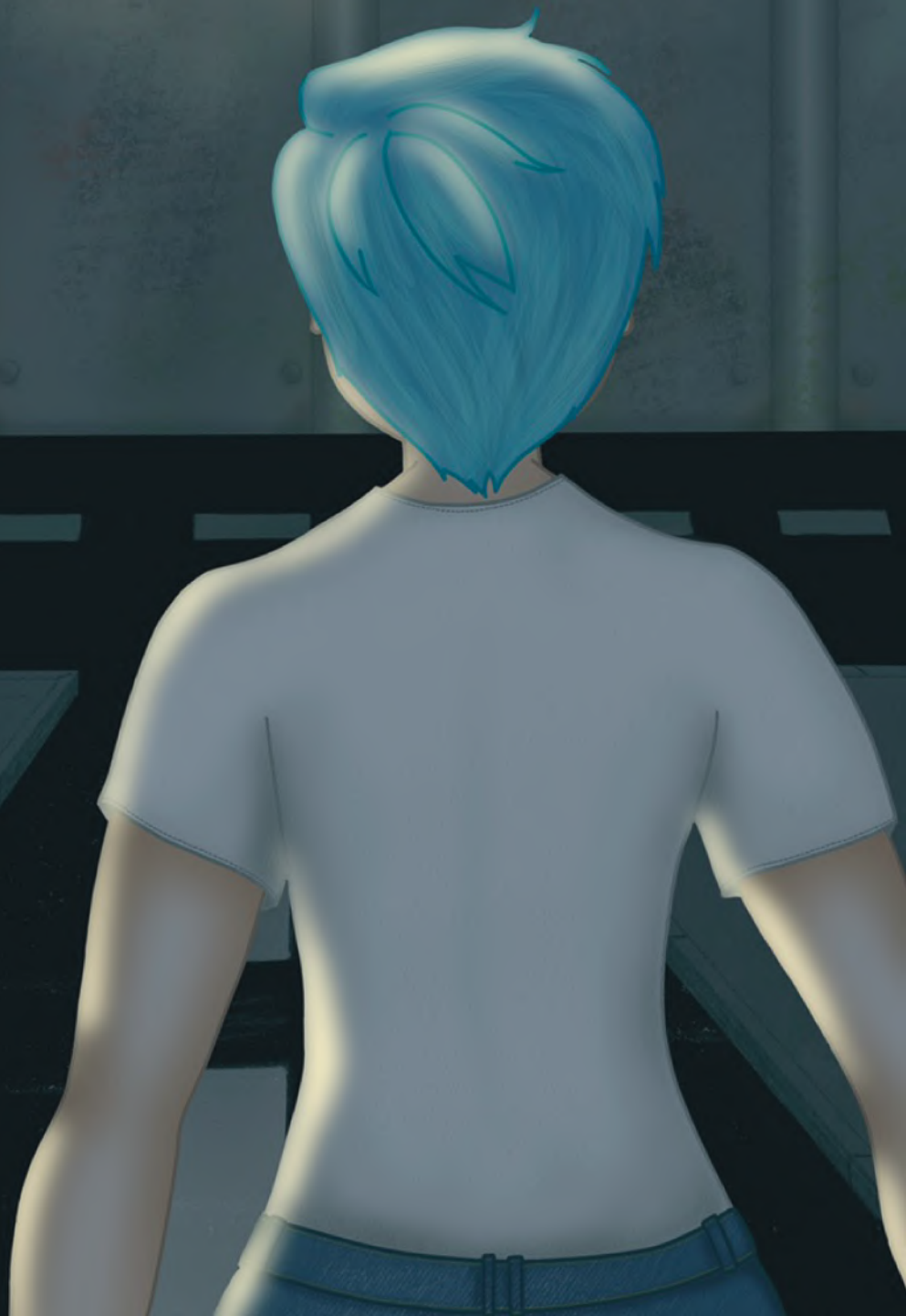


SHIKOBA



**MARINA
LUNSING**

Chapter 2.1

On an improvised, wooden podium, the most infamous of Ignis Academy's students, a girl with dyed navy-blue hair and a black beret passionately yelled at the school plaza through her megaphone, her message directed at her peers.

"I didn't come here to be taught propaganda!!" She yelled, "Did you? I doubt it! I won't rest until this school teaches us what it claims to teach! The truth! How can it be that the only school in all of Sanctus fails to teach us what lies beyond the walls that imprison us?!"

Her name was Lisa Jackson. She studied journalism, but she had no intention of actually listening to her teachers. She was infamous for a reason. She was only twenty one years old, but she was the government's most outspoken critic.

"You cannot silence us forever, Governor!!" Her frustrated shout echoed as two of the school's guards approached the stage, frantically getting some last words in before inevitably having to abort the speech.

Sitting next to her on the podium's edge was her friend, Isinachi, a dark-skinned young man wearing his long black hair in a man bun. What he stood out for most, however, was his absurd height, being well over two meters tall. In his low, yet gentle voice, he asked her; "Time to bolt?"

“Yep, time to bolt, before we get hurt!” She nodded as she dropped her megaphone and hopped off the stage, running for the school’s front door with Isinachi close behind her. They separated soon after, however, as their lessons began.

And so, mere minutes after her speech, she was glued to her school desk as if none of that ever happened. For her and the guards alike, her speeches had become part of the daily routine. Even the students started to get used to seeing it by now, to the point that it concerned her. Did her message not land somehow? Was the majority of people truly content with the state Sanctus was in? Did they not care for what was hidden from them? The thought worried her.

Despite how obedient it usually was, the class was surprisingly rowdy today, however. Even if she wanted to, she couldn’t focus on her work.

“Did you see Madeline’s sister today?” A guy asked his friend.

“Shikoba? She’s back?”

“Yeah, but she’s like a totally different person now! It’s crazy!”

