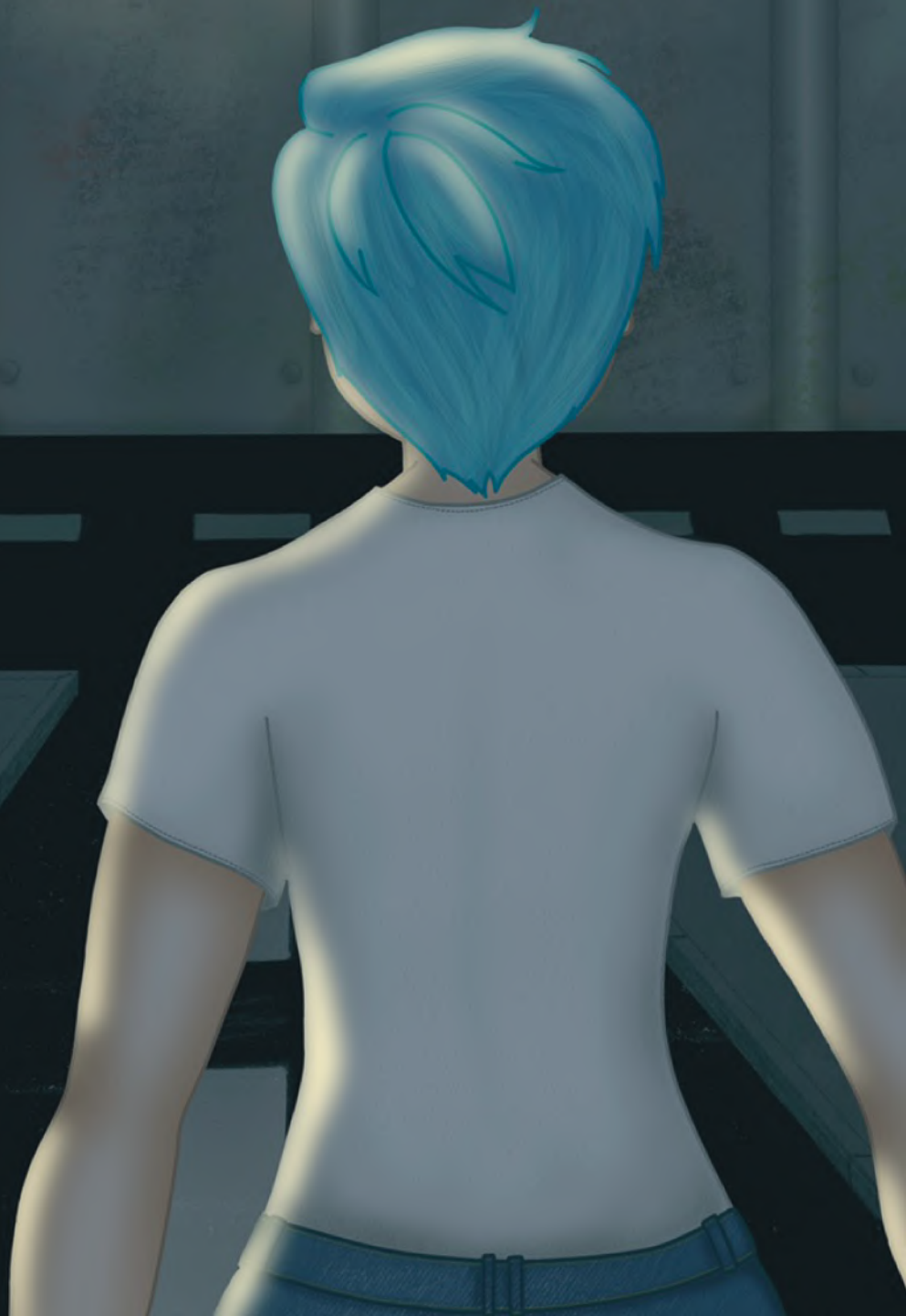


# SHIKOBA



**MARINA  
LUNSING**

## Chapter 3.1

The doors to the local supermarket automatically opened as Mach approached them. It was a few hours since Mach got to meet LISA and its members, but no amount of planning, socializing, or good memories stopped their fridge from being completely empty. The sun was starting to set, and if he didn't get himself some groceries, he and Shikoba would be protesting on an empty stomach. The protest's planning was a bit rushed, but he trusted that Lisa knew what she was doing.

