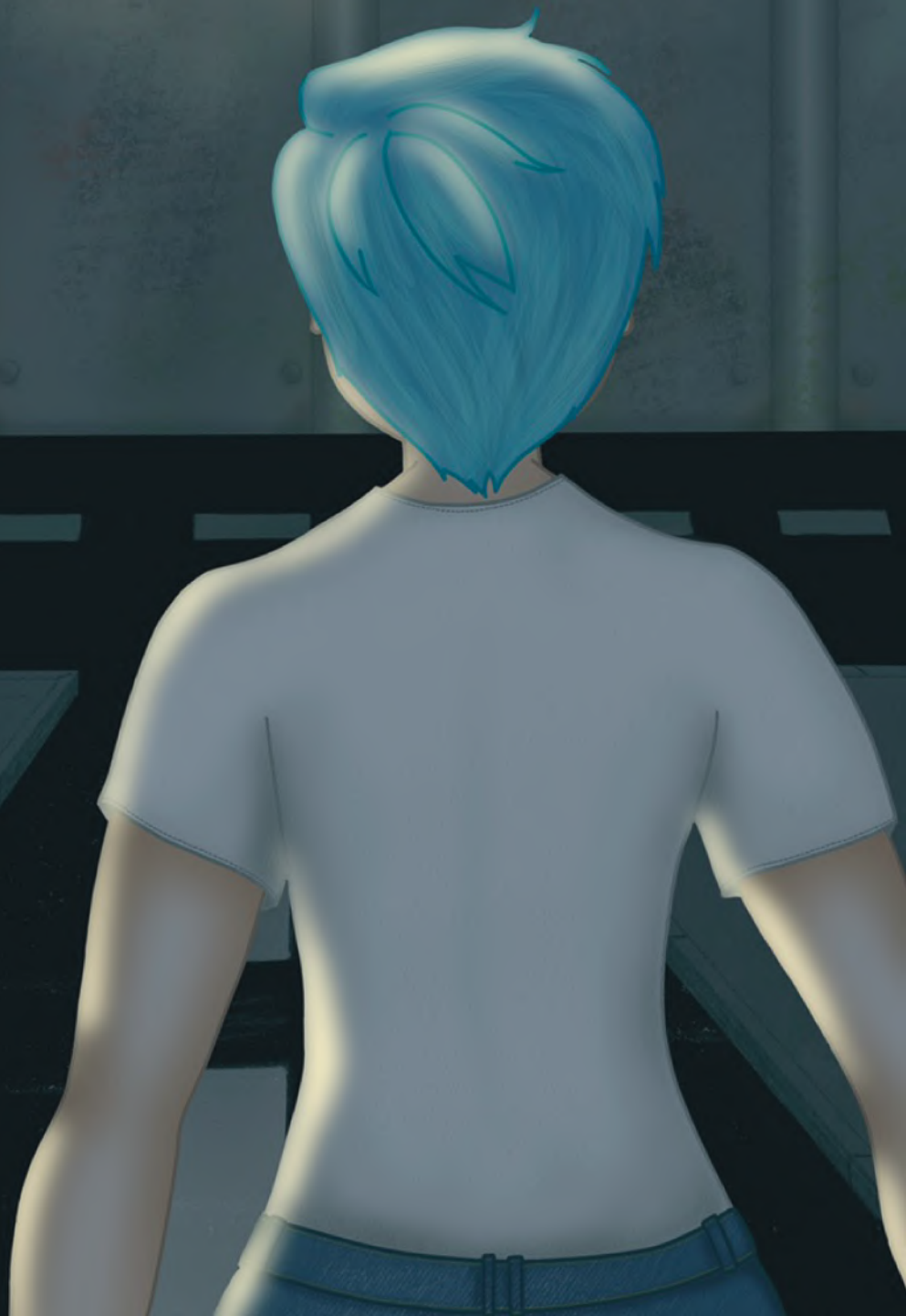


SHIKOBA



**MARINA
LUNSING**

Chapter 4.1

It was Saturday, a few weeks since Lisa Jackson's abrupt disappearance. The topic had since faded completely into the background as a variety of entertainment events completely overshadowed it. Isinachi, on the other hand, was still widely talked about to that day. In addition, unlike everything surrounding Lisa, Roxanne was actually allowed to write about it in the school paper. Notepad in hand, she sat in the crowded gymnasium tribunes, watching the Sanctus Swans, Isinachi's team, slowly but steadily gain a lead over the Ignis Eagles, who seemed powerless to stop their giant opponent. It looked unfair.

Ignis Academy never closed, though the lessons only happened from Mondays to Fridays. Every Saturday, there was a match between the two clubs of any of the sports clubs at Ignis, and every Sunday, various, more casual clubs held special activities, like a play from the Theater club, or an art exhibition from the Art club. It was also the deadline for the Ignis Times to submit their weekly newspaper to the student council. In other words, this was the last day Roxanne had to whip up an article to finish the paper. She lacked a front-page article, and this would have to be it.

Wham! There was another violent slam-dunk from Isinachi, and the crowd grew rowdy. Rowdy enough to make Roxanne's personal space diminish, forcing her to make herself smaller and smaller until someone from behind her shoved two Swans fans to her sides.

"Hey there." A handsome and slender young man greeted her, his beautiful long and blond hair slightly messy from brushing against the crowds of people.