That piqued Lisa’s interest. Shikoba Bullard was the daughter of the CEO of HighLife, and a freshman in economics. For the past week she had been absent, but...

“Different person?” The second guy scratched the back of his head, “What does that even mean, man?”

“She dyed her hair blue, for a start!” His friend said, “She’s super violent and angry now, too! She picked a fight with her sister this morning!”

“With Madeline?! What the hell happened?”

“Fuck if I know!”

Oh? Did Shikoba wake up to the injustices of Sanctus? If someone as high-profile as her was on her side, that just might be the boost she needed to kick some life into her movement!

Now completely disinterested in her class, she got up from her seat and walked out of the cold, grey classroom. Not that the hallways looked any warmer, but okay.

Normally, teachers would immediately protest if a student did this, but because outrage was exactly how Lisa thrived, they let her do as she pleased. That way, the school hoped that it would make Lisa seem spoiled, rather than rebellious or brave. It was a nuisance, because it worked to some extent, but that worry paled compared to Lisa’s main concern; becoming old news. If she could get Shikoba on her side, that would stop being a problem for a good while!

With that thought in mind, she marched through the halls. It was about time she met this reborn Shikoba and gauged her interest in democracy and freedom of information!

It seemed, however, like this endeavor of hers was already predicted. As Lisa was about to enter the utterly massive cafeteria, her path was blocked by one of her peers. A young lady with long, pretty blonde hair, wearing a business-casual dress and high heels stood between her and the hallway's end.

"Something the matter, Prez?" Lisa teased her, though her friendly attitude was far from sincere. This was Madeline Bullard, student council president of all of Ignis Academy. They were in the same year, but Madeline studied economics instead.

"Quite so," Madeline growled, "today has been naught but one headache after the other. I do not require you to add more to the pile."

"Haven't done anything yet today, Prez." Lisa threw her hands behind her head. "Putting aside that speech from thirty minutes or so, I suppose! But you were probably the one who ordered the guards to break that off, right?"

"Silence." Madeline hissed. "I know why you left your classroom. A fellow student council member informed me through text immediately."

"I'm still a top surveillance priority, I see! I'm flattered!"

"Silence!" She stomped on the floor, her heel producing a clacking sound, "I have but one message for you! You are hereby forbidden from ever approaching my sister!"

Ooh, Lisa thought as her eyes lit up. Her hunch was right, then! Seemed like the establishment was more than a little desperate to stop her and Shikoba from becoming friends! What they failed to understand, however, was that trying to prevent it only made it inevitable.

“Aww, you must care for your sister a lot! Are you scared that I’d radicalize her?”

Madeline held her breath as her face turned red from anger. She was fuming! Lisa’s relaxed, unbothered attitude never failed to piss her off. The last thing Madeline wanted to tolerate, was not being taken seriously.

“If I spot you anywhere in the vicinity of my sister, I will take appropriate measures!” She crossed her arms, as if to make a final statement.

“Nice and vague! Good job, Prez! I’ll never see the guards coming!” Lisa winked at her, which only served to enrage her further.

“Turn around and return to your classroom! At once!”

“Nah, I’ll pass, I’ve got other places to be. People to meet, you know?”

“Return to your class! That is an order!”

“You don’t have the authority to order her around.” A low voice called out to Madeline from behind her. Towering over the student council president, Isinachi had come to Lisa’s aid. As Madeline turned to face him, she saw Lisa had already passed by the both of them.

“Hey, get back here!” She called after her, but this time, it was *her* path that was blocked. Victorious, Lisa playfully laughed as she sprinted away.

As only a bunch of stairs separated her from the cafeteria on the ground floor, she held her beret onto her head with one hand as she smoothly let herself slide down several stairway rails to swiftly reach the ground floor, bypassing a few wandering students for which this was not a new sight.

As she made it to the ground floor, she danced her way through the cafeteria and into one of the hallways, where a sword-wielding guard stood between her and an unusually fancy, wooden door. A woman wearing a police uniform with a metal chest plate. Sheesh, sheesh, Ignis Academy! Tight defenses as usual! Not that it was a surprise. Beyond that door were the higher education teachers’ offices, and the principal’s office. If the rumor was true, and Shikoba had indeed fought with Madeline, then that’s where she’d be! But first...

“Halt!” The guard ordered as Lisa approached. Lisa stopped, but...

“Quick!” Lisa pointed in the direction she came from, feigning panic by frantically stamping and repeatedly pointing in the same direction again, “Someone from the boxing club is trying to beat up his teacher! Second floor! Hurry!”

“Shit! Thank you!” The guard immediately sprinted away. Lisa couldn’t help but let out a devious chuckle.

“You’re welcome, miss~!”

Now able to afford going slow, Lisa opened the door and strolled through the teachers’ private hallway. Nice, dark green painted walls, a fancy red carpet on the floor, and expensive looking paintings with frames of gold decorated the place. It made her sick. Did they not have better things to spend their money on? Like real education?

Of course not.

Opening the door at the far end of the hallway, Lisa found a waiting room. Comfortably cushioned chairs formed a circle in this large room of which the decoration matched the hall she came from. Across the room from her was the door to the principal’s office! All she had to do was wait for Shikoba to come through that door!

At least, that would’ve been the case, had there not been a Blacksuit in the room.

“Lisa Jackson, correct?” A pale, white-haired lady stood from her seat to face her. She was smiling, but if looks could kill...

“Maybe.” She shrugged, “You’re with the SSA, you would know more than anyone, right? About anyone?”

“Do you have an appointment with the principal?” She asked, ignoring Lisa’s remark.

“Nah, I’m just waiting for my friend!” She smiled, but the Blacksuit didn’t budge.

“You have never met Shikoba Bullard in your life.”

“Are you sure?” Lisa smirked, but that smirk faded as soon as she got her answer;

“Yes, because I surveil her. My name is Luna Snowfield. My current objective is to make sure that you and Shikoba do not become friends. Pleasure to meet you.”

