and Mach. "They're so cool!" she said.

"If I'm Sleepy Man, who are they?" He asked her.

"Dance Man!" She pointed at Mach, and then moved her finger to where Vic was, and said; "Mommy!"

"Huh?" He raised his eyebrows, "She's your mom?"

"She's the Slums' mommy!" She nodded excitedly, "That's what Dance man says!"

Mach...

“Found you.” Archie lightly hit Mach’s shoulder as he sat down next to him in front of a cracked gravestone with a name poorly engraved onto it. ‘Vicky Flowers’, it simply said. Vic, for short. ‘Presumed dead’.

“Here,” He handed Mach the cheeseburger, “don’t talk back to me, just eat it.”

Mach nodded as he took it, and immediately he wolfed it down eagerly within seconds, leaving crumbs and ketchup on his face. He buried his head behind his upper legs, tightly gripping his knees with his hands as he silently cried. For a while, Archie said nothing. He feared that if he did, it’d just give Mach something to deny, dismiss, or deflect, like always. He’d never allow himself to be vulnerable in spoken words. He was an annoying little rat, but Archie understood where it came from.

Still, if he was ever going to catch him vulnerable and honest, this was probably the time.

“The SSA won’t make Shikoba disappear.” Archie broke the silence at last. “We might never know why they took Vic, or any of the other people, for that matter, but this is different.”

“...I know it is.” He lifted his head and wiped away some tears with his arm, “But I just don’t trust them. Why would I?”

Archie couldn't argue against that. The SSA was a vile organization. They had the unreserved right to arrest anyone and detain them indefinitely as they saw fit. And that, they did. In the slums, it was relatively commonplace for people to just vanish. Never did they see any of those people again. Vic was one of them.

"Tell me honestly for once." Archie said, "You loved her, didn't you?"

Mach desperately tried to hold back tears again, but as he clenched his teeth and whimpered, he realized just how torn his mask had become, and teardrops rolled down his cheeks once again.

"That's an honest answer, I guess."

"I..." he sniffed, "loved Vic, and I think... I love Shikoba now."

"Oh? Getting honest for real, then? Good job." Archie said, "And I mean that."

"I just... don't want to lose any more people dear to me."

"Anyone who's lived in the slums long enough knows the feeling." Archie nodded, "But at least for now, it'll be fine."

"Easy to say, harder to believe." He sighed.

"Why don't you call her?" Archie smirked, "She still has her phone."

Mach was silent for a second. Archie figured he'd immediately turn that down, but it seemed he was actually contemplating it.

“Maybe I should,” he said, “but I don’t know.”

“Afraid she’ll actually be able to notice that you feel like shit?”

“No, I... aargh! Okay fine, yes.”

“I don’t care how good you are at hiding that sorta thing to the women in your life. You’re an open book to me.”

“I don’t know how to feel about that one.”

“Heh. If it wasn’t the case, you’d be starving right now.”

Mach finally cracked a modest smile. “I... think I have a phone call to make.”

“I’ll leave you to it.” Archie decided to get up and, hands in the pockets of his green tracksuit, walked away.

“Hey, Archie?” Mach called out to him from behind.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks man.”

Archie turned around and looked into Mach’s grateful eyes wearing a content smile. “Make sure you apologize to the others, too. I won’t do it for you.”

“I will. Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome.”

Chapter 9.3

“No way...” Roxanne tightened up after listening to Archie’s story about Vic, the slums, and the SSA in the restaurant’s attic. “No wonder he was like that! If I had known, I would have made Mach look like he was just peachy by comparison!”

“It’s reality, I’m afraid.” Archie sighed, “It’d be soooo nice if someone were to report on this somehow.”

“Wow, you are as subtle as Mach is honest.” Roxanne smiled. “I will try.”

“We’re counting on you, famed and beloved Ignis Times reporter Roxanne Ashworth.” He said with a smirk on his face.

She nodded. “I will not disappoint.”

“Don’t put too much pressure on her,” Isinachi leaned forward on his bed, “starting out as an independent journalist is already tough without it.”

“You’re right. I’ll be mindful.”