"Oh, Mach! Um, hey!" She shook up a little, "Here to um..."

"I'm here to watch Isinachi play, yeah." He nodded, but quickly lifted his finger, "But actually, that's only part of it."

Before elaborating, he quickly took his chance to steal the seat next to her as someone else abandoned it. "In truth, I'm mostly here for the halftime show." He continued.

"Hm? Are you... into cheerleaders?"

"I'm more into journalists, personally." Mach winked.

"H-hey, stop teasing!" She laughed, feeling her cheeks heat up.

"Ahaha, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Mach laughed, "I helped a cheerleader for the Eagles practice her moves."

"Oh? How so?"

"I was a street dancer before the government kindly gave me a house. It's not the same, but I was asked for help, and, well, it appears I can't say no to women."

"Ah, so that is why you look so fit."

"Why, have you been eyeing me?"

"Wha..! No! Please get your mind out of the gutter!"

Mach chuckled. "I guess I'll have to work harder then."

"You... owh, you have no shame, do you? Honestly..."

He was always like this. Ever since they met at the grocery store that day, he had been keen to teasingly flirt with her whenever he could. Was he like this with all girls? For shame! He was not good for her maiden heart.

"I didn't take you for the type to watch basketball, by the way." Mach then said.

"Ah, well, I am not. I am just reporting on the match for the Ignis Times." She clarified.

"I see. You should write a piece on the new club Shikoba and I formed instead."

"I intend to interview you two about it soon!"

The Investigation Club was perhaps the most peculiar after-school club to have ever been founded at Ignis Academy. It came as a big surprise to her that any teacher was willing to sign their name onto it as its supervisor, but Ms. Fall, er, Skye, as she preferred to be called, apparently took the job.

"You're welcome to drop by any time." Mach said.

"Thanks! I will!"

After the match concluded in a 121-95 rout for the Swans, Roxanne tried to get an interview in, but when she approached him in the hallways, he just kept walking on and ignored her presence. Unfortunate. But also not so much.

After all, Isinachi was scary recently. Ever since Lisa disappeared, he seemed... intense. Not that she really knew him, but it was not too hard to tell. Tragic as it was, there was nothing she could do about it, so it was better to worry about her own problems for now.

As there were no classes on Saturday, and thus, attendance was not mandatory, Roxanne's stroll through the prison-like hallways of the academy was a silent and lonely one. Therefore, her mind was free to wander off.

How long could she keep up this job? How long could she deal with the endless restrictions that the student council imposed on the Ignis Times, leaving it as no more than a propaganda pamphlet? There was so much more she wanted to cover than just sports and mundanities around the academy. Sure, she applied for the job, but she also knew why she was accepted. Because she seemed timid and obedient. She did not like to argue, and struggled with confrontation. In their eyes, she was probably a convenient yes-sayer they could use.

However, ever since her question during the Governor's special lecture, opinions on her from authorities were shifting. She felt goosebumps just thinking about it.

Her heart ached. Obeying was depressing. Disobeying was terrifying. She has always walked the tightrope, but it felt like she was falling off. Her heartbeat raced. What could she do? She did not have the courage to be a freedom fighter, but this felt horrible too!

Walking around the corner continuing to argue with herself, she ran into a young woman her age. Long, blonde hair, corporate look, stern face. Yup, that was Madeline Bullard. The last person she was comfortable talking to right now! Or any time for that matter!

“Oh, Roxanne. Hello.”

“H-hi!”

“If I may ask, how is the paper progressing? It is due tomorrow, as you’re aware.”

“Ah, well, er, I am close to finished with the text. I just need to finish this story and get a teacher to write a staff column, and then my work is done.”

“Good. It’s always a pleasure when matters go smoothly.”

“R-right? Ehehehe...”

Talking to her was horrifying! She talked to her as she always did, but her eyes were judging her very soul! She knew what she was thinking. The student council was anything but happy to hear that the director of the Ignis Times criticized the IVB, short for Information Verification Board, through a mic for all her peers to hear! She was the mouthpiece of the student body, supposedly the reporter of facts in the eyes of many. If she did fall off her tightrope, she had fallen on Lisa’s side. If she could not regain her balance, consequences would reach far and wide beyond just the school paper!

She was so lost in thought; she did not even realize that she was shaking.

“In any case,” Madeline pushed her glasses, “I’ve not gotten the chance to talk to you since, but I’m certain you comprehend what I am referring to when I tell you to select your words more wisely in the future?”

“I-I know! I am sorry! Really, won’t happen again!” She immediately answered, as if it were a gut reaction. It sure felt that way. Her heart hurt from how badly it was beating!

“My advice is to stop talking to deplorables like Mach Courtenay, who spit on the virtues of our wonderful city. Don’t let them sow doubt in you. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got other places to be.”

And there she went, finally allowing Roxanne to take a deep, deep breath. Leaning her back against the grey concrete wall, she took a second to recover. She gritted her teeth. How dare she call Mach ‘deplorable’! It was not his fault that he was not born rich like Madeline was! She’d write dozens of articles about Sanctus’ disastrous income inequality if she were allowed to!

Was there really no way to do actual journalism in this city? There had to be some kind of way for her to me more than a mouthpiece...

...right?

For now, she had no choice but to toss such thoughts aside as she opened the door to the Ignis Times’ office.