...Seriously?

Chapter 2.2

Lisa wandered around the cafeteria, walking in circles aimlessly. Unfortunately, getting in touch with Shikoba Bullard was gonna be harder than she anticipated. Luna Snowfield... what a pain! An SSA agent with the explicit task to prevent a friendship? Seriously? This government was *desperate* to stop her!

"I knew I'd find you here." Lisa's favorite voice greeted her from behind.

"Isinachi!" She turned around as her trademark playful smile returned, "Thanks for stopping Madeline back there!"

"It is the least I could do." He shrugged, "What were you doing?"

"I was trying to meet up with Shikoba Bullard!"

"Because of the rumors?"

"Bingo! But alas, a Blacksuit is surveilling her, and won't let me approach."

"Seems like they're desperate to stop you two from talking."

"You took the words right out of my mouth! It's something else, really, I'm astonished at the lengths this government is willing to go through just to thwart *potential* disobedience!"

"About that, there's something I thought I'd let you know."

"Oh?" Lisa's eyes sparkled with curiosity, "Do tell!"

“Your underclassmen within Journalism are going to listen to a lecture in the audience chamber. You may want to sneak in.”

“Why? Lectures are boring!”

“Even if the Governor himself is giving it, and is taking questions?” Isinachi smiled.

“When’s it starting?!”

“In five minutes.”

“Isinachi, I love you! I’m off!”

“Good luck.” He told her, but like the wind, she was already gone.

Sprinting faster than some members of the athletics club with a scheming wide smirk, Lisa stormed through the halls to make her way to the audience chamber, a separate building close on the school’s terrain, connected to the main building. It was the venue for high-level academic lectures, but sometimes, government officials would hold lectures of their own to classes of their choosing. But for the Governor to do so was unheard of! If she could manage to sneak in, she could ramp up the pressure! The more they feared her, the better! She had to be a relevant voice that the public recognized! Only then would people hear and talk about her views!

As she turned right into a hallway, she was halted. Not by anyone who tried to stop her, but by the huge crowd of students! Great, she made it in time! Swiftly and smoothly, she blended into the student horde as it moved ever so slowly into the audience chamber through the cramped hallway connecting the buildings.

At the door's opening, there were two guards, but they did not see nor stop her advance into the chamber. Heheheh, she made fools of them once again!

The audience chamber had a rather simple interior, with a lectern on the right of the entrance, and dozens of rows of chairs with stands and microphones on the left. The floor was carpeted red, the walls were painted dark green, and the high and rather elegant chairs behind the stands were cushioned. Clearly, this was a place that the staff also used, otherwise, it'd never look so chic! In the back hung a ridiculously large picture of Governor Morsus' father, the former governor. They may as well be called the royal family. Insufferable.

Lisa sat down on a chair without a nameplate, and leaned back. She was lucky that there weren't enough students in the first year of Journalism to fill up all the seats! She only just noticed that everyone had already been assigned a seat per these nameplates. Hmm, the name of the person seated next to her was...

Before she could even read the nameplate, her neighbor already showed up. "Sorry, mind if I pass by you really quick?" He was a slender, yet fit looking young man with shoulder-length blond hair. Easy on the eyes, too, she had to admit. "My seat's right next to yours."

"Oh, of course! I'll make you some room." Lisa shoved her seat forward, allowing the freshman student to pass her by.

“You don’t have a name?” He winked as soon as he sat down, pointing at her desk.

“Oh, maybe the nameplate fell..?” Lisa tried to bluff her way through, but the guy just chuckled.

“Don’t fret, don’t fret, no need to lie. You’re Lisa Jackson, right?”

“Sssh!” Lisa put her finger on his mouth, “They’re not supposed to notice until I begin talking!”

“I know, I’ll keep quiet. I’m not exactly a government favorite either.”

“That’s a relief!” She beamed, though she was now curious. “But ehm...” She quickly peeked at his nameplate, “..Mach, what do you mean by ‘not being a government favorite’? Got in trouble recently?”

“I’m under surveillance by the SSA.” Mach leaned back in his seat, “Me and my roommate both, actually. Messed with an SSA agent and paid the price for it. She exaggerated my actions so she could punish me harder.”

“That’s..!” Lisa restlessly struggled to find words for what that made her feel, “That’s low, even for the SSA! I’m so sorry for you and your roommate!”

“For people like me, you’re our champion.” Mach smiled at her, “Don’t underestimate how nice it is for us to have our voices heard.”

Lisa’s happiness to hear him say that was immediately cut short as two people in suits walked up to the lectern. The man in front had a confident, elitist aura of holier-than-thou elegance about him, with his long, beautiful black hair and expensive-looking suit standing out. A muscular blonde woman, his bodyguard, was with him.

“The Governor...” Lisa fixed her eyes on him. She knew he was coming, but part of her still couldn’t fathom it. It was the first time she saw him in person. The man she put all her effort into resisting was here in the same room with her.

“Welcome.” He greeted his audience calmly, yet it turned all attention in the room to him in an instant. He rarely showed himself in public, but he was on television all the time. His mere presence silenced crowds. That was the kind of man he was. Sanctus’ dictator, revered by the rich and privileged, despised by the disadvantaged. But here, in this very room, the latter group would have *their* voice heard, too.

Lisa sat up straight. For the first time, she had the chance to clash with him directly!

“I have come here today to do a special lecture.” Morsus opened, “None of this will be on any test, but I do implore you all to listen very carefully.”

Oh, she was listening, alright! And so did everyone else, for any and all noise completely left the room. Morsus had all eyes on him.

“Sanctus suffers a crisis. A crisis invisible to the naked eye. And if journalists like you yourselves will become keep up the marvelous work they do, it shall remain invisible.”

Lisa and Mach exchanged looks. What the hell was he talking about?