“Say,” Roxanne then spoke up, “this is really making me realize, I do not know you guys very well at all. Isinachi, Archie, could you tell me about your pasts, too? I am willing to tell about myself, as well!”

Archie scratched the back of his head. Hoo boy. He and Isinachi made eye contact, and Archie subtly nodded, giving him an okay.

"I'll start." Isinachi then raised his hand.

"It does not have to be a grand retelling of your whole life or anything, do not fret." Roxanne assured him, "I just... would like to understand everyone better. So I can be there for you guys, you know?"

"I feel that." He said, clearly relieving her.

Isinachi then cleared his throat, and began.

"I don't remember anything from my childhood. Or most of my teenage years, at that. The latest I remember anything was five years ago, when I woke up at an orphanage."

"Huh?!" Roxanne interjected, "I was right to ask you this!"

"Sorry for not bringing it up sooner." He gently smiled.

"It is fine!" She dismissed his apology, "continue."

"Alright." He said. "I was then adopted by the people I call my parents. They look nothing like me, though, and they have never really treated me as their son. They took good care of me, but we never became close. Then, our relationship grew strained when I befriended Lisa."

"No wonder that you were abandoned by them the second you quit the Swans and joined us." Roxanne said, "Do you know anything about your real parents?"

"Ace told me that they and I aren't from here."

"You mean... you are from outside the city walls?"

“Yeah, though I usually keep that quiet, since I’m not supposed to know.” He nodded, “Ace says that a government ship came to collect people, much like they do to the slums now, apparently.”

“That is honestly so awful.” She started to sound a little mad. Archie noticed the same look in her eyes that Shikoba sometimes had. Good.

“One last question.” She said, “Do you know why you have no memory of any of this?”

Isinachi shook his head. “Even Ace doesn’t know. But I don’t really mind. I care about the here and now. I found basketball, I found a cause, and I found friends. Who I was doesn’t matter anymore. Only who I am now, and who I’ll be tomorrow.”

“Personally, I’d die to know if I was in your position, y’know?” Archie closed his eyes and smiled. As he opened them again, Isinachi smiled back at him.

“Well, no two people are the same.”

“True.”

Roxanne looked in awe of Isinachi’s story. “Everyone in our little group is so much more interesting than me, I feel like an odd one out!” She giggled. “My parents were just careerists who imposed that aspect of themselves onto me. Grades, grades, future jobs, more grades, reputation, opportunities, go join the Ignis Times team, it’s good for your resume! You better not fail at anything! What is joy? Get better grades! That kind of deal.”

She giggled again, but as mundane as her story was, Archie noticed real pain in her voice and her eyes as she off-handedly told them about her parents.

“Sounds rougher than I had it, to be honest.” Isinachi said.

“No way!” Roxanne shook up, “You do not even know who your parents are!”

“If I had yours, I don’t think I’d want to.” He chuckled.

“Right?” Archie leaned forward in his seat and looked Roxanne in the eyes, “Sounds like hell.”

Roxanne shook her head, “It was not *that* bad! Well, it was pretty bad, but-!”

“Just because you grew up ‘normally’ doesn’t mean you didn’t suffer.” Isinachi told her. “No need to dismiss your own misery.

“I... suppose that is fair.” She sighed.

“But how about you then, Archie?” She then turned to him, “What was your life like before you came here?”

And there it was. The question he dreaded. And simply couldn’t answer.

“I think it might be wise for Archie to return home.” Isinachi winked his way without Roxanne noticing. Heh, clever bastard.

“Oh, you are right!” Roxanne said, “It is almost midnight at this point, is it not? Please go home!”

“I will, I will.” He said as he stood up and put his tracksuit back on. “See you both tomorrow.”

“Till tomorrow!” Roxanne waved.

Isinachi did the same. “What she said.”

And so, he walked home. Thankfully, here in Sanctus, it didn't get too cold at night. Shitty as the place was, they had the climate going for them. A pleasant summer breeze enveloped him as he crossed some streets and walked out of the slums and into the suburb where he lived.

If only the weather was like this at home...