Just as he reached for the last jar of jam on a shelf, he noticed a girl next to her doing the same, their fingers touching as they both grabbed the jar at the same time.

"Oops! Sorry!" The girl let go immediately, but Mach handed her the jar anyway.

"You can have it, don't worry."

"O-oh! Really? Thank you!"

"It's no problem at all."

What a pretty girl she was. She had a sweet face, long silky brown hair, and overall just looked cute. The beret she wore stood out to him, but that was probably just because Lisa always wore one too. He was about to walk away in search of something else to buy instead, but the girl apparently wasn't done talking to him just yet.

"Ehm, I think I recognize you. You are... Mach Courtenay, right?" She asked. Was she nervous?

"Oh, we know each other? I thought I'd remember a girl like you. Shame on me."

"Y-yes!" She blushed, averting her eyes for a second, "We, well, share some classes. We're both in Journalism."

"We've never talked, and yet you remember me so clearly." Mach winked to tease her, "I must've left quite the impression, then."

"Yes! I mean, no!" Well, yes, but that is not why-.."

"Relax," Mach chuckled, "It's because of the SSA agent following me around, right?"

The girl sighed in relief. She malfunctioned as soon as he teased her a little, huh? Pfft. It reminded him of a certain someone.

"Yes, it is because of the SSA agent, mostly. That, and I remember you giving your mic to Lisa Jackson at the Governor's special lecture yesterday."

"Wait, wait, it's clicking for me now." Mach suddenly realized who she was. "You're Rosanne, right? From the Ignis Times?"

"You were close!" A modest giggle escaped her mouth, "My name is Roxanne. You were right about everything else."

"Well, nice to meet you, then, Roxanne." Mach smiled.

"Why is a kind guy like you being surveilled by the SSA? You said something about inconveniencing a blacksuit yesterday, but you've been nothing but sweet to me."

“Who knows?” He shrugged, “For all you know, I might just act sweet to seduce women.”

To Mach’s surprise, Roxanne laughed at that answer. Responding to it, she said, “I do not believe that. You seem genuine, so it is clearly something else. You did not deserve this treatment, am I right?”

Mach paused. He really expected her to just blush and get all cute and flustered again. Maybe there was more to her than he thought. He didn’t answer her. Instead, he just grinned.

“Why do you study Journalism?” He asked instead.

“Oh! I have always found the idea of reporting on events or writing stories on them to be appealing, so I decided to become a journalist... or at least try to, I suppose.”

“Is it really fair to call reports and articles in Sanctus’ media ‘journalism’ though?”

Catching Mach off-guard once more, Roxanne shook her head. “You are right, to be honest. I would express that opinion, but Madeline and the student council would tell me to delete the article...”

Mach smiled.

“So, what was your name again?”

“Roxanne!” She giggled.

“Alright, I’ll remember that, Roxanne.”

“Nice to hear!”

Mach was about to say his goodbyes, but Roxanne still had more to say.

“Ah, Mach!” She very lightly tugged his arm for a second as he was about to turn around, “Do you, um, want to study together sometime? I don’t know if that is strange of me to ask, but-..”

“Sure,” Mach cut her off, “I’m not much of a serious student, but sounds fun. Hit me up whenever you feel like it.”

“O-oh! I, um, I will!”

“See you at school, then.”

“Yes! I’ll see you... at school!”

Cute girl.

After he finished grocery shopping, Mach began his short walk home. To his left, he saw asphalt and cars. To his right, tall blocks of flats designed to fit as many apartments inside as possible. These high-rise residential buildings were built a few years or so ago, when Governor Morsus first took office, Mach remembered. The news wouldn’t shut up about how the new governor was going to ‘end homelessness’ and all that.

Credit where it was due, homelessness definitely decreased over the last few years, however, since the Ministry of Housing didn’t understand the concept of real poverty, the rent was far too high for most homeless people to afford. As a result, many of these apartments were actually empty, and the city’s housing crisis remained far from fixed. Mach sighed. Every positive thing about this city had a downside to it. Just thinking about it was exhausting. Maybe it was Lisa’s influence.

Walking around the corner, Mach entered a quieter neighborhood. Well, it was not really a neighborhood, more like one long dead-end street, but it had its own unique feel, mostly because it wasn't so grey.