“The outside world!” Morsus raised his arms into the air, “Ever does it try to infiltrate our safe home, aiming to stir up division and disorder!” He stated before taking a moment to calm his voice, “Within the government, the Ministry of Information often warns us about malicious foreign influence. Sometimes, their lies reach the people, but never do they spread. The state of Sanctus is immune to propaganda. Why? Because all information that reaches the press is verified.”

Lisa gave Mach a look. “Government approved, more like!” She whispered. She didn’t realize, however, that the Governor was not intending on hiding it.

“The IVB, short for Information Verification Board, is our ultimate guardian, and for you, your ultimate guide. They are government experts who fact-check all press stories. In this time of excess misinformation, the IVB is key. But even more important are journalists. Fighting against a constant flow of propaganda, it is their task to inform the public with factual information. Soon, that task shall fall onto your shoulders, as well.”

He raised his hands once more.

“You all are the future of information, the guardians of truth!”

Loud clapping from the audience ensued, and all Lisa could do about it is watch in despair and make a fist. He told you! He told you the government controls what you can say! He outright said it! And you’re cheering it on! Did you even listen properly?

She looked to her side, at Mach's face. It was one of pure, unfiltered disbelief. Lisa knew why they cheered, but it was frustrating to say the least.

"It's fear." Lisa told him, "Fear of an invisible enemy. Since we don't know what the rest of the world looks like, it's a wonderful boogeyman..."

The crowd shut up as Governor Morsus gestured them to return to silence. He flipped his hair, and continued talking. "Now, I do not have much time, so I had to keep my speech brief, but with the time I do have, I would like to discuss this topic together. Raise your hand if you have a question, I will answer as many of you as I am able to."

A teacher stepped forward to hand Morsus a remote with which he could turn on any of the stands' microphones that he wanted. Of course, Lisa and Mach both raised their hands as fast and high as they could, but many others did the same.

And so, one by one, Governor Morsus answered the students' questions. While some raised reasonable questions, none of them were actually skeptical of the system itself, much to Lisa's irritation. It was probably going to continue on like this until it was hers or Mach's turn, or so she thought. In truth, however...

"Your turn." Morsus pointed at a modest looking girl with long brown hair, wearing a red jacket over a pink shirt, and a brown beret, not too unlike Lisa's own.

“Um, my name is Roxanne Ashworth, I am the director and main writer of the Ignis Times.” She introduced herself. The school paper, hmm? Lisa didn’t expect someone in a position like that to ask any questions.

“She’s a freshman, and the director of the school paper?” Mach whispered to her, “That’s impressive.”

“Yeah, I wonder how she got there.” Lisa nodded.

“You have my appreciation for your hard work.” Morsus smiled at Roxanne, “Feel free to ask your question.”

“Th-thank you very much!” She shook up, “So, um, what I was wondering was, well, if a fact-checking board would really need to be a government institution, rather than an independent organization that, um, you know, would be less biased... perhaps.”

The room went eerily silent. Whoa, someone other than the two of them actually voiced a legitimate concern about the system itself. Judging by the Governor’s raised eyebrows, he was quite caught off-guard by that question as well, as calm as he remained.

“A fair question.” Morsus stroked his chin, “However, while it might be true in theory that the IVB would be less biased as an independent institution, that would not be the case in reality. An organization without ties to the government would not have access to the information that only the government possesses. They would need to use their own judgement, which can easily be-

manipulated by false information from abroad.” He explained.

Lisa saw the people in the room nodding and agreeing in silence, and Roxanne concede. Of course they would think that makes sense, it’s consistent with everything else Governor Morsus had said! It sounds reasonable now! What he’s actually saying, though, is that only the government decides what’s truth and what’s not! The conflict of interest was right in their faces, and yet they didn’t see it!

“Next, you, with the blond hair. Introduce yourself.” Morsus turned on Mach’s microphone! Now, time for the grilling to truly begin, Lisa grinned. Mach stood up. The floor was his.

“I am Mach Courtenay, you put me under surveillance for mildly inconveniencing an SSA agent once. Nice to meet you.”

“...You and I have a different interpretation of the word ‘mild’, but by all means, the floor is yours. I will not silence you.”

“That’s a first.” Mach smiled smugly, to the audible annoyance of the crowd. “I have a rather simple question, actually. Nothing too hard for you to answer, I imagine.”

“Oh? Go ahead, then.”

“I’ve done a little research, you see,” Mach shrugged, “and over the course of Sanctus’ 200 years of recorded history, not one attack on the city from the outside is mentioned throughout. My question is, what is so

dangerous about the outside world that we have to be locked up in this prison of a city?"

The class erupted in chaos. Hoooooly shit, Mach went WAY further than Lisa imagined he would! This wasn't even a critique of Sanctus journalism anymore, but a critique of Sanctus' entire foundation! But, unfortunately, Lisa knew what that meant.

"This is not the topic of discussion." Morsus lightly shook his head, "I promise more clarity on your topic another day, and you have my word, but I ask you to not treat this open lecture as a Q&A."

"My apologies, then." Morsus, ever smiling, condescendingly bowed as if he was talking to a medieval king. "Since my question was unanswered, can I give my questioning time to my friend here?"

"I don't see why not."

"Excellent." Mach looked at Lisa, who spared no moment to lightly push Mach away from his mic with her shoulders and claim it for her own. Mach, you wonderful soul! She had never been more eager to shout in a microphone all her life! And that said something! Parts of the crowd were already in uproar as they saw her stand up, but the room was too large for her to be universally recognized instantly.

"Well then, friend of Mach Courtenay, what is your name?"

“Governor, I have always wanted a chance to talk to you! I’m so glad for Mach’s gracious gift! I wanted to have that said before I introduce myself, if you don’t mind!”

“I do not.” Morsus let out a chuckle. “Now, by all means, introduce yourself, I am all ears.”