“Welcome back, Roxanne.” A spectacled male student greeted her, his messy black hair almost covering his droopy eyes, which were fixated on his laptop screen.

Wearing a suit and tie, he looked overdressed for a student.

“Hi Byron.” Roxanne waved back, and sat down at her own desk.

Byron Underhill was one of her two colleagues at the Ignis Times, the other being a Shiori Tachibana, a glasses-wearing young woman with silky black hair that did not quite reach her neck. Byron was the paper’s graphic designer, and Shiori was the photographer, and their secondary writer. Roxanne was, alongside her duties as the director, also the paper’s primary writer, and thus, the Ignis Times swallowed up most of her free time. As director, it was Roxanne who had the final say on what the final product would look like and contain, assuming that the student council wouldn’t send it back and told her to change things, that was.

Roxanne opened the laptop resting on her metal desk and soon started typing away, using the notes she had made during the game as her guideline. Her heart continued to feel heavy, however, as Madeline’s warning was still haunting her. The student council handpicked the Ignis Times’ small but elite staff, and officially, the publication of the Ignis Times was its responsibility, not hers. She had the title of director, but that was what it was. A title. Ultimately, it was Madeline and her council that filled that role. It was also the council’s job to decide how it was printed, spread, and advertised. The ‘club’ that was the Ignis Times was in practice a subordinate commission of the student council.

There was only one part of the paper that was outside of Madeline's control; the teachers' column. Roxanne being the director only meant that it was her job to present content that the student council would approve of so that publication would remain on schedule.

"We've still got to decide on an article for the front page, by the way." Byron closed his laptop after a relieved sigh. Seems like he was done with work for today.

"Hm, you're right." Roxanne nodded while her fingers continued to dance over her keyboard, "The student council doesn't often like it when we put basketball or other sports activities as our front page article, but..."

"It appears that there was not much else of note that happened this week." Shiori joined their conversation. Roxanne had not noticed her, but her desk was in the far corner of the room, so she supposed she just missed her.

"Not an uncommon problem." Byron sighed. "We end up leading with whatever sport was played on Saturday all the time anyway. They don't *like* it, but it's not like they'll stop us."

"True," Shiori agreed, "I do not like it either, but we might have to."

Heading the paper with sports had been the go-to move for the three of them to make sure that people read the paper, but this was obviously not what the student council wanted people to read, first and foremost.

It was not as if she was particularly well versed in sports herself, so Roxanne preferred having anything else as her eye-catcher whenever possible, too. Ignis sports fans were not enthusiastic about her work.

“Um... There was one thing that happened this week that was a bit peculiar.” Roxanne said, her fingers still moving.

“Which was...?” Byron scratched his head.

“The Investigation Club officially formed last Monday, right? I think people might be curious about it.”

“That sounds like an ill-advised idea, Roxanne.” Shiori walked up to her, “its club president is Shikoba Bullard, Madeline’s delinquent sister. The student council won’t approve it.”

“You’re right, but...”

“But?”

“Would it not be possible to very neutrally cover the event, or even just interview Skye about it? It would be weird to ignore it... I think.”

“What’d be weird about it?” Byron interrupted. “It’d be irresponsible to give troublemakers like Shikoba a platform.”

Sigh...

Chapter 4.2

It was now Sunday, and while for most people, that meant either a day off or fun club activities, for Roxanne it meant that the final version of the Ignis Times was due, and she had yet to find an article worthy of selling on the front page. She fought against her eyelids as they tried to close, and her steps were sluggish. If only she could rest...

“Earth to Roxanne!” A strong womanly voice called out to her. Judging by the tone of her voice, it was not the first attempt.

“Oh, Mi-. um, Skye!” Roxanne corrected herself preemptively, “I am sorry, I have not gotten a free day in a while, I am a bit tired.”

“I can tell!” She almost laughed, “You should ask the student council for more staff!”

“Um... I do not think that Madeline is going to do me many favors at the moment...”

One awkward giggle from Roxanne was seemingly enough for Skye to get the picture.

“I’ll see if I can do anything for you. Until then, good luck out there.”

“Thank you, Skye.”

“You’re always welcome. I know teachers aren’t supposed to have favorites, but I’m not fooling anyone anyway.” She winked, bringing a small smile to Roxanne’s face as she walked on.

All she could do now is power through with the energy she had left, and come up with something to cover. Little did she know, she did not have to search.

“Hey!!! You!!! With the beret!!!” Roxanne heard an outrageously loud voice call out to her from behind. As she was about to turn around, her wrist was grabbed already, and now she was being tugged back. “Come with me! You need an article, right?”

It was Shikoba.

“H-hey, please slow down! Sure, I can interview you, but can we not walk?”

“Nope!” Shikoba said as she dragged her through the hallways, “Luna might fuck with us! She’s distracted by Mach right now, so now’s our chance!”

“O-okay then!”

Two minutes of constantly almost falling later, Roxanne walked into the Investigation Club’s clubroom, albeit dizzy and worn-out. As she regained her balance and her eyes adjusted, she scanned the room. It was almost completely empty, save from the sole desk in the middle of the room and the two accompanying chairs on opposite sides. Granted, there were a bunch of chairs and tables in the back, but all of them were covered to the brim with spider webs and dust. The rest of the clubroom was, however, no different. This was a clubroom that begged for womanly interference.

“Shikoba?”