Chapter 9.4

A handful of years ago, in a place far away from Sanctus, there was a tower. A tower with, at its highest floor, an office room. There, Ardal Monaghan, a guy in his late teens with messy, black hair and purple eyes stood in protest before an old man seated behind his desk. It was a room of extravagant luxury, akin to what you would expect in a mansion for nobility. A red carpet, artistically crafted furniture, and red, green, and golden colors all around characterized it. Ardal, a young man that preferred wearing tracksuits and jogging pants, ill fit the environment he found himself in, but he was familiar with it all the same.

“Not this again, Ardal.” The old man complained with a gruff voice.

“Is it really necessary for us to decide who rules Sanctus?” Ardal reiterated, as he had many times before, “Why do we not have faith in its people, and why is that our problem?”

“Sanctus was a project we started! Why would it not be our problem?” The man barked. “Our place is and always will be above theirs! Maghnus is going to make a fine governor! Both for us and them!”

“Tch!”

Ardal grit his teeth. Maghnus, the absolute worst outcome for a gubernatorial candidate, and the one the current governor, the man he was talking to, favored.

“Complaining about him only makes your camp seem like sore losers, Ardal.” The governor said.

“Maybe we are.” He shrugged, “I just don’t like the direction this is going in. Sanctus has always been an authoritarian shithole, and with Maghnus, Flann, and Shamus at the helm of it, what control will the people have left?!”

“What the people of Sanctus will have, is peace!” The governor stood up, “Both in the physical and the mental! The dream those three share, their end goal, is the one that most closely resembles mine! You, Finnbar, and especially Elva have completely missed the memo!”

“Failed experiments, am I right? Weren’t those your words?” He smirked.

The governor sat down and leaned back in mild shock. “Where did you hear that?”

“Heh! You’re not gonna tell me you forgot who taught Shamus the basics?”

The governor stayed silent.

“You can’t hide anything from me. Nobody can. That was the point of my existence, right?” He showed a cocky grin, but his teeth were clenched together, biting through the anger he could feel boiling up.

“And what of it?” The governor asked. “Elva was not chosen. Your involvement with the Sanctus project ends as soon as I die and Maghnus takes office. I don’t need your tantrums to be among my last memories.”

“Fine, Ardal sighed, “then I’ll disappear.”

“So, you fell on deaf ears too?” Elva, a spectacled and youthful young lady wearing a yellow hoodie asked Ardal as he sat down next to her on a bench in their city’s park.

“Of course.”

“Sooo... what’s the next plan?” She leaned her head stupidly close to his face, with the same dorky smile she always had.

“You really seem to see this as some kind of strategy game, don’t you?”

“Nope! Not a game!”

“What then?”

“A story!”

“Pfft. I don’t think you and I make great protagonists.”

“I agree!” She laughed, “But I don’t think that’s our role in this narrative.” Elva shook her head.”

“What is, then?” Ardal asked, entertaining her train of thought for a while longer.

“I think Sanctus will reach a tipping point soon.” Elva said, “There’ll be people who decide to be open about their disapproval. It’s getting worse and worse, after all. I think we should enable them, and nudge them in the right direction! Those people will be our heroes!”

She asked him what they should do next, but she seemed to have quite the idea already herself. Not that he was complaining.

“So we should go to Sanctus and orchestrate a rebellion behind Maghnus’ back?”

“Sure!”

“What do you mean, ‘sure’?”

“I’m just thinking out loud, I have no plans yet!”

“It seems like a pretty good idea.”

“Sooo... to Sanctus we go?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Ardal dialed it back, “we’ll have much to consider. But if we were to do this, we’d need to get aliases, and get documented as Sanctus citizens before Magnus gets there.”

“Sounds like a job for you!” Elva nodded hyperactively.

“It does. And how are you going to contribute?”

“Hm...”

For a moment, she entered a needlessly stereotypical thinking pose. Ardal could tell she was serious by her pouting face.

“What’s she doing?” A young teenage boy’s voice asked from behind the bench.

It was Finnbar, a pubescent boy with kind of messy red hair and greenish-yellow eyes. He wore a green tracksuit, track pants, and sneakers. They were all hand-me-downs from Ardal, but unlike him, Finnbar was actually athletic. Well, he’d have to be. He would’ve been Elva’s military guy, had they won their election.