“Alright!” She beamed, “My name’s Lisa Jackson! Nice to finally meet you!”

Morsus gentle smile instantly vanished. For the first time today, his expression turned cold and hostile. In stark contrast, Lisa shone as bright as Sanctus’ summer sunshine rays! This was her moment of spectacle! Finally, she could confront Morsus personally, in a verbal showdown with a sizable audience!

“...You are not in this class, are you?” Morsus glared her way.

“You’ve granted me the chance to speak, so speak I will!” She laughed, “I snuck my way in here to introduce a different argument than the one that’s been spoon-fed to you all by the government all this time! Let me introduce you to an idea called ‘freedom of speech’! Wouldn’t it be nice? If you could just say what you wanted? Even if you disagreed with the man in the suit over there? Wouldn’t it be nice if we could talk things out with them? Wouldn’t it be nice, even, if we got to see what the rest of the world looked like? That’s-...”

Her mic got cut off, and Morsus’ bodyguard came charging at her.

“You do not want to see the outside world.” Morsus told her, and the class at large, as his bodyguard, after a way too long game of cat and mouse, managed to get a hold of the agile activist.

“I’m going to do a protest!!! At the Ministry of Information!!!” She shouted from the top of her lungs to make herself heard while struggling to escape the bodyguard’s grip, “If you want more freedom for yourself, come and claim it with me!!!”

And like that, Lisa was tossed out of the door, falling on the cold, hard floor. She wasn’t upset. Quite the contrary. Even while wincing from her bruises, she smiled. She got to put pressure on him.

“Mission accomplished!” She laughed. But this wasn’t the end. No, if the Governor thought this was the last time he’d hear of her, she was gonna have to disappoint him.

This story was far from over!

Chapter 2.3

Yawning, Lisa stretched her arms as she sat up in her bed. Drowsy, she grabbed for her phone and found herself blinded by its bright setting. Augh, she had to change that. As her eyes adjusted, she looked for the time and new messages.

5:26 AM

2 new messages

Two new messages..? She squinted her eyes until realization struck. Two new messages! She hung posters all over school to contact her for a meet-up to plan a protest! Someone replied! Yay!

She almost dropped her phone in her excitement as she quickly unlocked her phone and frantically opened her messaging app.

Mach Courtenay (2), it read. Wow, he truly was the real deal! Let's read!

"Hey Lisa. It's been a while since I've texted a girl first. Anyway, I'm texting you for the protest, of course. This is short notice, but if you can get everyone to wake up early, my roommate and I can show up to your meet-up to discuss the protest. Got a good location for you, too. See you there?"

The second message was a link to the address. This was in the slums, wasn't it? Well, she didn't really have a good location yet anyway, so it was all good!

*“Sure! I can do 7:00 AM! My comrades are used to some stuff! See you and your roommate there!
Welcome aboard the LISA! Destination, democracy!”*

LISA was the unofficial name for her little movement, and that was her corny welcoming message for all newcomers. Nobody other than herself liked it, but that made it fun. LISA was actually not her own idea for a name. Isinachi came up with it. Liberators In Sanctus Alliance, the letters stood for. Again, nobody other than Lisa and himself liked the name. It wasn't like they had the numbers to be able to care about branding, anyway. She was already grateful to have Mach and his roommate join them!

As she quickly entered the bathroom and turned on the shower, she heard footsteps in the hallway.

“Lisa?” Her mother knocked on the door, “Why are you up so early again? You should really get more sleep!”

“Sorry, can't!” She hastily answered, now undressed with soap already in her hand, “Got somewhere to be at seven!”

“Then go to bed earlier, dear! Think of yourself a bit more!”

Lisa didn't answer.

“You're going to end up in danger if you keep doing what you do, you know?” Her mother continued. Yeah, she expected this speech by now.

“We make a decent wage, and you’ll be able to graduate as a journalist in two years! Isn’t it fine this way?”

“Of course not.” Lisa matter-of-factly said as she turned off the shower and reached for her towel. “Have you ever been to the slums?”

“No, dear, it’s dangerous to walk there alone.”

“How can you know, if you’ve never been?” Lisa put on her underwear, shirt, and trousers and opened the door, meeting eye-to-eye with her concerned mother. “There’s people out there in this city who don’t have the resources that we have. They live on the street, Mom. They’re being ignored.”

“I would prefer that it stopped too! You know that, right? But are you prepared to die for them? For those people you barely know?”

Lisa didn’t say a word, but her mother saw her determined gaze, and gasped. With wet eyes, Lisa and brushed shoulders with her mom as she passed her, reaching for her beret, hanging on the wooden coat rack.

“I want people to live in a Sanctus where saying what I say isn’t dangerous.” She showed her a bittersweet smile. “I’m gonna meet up with Isi now, okay?”

“...Okay. Take care.”

“I will. You too.”

“Of course, dear. Stay safe.”

“Mhm.” She nodded.

“Promise?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Lisa crouched down to put her boots on, but as she stood up, her mom was still there, looking at her all worried.

“Want a goodbye hug?” Lisa asked, but her mother was already coming at her, wrapping her arms around her. She felt her shirt get wet as her mother’s tears fell on it. Still, that was a small price to pay. Smiling, Lisa petted the back of her mother’s head. She knew that her actions terrified her mother. How could they not? Freedom of speech was not really a value the government cared about, and no good mother wanted to lose her child. Since there was nothing that could stop Lisa from fighting, this was the least she could do for her.

“I have to go now, or I’ll be late.”

Her mother sniffed, “Okay dear. Good luck.”

“Thanks!” Her bright smile was contagious for her mother, who gave her a smile in return. That was reassuring.

Lisa closed the front door behind her, quickly texting the LISA group chat to notify them about the meetup location and time, and being assured by Mach’s reply to her text, saying that 7:00 AM was okay. Good!

