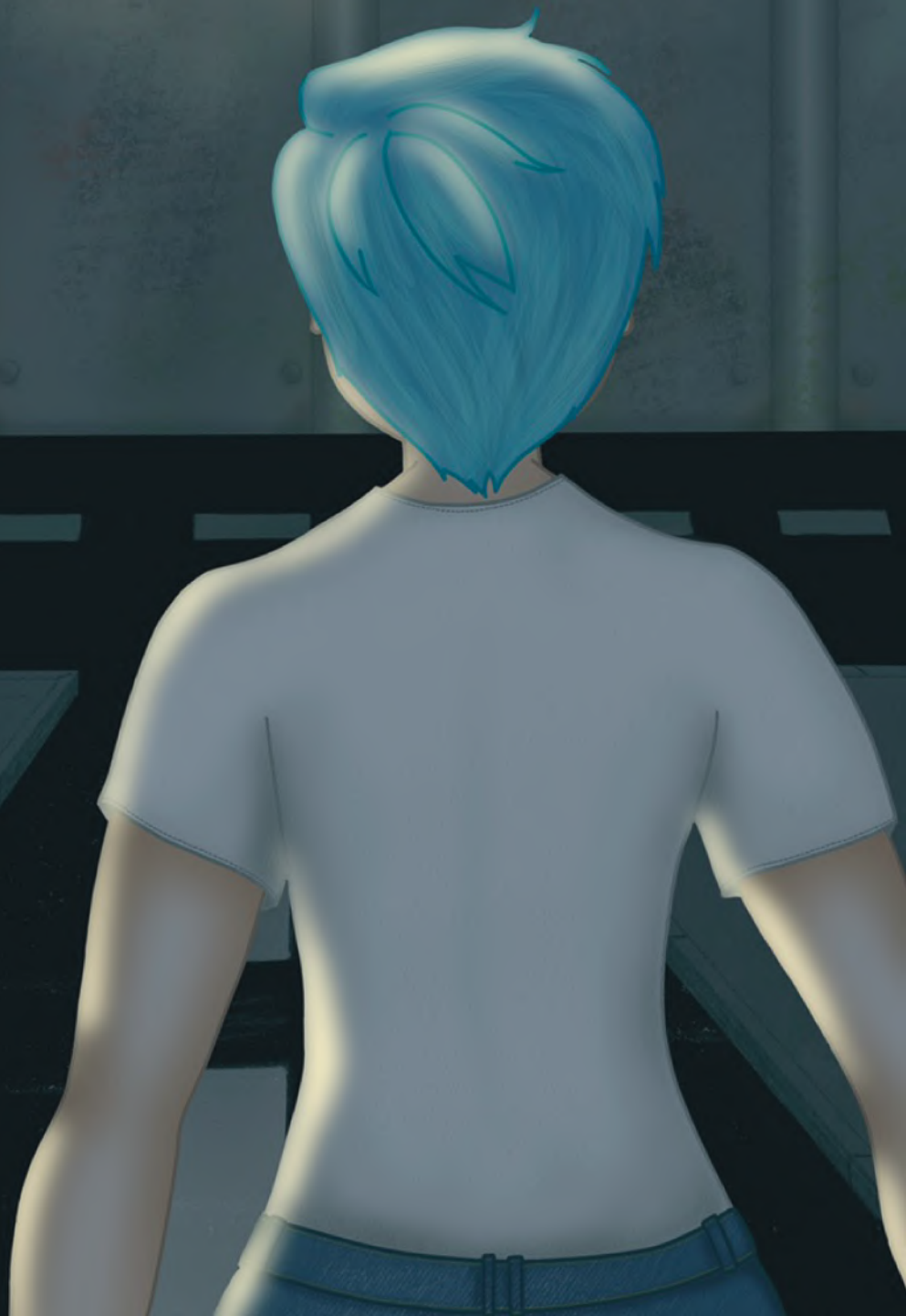


# SHIKOBA



**MARINA  
LUNSING**

## Chapter 7.1

Gruesome memories. Shikoba's brain was filled to the brim with them. She had always known that her father was a horrible man, and was always baffled that Madeline was unable to see it, but... on that fateful evening... she stopped thinking of her father as a human being at all.

All she intended to do that night was ask her father for permission to buy a motorcycle to get around, since she had just gotten her license, but as she walked into HighLife Inc.'s laboratory, she found much more than she signed up for.