Houses were built in a circular row surrounding a tiny little 'park' made of artificial grass, with a couple of benches and a small playground for little kids. While the road went around the park in a circle, Mach ignored it and walked through the 'park' in a straight line, as his new front door was the one right in the center.

"I'm back." Mach called as he closed the door behind him and stepped into the living room, for they had no hallway in their tiny home. The houses here had no additional levels and were barely any bigger than a hotel room. To his right, there was a small kitchen counter with an electric stove and a fridge. To his left, there was a couch, a table, and a TV, as well as the door to the bathroom. Looking straight, he could see the door to the bedroom. It was a modest home, and a bit cramped for two people, but it was better than jail.

"Yo..." Shikoba responded, devoid of her usual energy. She sat on the red, cushy couch with a laptop on her lap, staring at the screen like a zombie.

"Homework?" Mach asked.

"No way I'm doing homework after today! Or at all, ever! I'm trying to write my speech for our protest, but it's so haaaaaard... I'm dyiiiiing..."

“It’s far too early for you to die.” Mach chuckled, “Don’t worry too much, very few people are actually gonna hear us. For the time being, whatever we do will likely fall on deaf ears.”

“If that’s how I’m gonna treat this, that’s never gonna change either!” She shook awake. “How could we move anyone if we half-ass everything ourselves?!”

Mach conceded with a shrug. “I can’t argue with that.”

Smiling, he sat down next to her on the couch, peeking at the bright laptop screen. “Want me to help?”

“That’d be great!” She hyperactively nodded, “I’m seriously lost!”

She shifted emotions so quickly, it was honestly adorable. As if he was handling a puppy.

“Normally when you’re shouting at people, it’s from the heart, right?” Mach asked.

“Mhm.”

“Why don’t you just write down your feelings first, without thinking about how the text flows, and then we work from there? We’ll take what works as is and tweak what doesn’t.”

Shikoba’s eyes lit up. “That’s genius!”

“You just vent all your frustrations into that text processor,” Mach smiled, “and afterward we’ll workshop the text and give you a speech on par with Lisa’s.”

“Hell yeah!”

Mach sat back and watched as Shikoba furiously typed out all her thoughts onto a new document. He intended to focus on the text appearing on the screen, but he couldn't help but look at Shikoba instead. Her eyes glittered. Never had he seen her so focused yet so passionate before. Like a beast eyeing its prey, she gazed directly at the screen and nothing else, failing even to notice that she was being observed so closely.

Mesmerizing.

Mach caught himself thinking, was Lisa really the most passionate about her ideals, or was there actually another young woman with dyed blue hair whose raw emotional investment in opposing Sanctus' system exceeded even hers? Shikoba was a lot more of a loose cannon, and required a lot more steering to make her effective, but that made her authentic. At least, in Mach's eyes. Seeing her try so hard for a protest that was unlikely to earn them anything other than a fine... it sparked something within him.

Mach was certain now. Being an idle supporter wasn't going to cut it.

Not anymore.



## Chapter 3.2

Mach was not so pleasantly woken up by a ray of sunshine making his eyes flinch. With his eyes still closed, he wondered; when did he fall asleep? Whatever his head was lying on didn't feel like a pillow, either. He opened his eyes, and saw Shikoba's face above his. His head was on her lap? How peculiar.

"Hey." He grinned. Shikoba's face was already red.

"H-hey!"

"When did the laptop and I switch places?"

"Not my fault you fell asleep! I was in a good flow and then I felt your head collapse onto my shoulder! You did this!"

"Why didn't you wake me up? Wanted to look at my pretty face in peace while you had the chance?" He winked, expecting a quick, flustered rebuttal, but all Shikoba did was shyly look away.

"...And what if I did?"

"How honest."

"I didn't admit anything!"

There it was.

Content, Mach got up from his admittedly comfy lap pillow. "When will Isinachi pick us up? Have you heard from them yet?" He asked, standing up and taking a few steps towards the bathroom.

"No clue."

"You can pick up my phone if it rings, I'm gonna shower for a bit."

"Got 'cha!"

“No peeking at my pretty face while I’m in there, okay?”

“Oh shut up, sleepyhead!”

Mach snickered and entered the bathroom. He intended to make it a quick shower, but as soon as the warm water crashed down on his body, he found his thoughts drifting away in all sorts of tangents. Naturally, he wondered what the protest was going to look like, especially since Shikoba probably finished her speech without his help, and to what extent the SSA was aware of it all at the moment, but a lot of his thoughts actually weren’t about today at all.