“Yeah?” Shikoba wiped some dust off one of the chairs

and sat down, gesturing for Roxanne to sit down on the other, which she did.

“About this clubroom...”

“What about it?” She leaned back in her chair.

“Well, um, do you not think it is a little... dirty? And dull?”

“I guess? I don’t really care.”

Shikoba did not count as ‘womanly’.

“Would you mind if I helped clean this place some other day? It cannot be good for your health to hang around here for too long.

“You’d do that?! Sweet!”

“It is no big deal.” She smiled, “But perhaps we should start that interview we both want, should we not?”

“Oh, yeah, of course!”

“You left me with no time to prepare, so forgive me if the questions aren’t as sharp or precise as you may expect.”

“I’m not expecting anything, don’t worry! All I read is Eliza Humphrey’s books, when I come across them!”

“Oh! I love those!” She instantly shook up, there’s a new one coming up, I’ll tell you if it’s out by the next time I see you!”

“Oh shit? Definitely do!”

“I will! Though, we have to start our interview now if we do not want Luna to find us, right?”

“Right! Hit me!”

She was surprisingly pleasant to talk to.

“Okay Shikoba,” Roxanne began, “up until a few weeks ago, nobody could have imagined that you would make such a transformation and form a club like this one, can you tell me what the cause of this was?”

“I’ve always been like this,” Shikoba leaned forward, “It’s just that my family doesn’t appreciate it when you have values other than making a profit for HighLife.”

“I see! Why did you form the Investigation Club, specifically, though?”

“Because of-!”, Shikoba clearly stopped herself from saying something rash there, “Because there are a lot of things going on around school that the student council and headmaster don’t want to share. What we’re gonna be doing, is try to solve these mysteries within the rules of the school.”

Shikoba’s tone suddenly changed right after that initial correction of hers. All of a sudden, it was as if Madeline’s twin reappeared before her again, with her emotions filtered out, safe statements, and selling her service like a businesswoman. But her eyes were soulless, only jumping alive in that brief moment when she was about to shout something. She could see why Mach was so fascinated by her. Compared to Shikoba, she was rather boring, was she not? Wait, no, that was not important! Even when you are tired, you have to focus, Roxanne!

“You can come to us for smaller things, like your wallet being stolen, as well. Whether the issue is big or small, I look forward to helping you.” Shikoba finished

her answer.

“Even if you wanted to break the rules, you have a teacher with a personal office as your supervisor, do you not?”

“Yes, Skye Fall supervises our club activities and secures our budget. I’m very grateful.” She nodded.

“How did that happen? Ms. Fall has rejected several times to supervise various upstart clubs, as well as the Ignis Times repeatedly. Why was yours different?”

For a moment, Shikoba was silent, probably thinking carefully about what she could and couldn’t say. To an outsider, Shikoba, the way she was now, must have seemed like the type of person that would blurt out things without care, but this was a person who managed to hide and preserve her true personality for twenty years, continuing to think for herself while surrounded by people demanding her to fit a certain image. Ironically, talking to Shikoba like this told Roxanne more about her than any other conversation would have.

Right as Shikoba was about to answer, the door flew open, and an angry, terrifyingly familiar young woman glared at them with demonic hostility through her glasses! It was Madeline! Was this her final hour?! Hopefully her parents would care enough to get her a nice tombstone if this turned south!

“If you presume I will permit you to publish any interview with that blue-haired chimpanzee, you are

sorely mistaken!”

“Fuck you, Madeline!” Shikoba jumped out of her chair and stomped right up to her, their faces almost touching as if they were wrestlers before a fight, “Whether you like it or not, my club’s newsworthy! I’m not saying anything crazy in my interview! You’re just gonna reject it because I’m in it?!”

Madeline pushed her away, “Why, yes! Ignis has suffered Lisa Jackson’s nonsense for years now! It doesn’t need yours to make the discourse even more horrid!”

“Am I talking to my sister or to the Governor?!”

“You presume I know what the Governor wants?”

“You definitely don’t fucking know what students at Ignis want, that’s for sure!”

“Oh really now? And you do?! You’re naught but a self-righteous brat!”

“What the hell do YOU know about me?!”

Silently, Roxanne carefully took her notes and slowly and stealthily fled the room. There was no way she could get in-between these two when they argued, not that she wanted to. They hated each other with unique zeal, to a degree that they were not going to stop fighting until somebody intervened. And she was not going to.

Retreating from not only that situation, but also her work for a little bit, she made her way to the nearest school library. Of course, a building as gigantic as Ignis

Academy had plenty of them, but the non-fiction areas of each were tailored to the studies that had classrooms nearby. Not that Roxanne was one to go to the library to study. In fact, for her, the library was an escape from her studies. Her sanctuary where she could engage in the one hobby she had: reading.

She walked into the romance section of fiction novels, eagerly looking for a specific book. Books were ordered by name of the author so she searched through the books beginning with H. There!

“Yes!” She audibly cheered, before she was forced show everyone around her an apologetic look of shame. Still, she could not be happier!

Humphrey, Eliza - “Artificial”

Finally, something positive to happen this week! The book dropped! Ever since the initial blog post where it was revealed, she had been eagerly awaiting its release, and here it was, only a few months later! Though it felt like an eternity, she supposed Humphrey fans were spoiled like that. She worked incredibly fast. She mentioned it to Shikoba, but she didn’t expect it to be out already when she did!