As she headed for her usual meetup spot with Isinachi, who lived close by, she couldn’t help but think of her mother. How horrible, that her poor heart had to suffer, just because her daughter had an inconvenient opinion! If only for that, she could never forgive the Governor!

As daybreak slowly came, Lisa waved at his tall friend, waiting for him by a bus stop. Despite their meetup location, they were going to head to the slums on foot. They didn't say a word to each other, for Isinachi recognized Lisa's expression.

In silence, they walked, and walked, and walked.

"Curse the tracking system in public transport!" Lisa finally complained, "We've been walking for an hour...!"

"It is what it is." Isinachi told her, wearing a modest smile, "It's more important that the SSA doesn't know where we are. We're not under surveillance, but that's just a technicality."

"I know, but it's easier for you to say! You're a student athlete! I just yell a lot! I'm not used to this!"

"I've seen you make rather athletic maneuvers."

"Not for an hour straight!"

"Well, maybe you should join the basketball club too." Isinachi chuckled.

"They banned me from all school clubs, Isi..."

"I forgot about that."

"I barely got any sleep, too!"

"That's on you." He lightly fist-bumped her shoulder, "Don't worry, we're almost there."

"Thank god!"

Pretty much the only reason why Isinachi wasn't also banned from all school club programs at Ignis was that he was the star of the basketball team, wasn't it? Well, of one of them, anyway. Ignis Academy had two, and they played against each other five times a year.

Isinachi was a popular student athlete, and thus a great source of entertainment for the students. Bread and games were needed to keep the student body content, huh? In that way, Isinachi was actually a bit counter-productive to the movement...

"Say, Isinachi," Lisa got his attention as they walked around a corner, "I'm not saying that you should or have to, but what if you quit the basketball team as an act of protest against the school's curriculum? That'd gather attention!"

"I'm sorry, but I don't think I can."

"Why not? Think they'd just censor you or force you to play?"

"Maybe, but that's not the issue."

"Hm?" Lisa tilted her head, "What's the issue then?"

"You're amazing." Isinachi suddenly said, his warm tone catching Lisa off-guard, "You keep protesting and organizing endlessly, without reward or pause. I believe in the same things you do, but I don't have that level of stamina."

"What do you mean?" Lisa got a bit worried.

"Don't worry, I am not leaving you." He smiled. Phew! "What I mean is, I can't keep up our fight if I don't have something I can do to take my mind off the misery of our world, if only for an hour or two per day."

Huh... she had never thought of it like that. So basketball was an escape for him...

He was fighting alongside her all this time, struggling way more than she should've realized, and yet he was still with her, gently smiling and comforting her every step along the way...

"You know, I feel kinda bad now." Lisa told him as they stopped before a crossroad.

"There's no need."

"Of course there is! We've been working together for three years, and I never asked! I'm horrible!"

"I do not blame you, I never told you, either."

"That's just because of who you are! I can't blame you for being a silent person!"

"And yet, when it comes to your own nature and habits, you cannot forgive a thing."

"That's-... it's been three years! Maybe we should... get to know each other a bit better? I'd like to spend more time with you outside of protests and school!"

"I'm gay, you know that much, right?" He chuckled.

"This is not a confession of love!!" Lisa laughed, "You know that, you bastard!"

"Light's green." Isinachi pointed at the traffic lights. Without answering Lisa, he walked onto the pedestrian crossing ahead of her.

"Hey, don't dodge me!"

He briefly stopped, making eye contact with Lisa, looking over his shoulders with his golden eyes, "You should probably focus on our movement, instead of on me." He grinned briefly, before he resumed walking.

Lisa had never admired anyone as much as she did Isinachi in this very moment. How could she not have realized that such an amazing person was always by her side?

“Thanks for everything!” She called.

“Light’s red.” He told her. Oh crap! She 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.”

Without even looking at each other, the two bumped fists as they headed for their destination, walking side by side. Entertaining themselves with light banter, they pressed on until they made their way into the slums. There, the two turned quiet.

As soon as the road shifted from asphalt to dirt, the houses were made of wood instead of stone, and those houses’ rooftops seemed like they were improvised by the inhabitants, the stark difference between the main city and its forgotten area became blatantly visible.

Every so often, Lisa and Isinachi passed by some local business with a building that was built properly, but they only had money because the people of the slums didn't spend their money anywhere else. They relied on these small, local businesses to stay alive. None of them could ever afford the prices in the main city. Compared to the booming inner city, and to Market Hall, the slums and its stores were a depressing sight to behold.

"I've been here before, I know how bad the slums are, but..." A tear rolled down Lisa's cheek. She was going to say more, but she didn't have words to describe what she felt. Most people knew that the slums were like this, but almost nobody actually set foot in there, so they didn't bat an eye. The state media loved to demonize its inhabitants as unruly, fiscally irresponsible rebels, too.

Without even realizing it, Lisa made a fist. Injustices like these infuriated her. It was so unfair that those who couldn't afford to pay for life in the big city were left with such horrible living conditions! Why couldn't the government take care of its citizens? Why was that such a difficult task?

"Our destination is around the corner." Isinachi told her.

"That building over there?" Lisa pointed at a cozy looking café as the two of them reached the crossing.

"Yes, that one." He nodded.

"Finallyyyyy! My legs are already protesting, and we haven't even discussed the details yet!"

Isinachi chuckled. "Goofball."

Chapter 2.4

Opening the old yet pretty wooden door, Lisa walked into the café with Isinachi right behind her to close the door. It was a cozy place. The floor, the bar, the tables, the chairs, and the stools were all made of a dark brown wood. It was a little dark inside due to the low amount of windows, but the large candles placed on every table lit the room. It was still early in the morning, but you would probably be unable to tell the time of day inside, no matter what the time was.

“Welcome!” A grey-haired man in a suit greeted them from behind the counter. He looked like the type of man to run a fried chicken-focused fast food joint, for some irrational reason. Sitting on the stools by the counter were two brown-haired twins, one noticeably more tired than the other. “You’re Lisa and Isinachi, right?”