He couldn’t get Shikoba out of his head. She was born so rich and privileged, and yet she gave it all away out of anger. Never in his life had he ever met a rich person that was concerned about his well-being, let alone one that actively fought for it. The current system served her, but she despised it more than anyone else. She threw her position of power and wealth away to be roommates with a homeless person.

She was wonderful. She bought him a shirt while on the run from the SSA, risking her own chances of freedom to ease his suffering. She was cute. How she openly admitted that she was staring at his face just now, but still acted bashful about it. He never met anyone like her. She was... something else.

Nobody else could make life under surveillance something to look forward to.

Suddenly, she was not only in his mind, but also in his ears, as Shikoba was yelling at someone or something in the living room. It was time to cut this little alone time short, it seemed.

Hurriedly drying himself and putting his clothes back on, Mach returned to the living room, where he saw Shikoba yelling at his phone.

“What’s going on?” Mach asked.

“Isinachi’s trying to tell me that we’re cancelling the protest! Mach, talk some damn sense into the bastard!”

Wait, what?

“I’ll try..?” Mach furrowed his eyebrows, reaching out for the phone. “Isinachi, can you elaborate?”

“Yeah,” he answered, *I cannot reach Lisa. She’s not home, and she’s not picking up her phone. I’m worried.*”

Uh-oh.

“Does this ever happen with Lisa?”

“No. *She charges her phone every night, and picks up every call she gets, for better or worse. That’s the problem. It is unusual.*”

“Do you want to go search for her instead?”

As he asked that, he looked to his side to gauge Shikoba’s approval. There was fire in those blue eyes of hers. He was afraid that she’d throw a fit, but she nodded. It seemed like she was fine with cancelling the protest if it was to make sure Lisa was safe.

*"I do. I intend to ask Ace if they know anything, for they have eyes and ears everywhere. In the meantime, can you two ask people on the street if they have seen her recently?"*

Mach looked Shikoba's way again, who nodded her head. "Sounds good to me." He answered.

*"Thanks."*

Mach's thoughts went out to Lisa. Did something happen? Was she arrested perhaps? Hm...

*"Keep an eye on the news, Isinachi." Mach told him, "If they arrested her, I'm sure they'll boast it on television."*

*"Will do. I'll call later."*

*"Got it. See you."*

*"Bye."*

And with that, Mach hung up.

"You think Morsus had enough of her?" Shikoba immediately theorized, "You gave her the mic to talk to her directly, didn't you? If she's dead, I'm gonna make him regret it, I tell you!"

"Let's not jump to conclusions, Shikoba." Mach walked up to the front door. "How about we try to ask around on the street right away? The sooner we find her, the better, right?"

*"Sure."*

As Mach tried to open the door, however, he ran into a bit of a problem...

"Hey, it's shut." He noticed. With all his might, he tried to get the door to open, but to no avail. It was locked from the outside.

*Bzz! Bzz!*

Mach's phone rang again.

*"Who's this?" Mach answered.*

*"Are you trying to open your front door? Unfortunately for you, it only locks from the outside now. I wonder why."*

*"Luna." Mach recognized her voice, putting it on speaker so Shikoba could hear her better, too.*

*"Don't be like that, you should be happy that you're not a prisoner. Anyway, I went and had that lock installed last night. Did you think you could join Lisa's little protest and slip past the SSA? We see and hear everything, you know?"*

*"...When did you find out?" Mach asked, "And how?"*

*"Just now, because you told me. Thank you for being honest. How about you take a little Sunday break and relax at home for the day? Oh, and if you're thinking about breaking the windows to escape, I'll be reporting that as destruction of government property. You'd definitely go to prison. Bye now."*

She hung up.

*"Aaaaaaargh!!!" Shikoba screamed her lungs out, "Fuck everything!!! This is so damn stupid!! Fuck!!" She kicked the air, but accidentally hit the edge of a rectangular table leg in the process. "Haaa... shit, shit, shit, fuck..!"*

*"Are you okay?" Mach lent her his shoulder to lean on while she held her foot.*

*"No, that was dumb," she winced, "ah fuck..."*

*"Come, sit down." Mach took her arm and pulled it over his shoulder to move her to the couch. "If you take your shoe and sock off, I'll put some ice on it, one second."*

He walked to the kitchen. Did they even have ice? Opening the fridge, it appeared that they were lucky. He did indeed buy ice blocks yesterday.