“Somebody’s excited!” A girl’s voice said from behind her. As she turned her head back, she almost touched noses with her.

“Eek!” She jumped back in shock. Before her stood a short, youthful, kind of round-bodied girl with long black hair and purple eyes that looked straight into her own through her glasses. “Sorry, you scared me for a second!”

“It’s okay, it’s okay!” The girl waved her hands to reassure her. “I’m... Eona! Eona... Hunt! Who’re you?” She introduced herself, though it was almost as if she had to... think about what her name was?

“Ah, my name is Roxanne! Nice to meet you! What do you study?”

“Not much, I think books are more interesting!” She giggled, “Were you waiting for this one?”

“Yes, I was! I suppose it was easy to tell from earlier. That was somewhat embarrassing...”

“Of course not!” Eona shook her head, “Passion’s great! Don’t apologize for caring about things deeply! That’s the stuff that makes humans beautiful!”

“A-alright! Noted!”

That took her aback. What an eccentric girl, saying such a thing out of nowhere. She had this look of curiosity about her, with the way she maintained eye contact. She certainly did not lack ‘passion’ herself. Practice what you preach, she supposed!

“Well, I won’t keep you from reading any longer!” Eona smiled, “Have fun, and look forward to Chapter

12, I was really happy with that one!”

“I will! Wait, you have already..-?”

Read it, she wanted to ask, but she already vanished back into the maze of bookshelves.

Eona, hm? She hoped to see her again. For now, though, she was going to take a well-earned break. It was time to sit back and read!

Chapter 4.3

Oh crap, time flies! Now in a bit of a frantic hurry, Roxanne entered what was called Ignis Village, where most of the college students, including herself, lived. It was a much prettier place than the main city, with nice, stone paths to walk on, lots of trees and flower beds decorating the place, and quality trailers to live in. It was essentially a real village, hidden within the fortress-like walls of Ignis Academy. Ignis' prison-like interior was a lot more bearable if you lived in one of the village's trailers, which you were eligible for if you had passing grades, participated in an after-school club and were not labeled a disturber of the peace. Needless to say, Lisa Jackson never lived here, but to Roxanne's own mild surprise, Isinachi did. She supposed his basketball stardom saved him there.

After asking some people on the way, Roxanne now had Isinachi's address, and was well on-track to knock on his door for a quick interview in a minute or two. Her previous attempt had failed, but this time, hopefully she could get him to answer a few questions!

Fate however, seemed to have other plans. Just as she walked into the block where Isinachi lived, she ran into Mach, who walked in the opposite direction.

"Is it a coincidence that we keep running into each other, or..?" Mach winked. Ow, why did he have to make everything so embarrassing..!

"I will have you know that it is!" She insisted with a red face, pouting.

"I suppose I'll have to believe that cute face of yours."

"H-hey! Cut it!"

"Sorry, sorry," He chuckled, "Were you here to interview Isinachi about yesterday's game?"

"O-oh, yes! Why? Did you just visit him?"

"Don't bother trying for now. Shikoba's there every day trying to get him to open the door, but he doesn't answer to anyone."

Oh, that was inconvenient, but also... worrying.

"So is he avoiding people? Does it have anything to do with..?"

"It's probably because Lisa's gone, yeah." Mach nodded wistfully. "We've been trying to contact him ever since, but even now that he's come back to school, he only goes to his club hours, and rarely speaks a word."

"That is so sad." She frowned, "Losing your best friend so suddenly must hurt."

"Yeah."

For a few seconds, they were both quiet. Lisa's sudden disappearance was often on Roxanne's mind, but if the media and the school were this silent about it, she could guess what happened.

Just thinking about it made her want to drop everything and join the Investigation Club that very second, but... That thought gave her shivers. She clenched her teeth. She was a coward. Imagining herself in Lisa's shoes terrified her. She did not dare to lose her trailer, her privacy, or most of all, her life.

And so, here she was, walking her tightrope. Forever balancing her principles with her safety. She was so...

Ugh!

"Hello, Roxanne? Still alive?" Mach waved his hand in front of her eyes.

"A-ah! Sorry!" She shook herself back to reality, "I am just very tired. I have not had a free day in a long while."

"Don't worry about it." He assured her, "I'll just ask you again; do you want to nab a spot at the restaurant here and grab a coffee or something?"

"That sounds lovely right now, yes."

As they walked there, Roxanne's thoughts drifted off once more. With Lisa's disappearance on her mind, she remembered Shikoba's passionate eyes in that brief moment during their interview. If she became as notorious for anti-government attitudes as Lisa, would they..? The thought made her sweat and her heartbeat accelerated.

Terror.

“Why is it that in both my jobs, I have to deal with you every shift? And always with some girl, no less.” The waiter’s tired voice woke Roxanne up. She and Mach had taken their seats at the restaurant’s cozy terrace, and were about to order. It appeared that Mach and the waiter knew each other.

“I wouldn’t want my dear friend Archie Padmore to get lonely, you know?” Mach leaned back in his chair, “And hey, you’re making me sound like some kind of womanizer!”

“Oh don’t worry, it’s intentional.”

“Hey, Luna doesn’t count, right? I’ve got no agency there.”

“Just to spite you, she counts now.” The waiter smirked.

“Hey Mach, who is this?” Roxanne asked.