“She’s thinking about how she’d contribute in a plan to enable rebellion within Sanctus.” Ardal explained.

“Oh, you failed to convince the governor, got’cha.”

“How about you give it a try, General?”

“Why would he listen to me? You’re the smart one out of us three!”

Ardal leaned back against the bench’s back rail, and looked at Elva thinking. “I’m not sure about that.”

Elva was an oddball, and definitely not the kind of person people would put their faith in as governor of a city state. Oftentimes, it was difficult even for him to understand just what the hell was going on inside that noggin of hers. Her thought processes never made much sense, but their results were profound, seeing how her plans for Sanctus were much better for the people living there than Maghnus’. Elva not being chosen because she didn’t believe in surveillance pissed him off.

“Oh, I know!” She suddenly jumped up, “I’ll inspire the people!”

“How?”

...

Chapter 9.5

For Archie, life in the daytime was the same every day. He woke up in his small apartment close to the slums, after which he took the bus to Ignis Academy to work as a waiter in Ignis Village. At the end of his shift, he ate dinner there, and then took the bus back. And finally;

“Good evening...” Archie opened the door to Arnold’s café, now restaurant, and quickly saw that only Mach and Roxanne were on location yet. Mach had clearly shaven, and looked at least somewhat livelier than yesterday.

“There he is.” Mach chuckled, “You’re late, but Arnold’s out complaining on the phone. A delivery of beer and wine didn’t arrive on time.”

“I see.” Archie said as he sat down on a bar stool in-between Mach and Roxanne. Roxanne seemed to be too lost in the book she was reading to notice him. Some impressive focus, that was.

He looked at the book’s spine. Artificial – Eliza Humphrey, it said.

“What’s with the evil smirk, man?” Mach ticked his shoulder, chuckling.

“It’s not evil, I’m just tired.”

“No, that was definitely different.”

Archie shrugged. "You're free to believe whatever you want."

"If only!" Mach said, and the two of them laughed.

After a bit of casual banter between the two, suddenly, the front door's bells chimed again as Amy toddled into the café with urgency. "Dance Man! Sleepy Man!" She shouted until she stumbled and fell onto the wooden floor.

"Hey, hey, easy there!" Mach got off his stool and helped her back up. Impressively, Amy didn't cry.

"Huh?" Roxanne raised her head, "what happened?"
"Amy's got something to tell us, it seems." Archie explained.

"Deep breaths, Amy." Mach said, as he took one himself for her to mimic, which she did.

"Now," Roxanne got off her stool and crouched to meet Amy at eye level, "what is wrong?"

"There's a suit coming!"

As she said that, the doorbells chimed once more, and Luna entered the café.

"Figured you'd be here, if not at home." Luna looked Mach's way.

"Excellent work, detective. He sure was at the one other place he tends to be." Mach mocked her with a passive-aggressive smile on his face as he stepped forward.

“Do you want the news on Shikoba or not, Courtenay?”

Mach took a step back. Heh, as much as he despised the SSA, seeing Mach be told off when he’s trying to be snarky was always satisfying.

“Do tell!” Roxanne said before he could.

“Very well.” Luna smiled, “She’s to return to you guys tomorrow.”

“Thank goodness!” Roxanne elated, as Mach could only sigh in heavy relief, and Amy threw her arms in the air.

“Yaay! Blue Girl comes back!”, she cheered.

Luna already turned her back to the group as she powerwalked back to the door. Before the entrance, she stopped. “Make sure you throw a party tomorrow.” Luna told them without facing them, “she misses you guys.”

And with that, before they could respond, she closed the door behind her. In silence, Archie smiled. Results like these were worth every minute of sleep lost. He received no credit, but he didn’t need it. In fact, it was better this way.

“Alright then!” Mach began dialing Isinachi’s phone number, “let’s prepare a warm welcome for her!”

“Wooo!” Roxanne and Amy cheered.

“You too, you lazy bastard!” Mach dragged Archie off his stool.

“I’m telling you, it’s insomnia, not lazi- ah whatever!”
He couldn’t help but get swept away by the mood.

For the dream of a Sanctus that was free, Ace waged war from the shadows.