“God, I’m fucking useless.” Shikoba muttered to herself, but Mach heard her.

“You’re not.” He told her while breaking the ice and putting it in a little bag. “I don’t know where you got that idea.”

“I’m the reason you’re in this mess, I can’t even do my part without your help, and all I ever do is get mad and suffer from it.”

“Would you have rather stayed with your father?”

“Like hell I would! ...But you wouldn’t be stuck here with me, at least.”

“You think I’d rather live in Arnold’s attic still?”

“You wouldn’t?”

Mach smiled in silence as he brought the bag of ice with him to Shikoba. “Here,” he said, “take your shoe and sock off, and put this on there.”

“You’re dodging my question.”

“You really think I’d rather still be homeless?”

“You were free. Thanks to me, Luna and the SSA decide what you’re allowed to do or not. I feel guilty! Hell, I am!”

“Nobody in Sanctus is free, Shikoba.”

“You get what I mean!”

“Just take off your shoe.” Mach continued to gently smile. “It hurts, right?”

“Fine...”

Albeit reluctantly, she did as he told her. She tossed her shoe over her shoulder, and then her sock after it. She turned to lean her back against the armrest as she rested her bare foot on the couch.

“You’re still dodging my question.” Shikoba pouted as Mach put the ice on her foot.

“What question?”

“I hate you.”

“No you don’t.”

“I might start if you keep dodging!”

No way to get around it, was there? He closed his eyes for a brief moment, as if to mentally prepare himself for what he was about to say.

“I much prefer living here with you to sleeping in Arnold’s attic.” He said, avoiding meeting Shikoba’s gaze, which was straight on him.

“But why?” She asked. She sounded so sincerely confused, that he didn’t need to see her face to be able to tell that she was.

“Because I like being around you.”

Silence.

“But... why?”

Her voice never sounded so soft before. Mach couldn’t look at her, though. This kind of vulnerability, the kind that came with sincerely sharing your feelings, wasn’t something he was used to. After all, there was never really anyone to be genuine with until now.

“Do I need a reason? I’m fond of you.”

Finally, Mach managed to convince himself to look Shikoba in the eye.

She was crying. Silently, but surely.

...

Seemed like this was new for the both of them.



## Chapter 3.3

Mach lied in his hammock without a care in the world, soaking in the good weather in the shadows of the trees. To his left was a rich, grassy field, and to his right a beautiful beach, where Shikoba and Archie were messing around in swimming gear. Next to him was a stool with a radio. Any second now, the election results would come in.

*"Ladies and gentlemen! The votes have been counted!"*  
Roxanne's voice declared on the radio.

"It's time!" Mach called out, and Shikoba and Archie immediately hurried over.

*"Between the incumbent governor, Morsus McNeil, and his social democratic challenger, Lisa Jackson, the winner of Sanctus' first gubernatorial election is..."*

*"Lisa Jackson!"*

Right as the three of them were about to cheer, Mach woke up with his face planted on a grey, metal school desk. Looks like he fell asleep in class. These kinds of dreams were nothing but torture, and yet, they kept him going. To make such dreams of his a reality, he was going to have to work a lot harder.

Not in school, though. He couldn't be bothered to pay attention in class. He was here against his will, anyway.

As he stretched his arms in the air, a girl wearing a beret and a red coat walked up to his desk, handing him a small notebook. It was Roxanne.

“Um, here!” She said, “These are my notes for the homework Ms. Fall gave us while you were asleep. L-like, what we have to do and some tips for that and the like.”

“Oh hey, thanks!” He smiled, “I owe you.”

“You really do not! It is no trouble at all!”

“Hey, you went out of your way to make those, you don’t want me to take that effort for granted, right?”

“Well, no, but you really do not have to repay me!”

Cute.

As he quickly looked around the classroom, he noticed something. “Is Ms. Fall not here?” He asked.

“I think she had to-..”

Roxanne stopped talking and quickly hurried back to her seat. Seconds later, the door opened. There the teacher was.

“I’m back.” Ms. Fall called as she walked back into the classroom. She was a tall woman in her early thirties, and always wore an unbuttoned suit. Despite the serious look in her red eyes, she was the most relaxed teacher Mach knew.