“Oh, this is Archie, a friend of mine.” Mach explained. “When I was homeless, I slept on the attic of the café where he works an evening shift. You might be tired for a moment, but for this guy, being tired’s a way of life.”

“Maybe that’s because I have two jobs and insomnia, you little dipshit.” He joked, or so Roxanne assumed, given the grin on his face. Mach chuckled as well, so she supposed this was just how they talked to each other. Guys were so weird sometimes.

“Well, nice to meet you, Archie!” Roxanne smiled.

“Oh, er, yeah, thanks.” He avoided her eyes for a brief moment, “And your name is..?”

"It is Roxanne." She smiled still. "I share classes with Mach."

"Nice to meet you too. And be careful with him, Roxanne, he'll flirt with any woman."

"Noted!" She giggled, "I will watch out around this man."

"Hey, don't listen to his nonsense, will you? You and Shikoba are basically the only women I talk to! I'm being slandered!"

"You are not helping your image with the way you talk to me!" Roxanne giggled, "Also, did you not mention a cheerleader yesterday?"

"Touché, touché." Mach lifted his shoulders, and the trio shared a laugh.

As Archie seemed to forget he was on the job, the three of them talked some more for a small while.

"Isn't it casual club hours right now?" Archie thought aloud, "Roxanne, what club are you in?"

"I am the 'director' of the Ignis Times." She told him. "I was going to interview Isinachi for a better main article, but it seems that he will not answer to anyone."

"He'll answer you guys eventually, but not in time for your deadline." He shrugged.

"Wait," Mach interrupted, "do you know Isinachi?"

He shrugged in response. "You could say that. We were classmates for about half a year, before I dropped out."

"Do you still talk to him?"

“We normally text a lot and call sometimes, but not since the whole Lisa thing. I’ve been trying though. What’s with the face?”

“Oh, no reason in particular. Sorry for derailing the conversation.” Mach grinned.

He was such a schemer, Roxanne thought to herself. She could never quite read what was going on in that brain of his, other than that it was plenty. What was he grinning for? She would probably never know.

“Anyway,” Archie changed the subject, “what are you gonna do now?”

“Hm, I do not know, probably nothing.” Roxanne sighed. “I would have liked to cover the Investigation Club’s founding, but I am stuck with Madeline as my boss. She can block almost anything I write if she so chooses.”

“Yeah, can’t help you there.”

“Archie!!!!” An angry middle-aged woman shouted at him through the café windows, “No slackin’ off during work!!!!”

“Shit! Sorry!!” He immediately ran off, to Mach’s audible amusement.

“Ha, serves him right.” He chuckled. “That’s what you get when you call me a womanizer.”

Roxanne giggled. “You are so petty.”

“Nah, only with him.” He smiled. “But something else though, I think you might’ve given me an idea.”

“Hm? How so?”

“You said that Madeline could control *almost* all the content of the Ignis Times, right?”

“Yes?”

“What’s the exception?”

“Er, that would be the teachers’ column. Every week, we ask a teacher to write an article or opinion piece about anything they want, as a guest writer.”

A smug grin appeared on Mach’s face, to Roxanne’s amusement. What did he come up with?

“You wanted to cover the founding of the Investigation Club, right?” He asked.

“Yes?”

“Do you have a teacher’s column yet?”

“We asked Headmaster Arkwright this time, but he has yet to submit his work, why?”

“Come with me after we’re done here.” Mach said, “I know how to grant you your wish.”

“O-okay!”

After finally getting to order and having chatted over some coffee, Mach took her back to the school without saying much. As they walked through the cafeteria and up to the door to Journalism’s staff area, a Blacksuit caught up to them. She looked like somebody out of an old colorless movie, save for her bright orange eyes. This was the SSA agent that stalked Mach and Shikoba, wasn’t it? Her perfectly white ponytail was hard to mistake for someone else’s.

“Where are we going with the director of the Ignis Times today?” She asked condescendingly, but Mach looked unphased.

“Oh hey Luna, we’re headed for your favorite teacher’s office, how nice of you to show interest.” He triumphantly smirked.

“You’re such a weasel. Suit yourself, the strict rules here make it hard for me to do my job.”

“Interesting statement from an SSA agent.”

“Shut it.”

Visibly agitated, Luna stomped away.

“Does she always get upset like that?” Roxanne asked.

“No, actually.” Mach furrowed his brow, “I’ve actually never seen her like this.”

“You seem worried about her.”

“Who, me? About Luna? Don’t be silly, Roxanne.” He turned his head back to the staff area’s entrance, shaking his head. “She’s done me too much harm for that.”

He denied it, but Roxanne was not fooled. She saw sympathy in those eyes of his. Why did he act so distant? He always talked in a way that implied he was taking things easy and relaxed, but...

“Uh, Roxanne?” Mach looked back at her, “The door’s open, the guard is letting us through.”

“O-oh, sorry, my mind wandered off again!”

She hurriedly made her way back to Mach's side, and followed him as he knocked on a door and opened it without waiting for an answer.

It was not hard for her to guess which teacher she would be seeing.

Chapter 4.4

Mach opened the door, and there she was. Skye Fall. Sitting at her desk, in front of a giant portrait of herself. Did all teachers with a private office have these? If so, that was...

“Oh, Mach! And Roxanne? What brings you here?” Skye raised her eyebrows.

“Hey Skye,” Mach began immediately as he sat down in front of her desk, “could you do me a favor for her?”