“That’s right!” Lisa nodded.

“Great! Now lock the door behind you! We’re officially closed, but I left the door open for you lot. Blacksuits will never look for ya inside a closed café!”

“Mach’s pretty smart.” Isinachi smirked.

“Hah! You bet he is, the little runt!” The man answered before Lisa could, “I’m Arnold, by the way! Mach was a freeloader in my attic before the state put ‘im under surveillance! Thankfully, even Blacksuits need sleep!” He proceeded to laugh like some kind of cartoon villain.

“Oi, Lisa,” The tired one of the two twins at the counter looked her way, “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.

“Stop using that name!” The twins instantly shouted in sync.

“Are they always like this, Lisa?” Arnold asked her, closing the windows while Lisa locked the door with a key he tossed at her.

“Yup! But they're all pretty high-profile people. Isinachi's a famous student athlete, and those are the Bennington twins, sons of the Minister of Finance! I don't know why those are the people I managed to get on my side, but hey! It makes it harder for people to ignore me!”

“Hah! I bet the government still tries its hardest to anyway!”

“They’re pulling it off, yes.” She giggled. It was so refreshing, hearing Morsus’ regime bashed so openly.

“By the way, where’s Mach and his roommate?”

“Mach’s taking a shower. As for his roommate, she should be here any-...”

Arnold got interrupted by the loud and fast footsteps making the stairs to the attic creak. A boyish girl with short, cyan-dyed hair rushed down the stairs and showed herself.

“So, this is LISA?” She grinned contently, leaning her shoulder against the side of the wall, “You guys look cool enough! Nice to meet you!”

“You must be Mach’s roommate!” Lisa hopped her way toward her and reached out her hand, “What’s your name?”

“Shikoba! You’re Lisa Jackson, right?”

“Yes! Nice to meet you, Shi...ko...ba?!” Her eyebrows raised, “Wait, are you Shikoba Bullard?!”

The guys grew wide-eyed too, while Arnold wore a smug grin on his face, walking back into the café’s kitchen. Shikoba looked so... vibrant! Totally unlike the blonde, soulless husk of a human being that Lisa associated with the name ‘Shikoba Bullard’ until recently! She had heard of her changes, but didn’t get to see her until now!

“Hell yeah I am! Shocker, right?” She bumped her fist against her chest, “I’m not just a sad version of Madeline anymore!”

Eugene leaned back on his stool flabbergasted, Eric had disbelief written all over his face, Isinachi scratched the side of his head, and Lisa's eyes sparkled with excitement. Shikoba was unrecognizable.

"Take your time here!" Arnold called from the kitchen, "I'm not opening until you lot are gone. Until then, it'll look like nobody's home! Keep your voice down a bit though, in case the SSA starts looking for ya here!"

"Thanks so much!" Lisa thanked him again.

"No problem! Staff's not here, but order somethin' if you want to! If it's just the six of you, I can manage on my own!"

Lisa, Isinachi, Shikoba, Eugene, and Eric took their seats at the largest table of the café when they heard footsteps coming from above once more. Nimble on his feet, Mach smoothly skipped a few steps moving down the stairs and swiftly joined them.

"Sorry for the wait." Mach apologized, but Lisa was quick to dismiss his worries. She was already more than happy to have him at all.

"It's totally fine!" We haven't begun talking about anything yet! Oh, Isi, did you bring the laptop?"

He nodded. "Yes, give me a moment to boot it up."

"Great! Then Ace can join us too!"

"Ace?" Shikoba's brow furrowed, "Who's that?"

“An anonymous ally, supposedly a friend of Isinachi’s.” Eugene shrugged. “A programmer and a hacker, we leave all digital endeavors to them. Their anonymity is respected, but I do wonder if it is for strategic or cowardly reasons that they do not show their face.”

“I suppose that doesn’t matter, at the end of the day.” Mach said.

“Perhaps not.”

“Oh!” Lisa raised her hand to draw attention to her, “In the meantime, we should do a little introduction round, since we’ve got new members! I’ll start!” She said, not waiting for feedback on the idea, “I’m Lisa Jackson! I’m in my second year of Journalism school, but I spend far more time shouting through a megaphone! I want to turn Sanctus into a democracy where the people are free to go where to please, the surveillance state is abolished, and poor people get the help they need!”

And so, roll call began.

“I’m Isinachi Kayode, second year culinary student, and captain of the Sanctus Swans, one of the two basketball teams at Ignis. I believe that the government’s main goal should be to improve the lives of citizens. I believe that Lisa can make that reality, and that’s why I am here.”

“The name’s Eugene Bennington, son of Mark Bennington, the Minister of Finance. I study economics. I’ve seen the way the system works myself, and I swear, it’s rotten.” He shrugged nonchalantly. “Lisa’s goals sound much better to me, so I’ll help where I can. Dunno if it’ll work out, but we’ll see.”

Lisa sighed. Eugene was ever the ‘realist’, wasn’t he? Though Eric was no different. She supposed that’s what seeing the system up close does to your dreams.

Eric picked up where Eugene left off. “My name’s Eric Bennington, I’m Eugene’s twin brother.”

“If we didn’t wear our bangs differently, you’d never know who’s who!” Eugene interjected, right before being pinched in the cheek by his brother.

“Shut up. Where was I? Oh. I am a smithery student, specifically swords and other weaponry, and I’m here for the same reason Eugene is. Don’t really know what our plan moving forward is, though. I’d rather stay out of trouble if possible.”

“Alright!” Lisa clapped her hands, “That brings us to the newcomers! Who’s first?”

Mach raised his hand. “I’ll go first.”

“By all means!”