“I know it’s almost lunch break and that there’s plenty of interesting stuff to gossip about these days, but shut up, please!” She loudly clapped her hands. “I can’t deal with your noise right now! I haven’t had my coffee yet!”

The class laughed, and she cracked a small smile.

“BZZZZZZZZZZ!!”

The infamous, ear piercing bell of Ignis rang.

Finally, Mach thought. Time to meet up with Shikoba and get dinner.

“See you later!” Roxanne waved him goodbye.

“Until we meet again.” Mach said in a dramatic voice, making her laugh as she left the classroom. Grabbing his stuff, Mach did the same.

“This fortress of a building is so depressing.” Mach said to himself as he walked through the hallway.

“Right?!” Someone immediately replied from behind him. As they caught up with him, it turned out to be Shikoba. “It’s like a damn prison here! You’d think they’d at least try to make it seem like a nice place to be!”

“You’d think in vain.” Mach shrugged. “Were you waiting for me or something?”

“I was!”

“Didn’t you have class as well? In a totally different area?”

“I skipped it, duh. I just gotta attend, doesn’t mean I’m gonna do anything.”

“At least enter the classroom if you want to avoid trouble.”

Shikoba was going to argue, but their favorite Blacksuit blocked their path.

“Listen to your friend.” She crossed her arms and gave them a smug grin. “At least pretend to be a civilized life form, will you?”

Mach’s mood soured in an instant.

“Hey, Luna.” He glared at her. Shikoba just started grumbling.

“You’d do best to spare your energy, you know?” She shrugged, “You two and I are going to have to make due with each other for a long time. It’s not my preferred job to follow you around either.”

Luna turned around and walked ahead of them to the cafeteria.

“Then don’t!” Shikoba shouted, “We’d both be happier!”

“That would not make me happier, because I’d be poor.”

“Surely you can find some other job?” Mach asked.

“Not one that pays enough.” She looked over her shoulder and gave him a quick, menacing glare, but then quickly moved on, mingling in with the students headed for the cafeteria. Yikes, Mach thought, that look gave him chills.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen Luna so intense before.”

“Fuck her!” Shikoba slapped his back, “Let’s go meet up with Isinachi!”

As it turned out, however, Isinachi was nowhere to be seen. Disappointed and a bit annoyed, Mach sat down at the last free table available with Shikoba.

“No updates from Isinachi today then, huh?” Shikoba shrugged. Her internal frustration was poorly hidden, however.

Mach wondered. Was he sick? That'd make the most sense. As far as Mach knew, Isinachi never skipped school, but if he spent all day searching for Lisa, it wasn't weird to imagine that he caught a cold or something. It was the timing that bothered him, though. Surely there was no reason to overthink it, but...

Mach and Shikoba decided to just eat something. After all, with Luna watching them from the corner of the cafeteria and Isinachi absent, there was nothing productive they could do anyway.

Eating in silence, Mach listened to the conversations of the other students near their table. Unsurprisingly, they all talked about Lisa. Some commented on how calm the place was without her, others were speculating on whether or not she was alive, and yet others, those who already settled on the idea that Lisa was dead, were discussing potential reasons for her death. Some spoke of murder...

Mach himself wouldn't put it past the government to arrange such a thing, and it was probably not a coincidence that the news hadn't covered her disappearance yet. Still, regardless of whether or not the government did something, if you announce a protest, don't show up to it, and then don't come to school either, people will start speculating.

"Hey Mach, Ms. Fall is coming this way." Shikoba interrupted Mach's thoughts.

"Hey, you're right. I wonder why."

"Fuck if I know."

“Shikoba, Mach,” She stopped in front of their table, “could I have a word with you in my office? I’d like to talk privately.”

Before either of them could even respond, however, Luna walked up to them as well. Shikoba was already growling at her, but Mach signaled to be quiet. This could get interesting.

“You cannot.” Luna told her with smug demeanor, “Your office is soundproof.”

“Correct,” Skye crossed her arms, “what about it?”

“It is my job to surveil them. I cannot do my job if you talk to them there.”

“Correct.” She bluntly repeated. “You have many authorities in this building, Luna Snowfield, but you do not have any over me. I’m a teacher here, which in this school makes privacy in my office a granted right of mine. I don’t even let you into my classroom, so forget about intruding.”

“My, no need to be hostile,” Luna’s arrogance knew no bounds, “I’m just wondering, why *are* you so opposed to me seeing you interact with your students, Ms. Fall?”