“What’s the favor?” Skye asked as Roxanne mirrored Mach and took a seat as well.

“Could you whip up a teachers’ column for the Ignis Times?” He winked at her. Now it was clear what Mach’s game was, though she already had a hunch.

“Let’s not act rashly.” Skye said as she took a sip from her coffee.

“U-um!” Roxanne spoke up, “if you do not want to, that is totally fine!” She said, but Skye shook her head.

“That’s not why I want to talk this out longer. Hear me out first, okay?”

Roxanne nodded.

And so, Skye downed the rest of her coffee in one go, slammed the cup onto her desk, and slid it to its corner.

"I'm assuming you want me to do this so that the Ignis Times covers the founding of the Investigation Club?"
Skye asked.

"That's the idea." Mach nodded, "If Roxanne agrees."

Roxanne fiddled with her fingers. "I do want to cover the news." She said, "I feel like not having anything written about the founding of such an unusual new club would not fit the job of a journalist."

"I agree," Skye said, "But I'm assuming that Luna is aware that you two are visiting me?"

"Um, yes, she is. She is not happy about it."

"Then having me write that article will have its consequences, mostly for you."

"How do you mean?"

"Luna reports not only to the government, but also to the school headmaster, through the student council, when she deems it appropriate. Madeline will know what you've done."

Those last words visibly startled her. She was shaking at the thought of having to face Madeline in bad faith again. She was dead. So dead. If she went ahead with this after that interview with Shikoba, and Madeline heard of it, then...

She would lose everything. She thought of Mach and Shikoba, who had the SSA breathing in their necks. She thought about Lisa, who 'mysteriously disappeared'. Being on the bad side of authorities was nothing short of horror.

No. Her hands became fists. What would it mean to back down now? Nothing would change. The school papers would continue to be dull and uninteresting every week. She would still have to appease Madeline and be nothing more than her mouthpiece. That was not what she wanted either!

She was truly put on the spot now.

“Hm...” Mach thought aloud, “Roxanne, are you popular with your readers?”

“O-oh, um, depends on the demographic?”

“Can you elaborate?”

“My sports articles are not popular, because they are obviously uninformed. The rest of my writing is very well liked, though!”

“I can confirm.” Skye added, “Since Roxanne became the lead writer of the Ignis Times, its sales at the kiosk in Ignis Village have been at a record high.”

“I am not too happy about some of what I have wrote, but I like to think that I am a decent writer, at least!”

“You are. Sometimes I struggle to teach you.”

“Thank you!”

Flattering as that was to hear; on Roxanne’s mind was what Mach was thinking about.

“Roxanne,” Mach finally spoke, “are you prepared to take a leap of faith?”

“Sorry?”

"I cannot guarantee anything, but I think that if you have Skye write the teachers' column about the Investigation Club, you will not lose your position. Madeline will detest you, but if you are prepared to play hardball, you might be able to get away with a lot more than you do right now."

"Huh? Can you explain?"

"Of course." he smiled at her. "Considering that you are the reason why the Ignis Times is selling so well, you have a lot of leverage. Ignis wants people to read the Ignis Times, so that they can use it for all the purposes you know and love. The fact that you had a hand in Skye's article wouldn't be common knowledge, so with that in mind, how do you think the readers will react if you are kicked out for seemingly no reason?"

"They would probably be upset!" A lightbulb in Roxanne's head lit up.

"Exactly."

"So you are saying that I will get away with this?"

"That is part of what I am saying." He smirked again. Hehe, he was such a schemer.

"What is the other part?"

"I'll tell you. We've established that if you are kicked from your position without a clear reason, people would be upset, right?"

"Right."

"So imagine this; you want to write an article about, say, something positive that the Investigation Club or someone from LISA has accomplished. Madeline would usually reject it immediately, right?"

“Mhm.”

“But now that you understand your worth, you can force Madeline to approve the article.”

“Huh?! How?”

“By threatening to quit.”

For a moment, silence ruled the office, and Roxanne’s brain gears started moving. Depending on how valuable it was for the school to keep her in her position, she could get away with more, because axing her was undesirable for their income?

So for as long as she remained popular, she could actually fight Madeline? That... made sense! No wonder they hired a pushover like her! She would have never thought to do that!

“Mach, you are brilliant! Thank you so much!” She told him. He just smiled like he always did, but when she noticed his face getting a tiny bit flushed, she smiled back. That was endearing.

“Well then.” Skye finally spoke up again, “What do you say, Roxanne? Do I write the column?”

“A-ah!” She shook herself back to reality, “Yes, do go ahead!”

And so, it was decided. Roxanne had made a decision. She would, within the limitations of her job, fight alongside the rebels of LISA. For as long as people enjoyed her writing and considered it high quality, she had leverage. Fighting the censorship of the press in Sanctus was something only she could do, and Mach

trusted her with it. The time for walking the tightrope had ended. It was time for Tug of War, with Madeline as her opponent, rather than her boss. It terrified her, but...

"I won't rest until this school teaches us what it claims to teach! The truth!" Lisa's words echoed in her mind. It was time to do her part. After a good night's rest, that was.

After sleeping for ten hours that night, Roxanne, with renewed energy, approached Ignis Academy through Ignis Village's streets.

As per usual on Mondays, she passed by the kiosk on her way, to see how the school paper turned out. This time, however, it seemed like she was not the only one.