“Well, I’m Mach Courtenay. I am a street dancer. I was kicked out of the house for my flamboyant, ‘gay’ dancing style by my parents, and lived up in that attic for a good while.” Mach pointed at the stairs he and Shikoba came from.

“When Shikoba ran away, I sabotaged the SSA’s efforts to find her, and so, because the SSA agent in question was a petty witch, I was condemned to life under surveillance. It beats homelessness, if only because of my beautiful roommate.” He winked at Shikoba, whose cheeks reddened immediately. “Anyway, Journalism student.”

“What’s your vision for the future of Sanctus?” Lisa asked him with eyes not unlike Shikoba’s when she gets all excited. They were like puppies, but this one was a bit less feral.

“I agree with you and Isinachi, but most of all, I want to get rid of the city walls, metaphorically. I want to see the outside world.”

Lisa giggled. The thought of passing through the walls and exploring the world seemed like a fantasy. If they succeeded, however, it could become very real. Reasons to fight were not scarce here!

“And then finally, our most high-profile member yet! Shikoba, the floor’s yours!”

As everyone, Lisa herself included, turned their eyes to her, Shikoba jumped off her seat with her fist in the air, startling the twins but putting a proud grin on Mach’s face.

“I’m Shikoba Bullard, daughter of the shitstain that exploits the people and the government alike to fill his dirty little rat pockets! I study business, against my will! Almost everything I’ve ever done until last week was against my will! I’m sick and tired and angry!! I won’t rest until I personally kick down the government’s door and have them pay for everything they’ve done to me and you and everyone else! I don’t have some kinda vision, I just want Morsus in jail! That’s all!”

“So much for keeping our voices down...” Eric sounded a nervous chuckle.

“Oh, oops! Sorry!”

“You certainly have passion!” Lisa giggled, “I’ve already seen Mach’s guts yesterday, but you, Shikoba, might be as passionate as I am! I’ve been trying to reach you, but now that I’ve met you, I must say, you exceed my expectations!”

“You’re welcome!”

Just having a name like Shikoba Bullard openly express support for her was already massive, but she got much more than that. Perhaps not in terms of ideas, but in enthusiasm, the only one who rivaled her was herself!

Their little moment was quickly interrupted by the sound of Isinachi closing his laptop. “No internet.” He said. “I suppose we’ll have to do without Ace for now.”

Hearing that, Mach nodded quickly. “Oh, yeah, the internet connection in the slums is terrible, you’re not getting any video calls here. Should’ve realized sooner.”

“It’s alright. Let’s get to planning, then.”

“Roger that!”

They began immediately. Accompanied by some drinks that Arnold brought them, the six activists discussed how they were going to handle their protest. Lisa and Shikoba wanted to cause some kind of disruption to force people to pay attention to them, but the twins were adamantly against the idea. As they talked on, it became clear that this wasn’t going to be as easy as Lisa had hoped.

“Let’s also not forget that two of us are under surveillance!” Eugene brought up. “I swear, Lisa, you’re taking this lightly!”

“I’m not taking anything lightly! We’ve avoided the SSA today, right?”

“Not gonna happen when we’re meeting up at the Ministry of Information. That SSA agent is not about to just let Mach and Shikoba hang out with us unsupervised in the afternoon, you know?”

Their discussion continued, until suddenly...

Bzzzz..., Lisa’s phone vibrated in her pocket, bzzzz...

“Hold on, I’ll pick it up.” Lisa grabbed her phone and pressed ‘answer’ on the touch screen. “Hello? Who’s this?”

“Meet me tonight at Market Hall’s parking lot.” The voice said, *“I have something important to tell you.”*

She couldn't tell who it was, their number was private, and they used a voice changer. Ace used one of those too, but when it was someone you didn't know, it was rather unsettling...

"Sorry, could you tell me just a tiny bit more? Just a bit?"

"I can tonight." They responded, *"At Market Hall's parking lot. I'll see you there at midnight."*

After that annoying response, they hung up.

"Who was it?" Isinachi asked.

"No clue."

"Hm? Did they dial the wrong number?"

Should she tell them? This was obviously sketchy, and if she told them, the twins would probably protest, or Isinachi would come along. If this really was important enough for them to use a voice changer, and they didn't call anyone else...

She feigned ignorance. "Dunno, they said something vague and then hung up. Let's return to the matters at hand, okay?"

"Sure."

"Alright!" Shikoba cheered, "I'll definitely be shouting some shit at the protest, so we're gonna have to brainstorm! Let's make it happen!"

When she said that, Mach poked her shoulder with his elbow. "I didn't know you had a brain."

"Oh shut up!"

Time flew by. They eventually decided on a protest where Shikoba and Lisa would hold self-written speeches at two different sides of the Ministry of Information's headquarters, with Shikoba accompanied by Mach and Isinachi, and Lisa herself by Eric and Eugene. This way, the SSA had no incentive to interfere until it would cause a scene to do so. Mach was a cunning young man for coming up with it.

This was hardly on her mind, though. The sun had made way for the moon, but Lisa was not yet home. Instead, she was on the streets, walking on the sidewalk. Unfortunately, taking the bus was again not an option, and this time, Isinachi wasn't with her either. It was a lonely, nighttime stroll, illuminated by lanterns and the occasional passerby car. With an emergency knife in her pocket, she walked in silence.

There it was. Market Hall. It was completely deserted, only lit up by the dim light of the moon and the stars. The street lights in the area seemed to be malfunctioning. She had a bad feeling about this, but walked up to the parking lot with a thumping heart regardless. She should've told Isinachi that she was going here, just in case. That realization came too late.

She could hardly see anything. "Hello..? Is anyone there?" She called, but no response came. Her heartbeat increased. Where were they?

In an instant, she tensed up. A hand grabbed her shoulder and turned her around. There they were. A mysterious figure wearing a black hood. In their hand, they had a sword pointing straight at her heart.

With a pained smile and tears running down her face, all she could say was

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

Shunk!