Skye smirked. “Call me Skye. I don’t have to deal with your interrogation. I know your powers, and I know mine. In this building, you listen to me for as long as the headmaster doesn’t say otherwise. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be in my office with two of my students.”

It really was satisfying, seeing that cocky smile of Luna’s collapse. Skye had her beat.

“Ha, get fucked Luna.” Shikoba laughed.

“Language. I’m still your teacher.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Mach followed Shikoba and Skye to the latter’s office. He didn’t know what to expect, but there was one thing he knew for sure; this was not going to be about grades or homework.

## Chapter 3.4

As soon as Mach walked into the staff area with dark-green painted walls, paintings with golden frames all over the walls, and an elegant red carpet on the floor, he realized just how different Ignis Academy was from the perspective of established employees compared to a student's. It was clear that whatever minister

"Damn," Shikoba remarked, "it's like we're in a palace from some kinda Eliza Humphrey novel!"

"I didn't know you were a bookworm." Mach chuckled.

"High school assignment, shut the fuck up!" She laughed back.

"Language, please." Skye sighed smilingly.

"Yeah, yeah."

"Hey, Ms. Fall?" Mach asked right as she was about to open her office's door.

"Skye. Call me Skye."

"Okay, Skye," Mach smiled, "remind me, what was the name of the new Minister of Education again?"

"That'd be Alatheia Ford, Minister of Education and Information."

"One hell of a combo! Really says the quiet part out loud!" Shikoba said what Mach was thinking. What a nonsensical combination of posts for anything other than propaganda. He just had to ask Skye who was responsible for the funding of the misplaced feeling of grandeur the staff at Ignis possessed.



Skye didn't respond to Shikoba's remark, but Mach spotted a poorly hidden grin as she opened the door she already stood in front of. It had the same interior style as the hallways, it seemed. How fancy. Closing the heavy wooden door behind him, Mach grabbed a chair and placed it in front of Skye's desk after seeing Shikoba do the same. Behind the desk, on the back wall, there was a large painting of Skye herself. 'Alathea Ford', he reminded himself again.

"Ignore the painting, please. It's embarrassing." Skye said as she sat down with a cup of newly filled coffee from the coffee machine on the far side of her desk.

"That's not the problem." She took a sip from her coffee, "I'm just a teacher, it's embarrassing to see that big painting in my office. If I was allowed to, I'd throw it away immediately."

"Ha, I'd take it any day of the week though! Give me a painting!" Shikoba laughed. "Most people won't even look me in the damn eye anymore!"

Skye chuckled. "I can imagine you feeling that way. I sympathize greatly with both of you. Curse the Governor and his eyes in suits. Luna Snowfield being allowed inside this building is a disgrace to our education system."

Mach and Shikoba looked each other in the eyes for a bit, both caught completely off-guard. That was quite the statement for a teacher at Ignis Academy to make!

"Say, Skye," Mach turned his look back to her, "Why did you bring us here?"

He decided to cut to the chase, and Shikoba nodded along, equally if not more curious as he was. Pfft, her eyes were like a puppy's.

"Right." Skye drank some more of her coffee before sliding her cup to the side. She leaned forward, and began explaining.

"I've overheard things that I wasn't supposed to. I don't know much, but you were Lisa's friends, right?"

"Yeah!" Shikoba aggressively nodded, and Mach confirmed.

"Allies would describe it best." He said. "We're not that close yet, but we share the same worldview. We're definitely in business with her now."

Skye sighed. "Sorry to say, but not anymore."

"What?!" Shikoba shook out of her seat.

"I'm not stopping you, calm down." Skye shook her head, and Shikoba sat back down again, letting out a sigh of relief. "No, it's because..."

She paused, took another sip from her coffee, and made eye contact. "Lisa is dead. What's more, Headmaster Arkwright and the government seem to know. Arkwright was on a call with someone from the government, I only overheard part of it, but Lisa was killed. By who I don't know."

"Fuck them!!" Shikoba slammed her fist on the desk, making some drops of coffee spill, "I fucking knew it, too! Fuck these monsters!"

"You're putting a lot of faith in us, telling us this." Mach said, bottling up his anger. Shikoba deserved to let her feelings out right now. For her sake as well, this conversation had to continue. Gladly would he play the part of her unemotional right-hand man. "Most students would probably rat you out," he said, "you'd go to jail for this, or worse."