Opening the tiny store's front door, she entered a sea of noisy students! Whoa! What did Skye write?!

"Sorry everyone!" The cashier told the crowd, "We've ran out of copies, they're printing more in the school itself right now! Go get them there!"

And just like that, Roxanne had to make a run for it, lest she wanted to drown in that wave of people! After letting them pass her, she followed from behind.

Making her way into the giant cafeteria, the commotion was no different. She walked through the chaos, out of the cafeteria, and toward the Student Council Hall, but there was somebody else in her path. This would mark her first true showdown with Madeline! Stay calm, Roxanne! You have leverage!

“Ashworth!!” She bellowed, her high heels clacking loudly and menacingly as she stomped up to her. Gulp. Here she came.

“W-what is wrong?”

“You’re fired! As of this instant!”

Wait, what? That was not how this was supposed to..!

“Um, why? I-I did not think I wrote anything out of the ordin-..”

“Of course not! You had Skye Fall write it for you! If you had been brighter, you had kept your revolutionary sympathies to yourself, had you desired to pursue a career in journalism! I cannot punish Skye, but I can certainly punish *you!*”

Roxanne’s head was spinning. This was not how this was supposed to go at all! The threat of backlash was supposed to-..! Mach said that..! But Skye..! No, no, no, no!

“J-just because I was fired here, does not mean my career is-..”

“Ahahaha!” Madeline let out an elitist cackle, “That most certainly is the level of naïveté I would expect from a revolutionary baboon! You, my dear Roxanne, are finished. Say farewell to the prospect of a decent job, and your Ignis Village trailer, for that matter! Farewell, Ashworth! I pray the slums are kind to you!”

Cackling, Madeline turned her back to her, and walked away.

Roxanne could do nothing but stand there with her head down. She fell off her tightrope. Would her parents even want to take her back in, when she was about to be demonized to no end? Clean records were everything in Sanctus, and hers was just squandered for life.

BZZZZZZZ! The school bell rang, people passed her left and right, talking about the last paper she ever wrote. She didn't move an inch, until...

"Roxanne?" Mach recognized her from behind,

"What's wrong?"

"I lost already." She said, not turning around.

"Were you... fired?"

"... Yes."

"..."

For a minute or so, she did not hear him anymore. But he was still there. Then, he finally spoke.

"This is my fault, I'm sorry."

"No!" She turned around, "It is not! Do not blame yourself! I just..."

A tear dropped onto the cold academy floor from Mach's eye. Without saying a word, he left as well, leaving Roxanne alone.

...

What was wrong with this world?

Chapter 4.5

Skipping class, Roxanne spent all day in the library. She did not want to face the real world right now. Good thing that Eliza Humphrey's new book was amazing at dragging her away from it. It was a story about a girl falling in love with a robot boy with human emotions. The boy desperately wants to live a human life, but he struggles to understand people. She was not very far into the story yet, but it hooked her already.

"You like it?"

"Eek!"

Startled by suddenly having a girl's face almost touching her own, she fell off her chair. "Eona!" She said, "Please leave a meter or two between us when you meet me next time!"

"Sorry, sorry!" She chuckled, "But do you like it?"

"Mhm! It is very good. But I am sorry, I would like to be left alone for now."

"What's up? Feeling down?"

"More than that." She said as she sat back down on her chair, "I was just kicked out of the Ignis Times. I was the director."

"So, what'cha gonna do now?"

"Read this book, I suppose."

"Hm..."

What was she making a thinking face for? There was little else she could do anymore.

“Seems like a waste!”

“Sorry?” She raised her eyebrows.

“I mean, fictional stories are great, but you’ve got the chance to be part of a real one, right?”

Did she? What was she going on about?

“How do you mean?”

“You’re friends with the Investigation Club, right? That passionate duo is totally a pair of real life protagonists! I bet their supervisor’s got more to her than what meets the eye, too! What about the SSA agent? What’s her deal? I look at the snippets I get to see as a bystander and I’m fascinated! Aren’t you?”

...She was. She totally was. Shikoba and Mach were truly amazing and fascinating people. They had such amazing courage, standing up to an oppressive regime that destroyed lives to retaliate against minor criticisms. But... join them? Someone like her could never... she was already...

“Oooh...” Eona stared into her eyes, “You wanna, don’t you? Deep down? I can totally tell!”

“Yes!” Roxanne clenched her fists and slammed them on her table as tears erupted from her eyes, “Yes, I do! I want to help them! They are the heroes of this city, and I love them for it! But someone like me could never..! I am a coward! I cannot...”

Eona showed her a dorky smile as she pointed at Roxanne’s book; “That author has written about plenty of heroes that said what you’re saying at first, right?”

She got goosebumps hearing her say that. She could not argue.

“Shall I ask you again? What are you gonna do now?”

...

“Mach! Shikoba!” She tore open the door to the Investigation Club’s clubroom, drawing both of their attentions, as well as Luna’s, who stood next to the door outside.

“What’s up?” Shikoba asked her as Mach looked at her confused. This was the real leap of faith she had to take! Now, Roxanne...

Nail the landing!

“I’M JOINING THE INVESTIGATION CLUB!!” She screamed from the absolute top of her lungs, “WHERE DO I SIGN?”

“Roxanne...” Mach stepped up to her, his teary eyes meeting her own as he slowly reached out his hand.

“Welcome home.”