Besides, If Luna found out that they knew this, he and Shikoba would soon follow Lisa straight to the grave.

"I know. But you're open supporters of Lisa, with nothing to lose." Skye justified her information leak, "The last thing you guys want is to lose an ally. You can consider me your ally from the inside."

Mach looked Shikoba's way, but she was still staring at the floor, gripping her knees tight and clenching her teeth. He patted her on the back and continued the conversation with Skye.

"I'm assuming the only reason you work here is so that you can make a living?" Mach asked her.

"Yes, I need money to get by, and I studied for this job. Good luck finding any good-paying job where the government doesn't use you for its agenda."

"Fair enough."

"Anyway," Skye continued, "I trust that you guys will continue to fight for what Lisa believed in?"

"Hell yeah we will!" Shikoba stood up without an inch of hesitation. What a beautiful woman, inside and out.

"There you have it." Mach shrugged.

“Then I have a warning.” Skye finished her coffee. “Lisa’s death will never be called anything more than a disappearance, and trust me, Shikoba, if things continue like this, you’ll be their next target. If you two want justice for Lisa, frame yourselves as detectives, not freedom fighters.”

“Huh?” Shikoba looked puzzled, “Detectives?”

“Independent detectives investigating Lisa’s disappearance. I know I cannot stop you two from doing silly and reckless things, so I’m giving you guys the best cover I can think of. It’ll be harder for them to frame you two as radical rebels like that. Better yet, form an Investigation Club at school here. I’ll agree to be your club supervisor. As long as you have the will to do menial ‘detective work’ for people sometimes, you’ll be able to do your thing without interference. I’ll work from the clubroom and ban Luna from entering it. How’s that sound?”

Hm, Skye definitely put some thought into this. Was this really a plan she made up on the spot, or..?

“Sounds like a plan to me.” Mach agreed, but looked to Shikoba for a final answer. There were no surprises on her end, though.

“Damn right it does!” She predictably shouted, “We can figure out who killed Lisa, and also make it impossible to mess with us without disbanding an official club! You’re a genius, Ms. Fall!”

“Please,” She beamed, “call me Skye.”

“Aye’ aye!”

Having the rest of the day off, Mach and Shikoba decided to bolt right after their talk with Skye, before Luna could find them again.

“Y’know,” Shikoba raised her finger as she kicked a rock off the sidewalk, “if we go home now, Luna’s gonna find us again.”

“True.” Mach nodded, “But where do you want to go?”  
“What a dumbass question!”

It took a while to walk there, but afterward, Mach opened an all-too familiar wooden door.

“I’m back!” He waved at Arnold as he and Shikoba walked up to the counter. Mach quickly sat down on his favorite stool, and Shikoba took the one next to him.

“Hah! Welcome home, you rowdy rascals!” The old man laughed. “Archie! Get these two a cheeseburger and a cola on the house, will ya?”

“Fine, it’s not me who’s losing profit off of it.” He shrugged.

“Looking tired as ever, aren’t you, Archie?” Mach ‘greeted’ him.

“I’ve been busy, you know? Not unlike you two, I’ve heard.”

“Hell yeah we’re busy! Call us detectives from now on!” Shikoba raised her fist in the air.

“Looking for Lisa or something, I imagine?” Archie chuckled as he started cleaning the glass of an earlier customer, “Good luck with that. Whatever it is.”

“Thanks!”

“Be careful shouting that though, you two got a stalker, right?”

“Mhm. We lost her for a bit though.” Mach shrugged.

“You two are so naïve.”

“Archie, go deliver their order to the kitchen!” Arnold shooed him away.

“Yes, sir...”

Mach smiled. The situation was rather serious, yet life in this café seemed like business as usual. Lisa’s death was hard to properly grasp, but he did know one thing; he couldn’t sit idle and let the government do what it wanted anymore. With Shikoba by his side, he was going to do whatever it took to bring the truth about Lisa’s death to light. He didn’t want to think about her death, for the implication made him tremble. But to do nothing in response would be the worst thing he could do.

No matter what he’d do next, however, he was absolutely past the point of no return. He had picked up Lisa’s torch, and now he had no choice but to carry it.

“Oi!” Shikoba waved her hand in front of his daydreaming eyes, “Earth to Mach? You there?”

At least he didn’t have to carry it alone.