Slowly, the thick metal doors opened for her, and she stepped into the darkness, hearing her heels clack with every step she made. In the distance, she saw a ceiling lamp shining ever so dimly onto what seemed like a cheap hospital bed. Was there someone lying on it? She couldn't tell. The place gave her the creeps, but she shook her head, deciding to approach. Something about this didn't feel right. This was a lab for pharmaceuticals? It didn't feel like it at all. Where was the personnel?

On some stray tables, paper documents were lying around all over. She picked up one of them. It was hard to read them in the dark, but she could make out sentences by reading the words she could. Project... Euphoria..? Creepy. Something about a pill... Super soldiers..? What the hell..?

She was wrong. She couldn't make sense of this at all.

She pressed on. With every clack of her heels, she got closer to the bed. As she did, it became clear that there was indeed someone on it. Were they... naked? Then she noticed; chains. Their limbs were chained to the far corners of the bed! She walked faster. Soon, she stood next to the bed, and saw a young woman, slightly older than her, with long, paper-white hair. Her face was completely lifeless and unmoving, her body was full of marks and cuts, and her mouth was hanging open. All she could do was move her eyes, which she did, staring directly at her.

Shikoba's heart pounded harder than it ever had before. What the hell did she...

Then, the tied up woman erratically moved her eyes to her left, from where Shikoba heard footsteps. Were those... tears in the woman's eyes? Shikoba clenched her teeth. Who the fuck was doing thi-...

"Shikoba Bullard." She heard a terrifyingly familiar voice, "it is time for you to leave."

Her father was a demon. She couldn't see him as anything else ever again. It took her a year to muster up the courage to get the fuck out of there, but she pulled it off. She was being surveilled and dragged an innocent bystander into her hell, but she finally stood on her own two feet. Sanctus was still a sheet covering its underworld of terror, but she was no longer part of that underworld. From the outside, she was going to tear that sheet off, even if it was the last thing she did!

But she couldn't tell her story to anyone. If her word got out, there was no telling what her father might do. Well, actually, it'd be very simple.

Death to her and everyone she ever knew.

With her insider information rendered useless, she only had two weapons left. Her infamy, and her anger. If she couldn't use her own voice, all there was left to do was use others'! Mach, Roxanne, and Isinachi were all victims of the system. Uniting as many of these victims as possible and sharing their suffering with the world was the only way the people were going to wake up!

That was Shikoba Bullard's new life mission, and she reminded herself of that fact every day.

"Hello? Earth to Shikoba?" Mach leaned his hand on her shoulder, shaking her awake. They were sitting next to each other in the back of a crammed bus, on their way to school. It was Saturday, so there were no lessons, but their club was active seven days a week.

"Fuck! You startled me!" She chuckled nervously, "Don't just rock me like that!"

"I tried getting your attention more softly, you know?" Mach let go of her, "You've been lost in thought a lot recently. Is something wrong?"

"Huh? Oh, nah, don't worry. We just gotta get Eric on our side, and Eugene will probably be easy after, right? That's all I've gotta think about right now!"

"You're right. We're on a roll, let's keep it up."

"Yeah!"

She wondered how much the Benningtons knew that she didn't, and vice versa. Marc Bennington was the minister of finance, and if there was anything she had learned from hearing her economics class peers talk about money, it was that it corrupted. Was he like her own father? If only Eric wasn't so hard to talk to...

*"Next stop: Ignis Academy."* The bus's announcement system's robotic voice then called.

"Alright! Let's get off and think of a plan!" She shouted, to the annoyance of the people around her. Mach excluded.

"Counting on you as always." He instead smirked.  
"Heh, same to you!"

It's begun to eat away at her. If only she could tell people, or had proof she could bargain with! Her voice aside, she was completely useless! Damn it!

Not much later, Shikoba opened the door to their clubroom with her key, and once she and Mach sat down at a table, it didn't take long before Roxanne and Isinachi joined them. Stalking them from the hallways was Luna, who was not allowed to enter, but of course had her ways to listen in. The only place where they could ever speak in full privacy was Skye's office.

"I assume we will divide the roles the same way again?" Roxanne asked.

"Sounds good to me!" Shikoba gave a thumbs up, "You and Mach handle whatever mundane task we currently got going on, and Isinachi and I focus on Eric!"

"We'll need to brainstorm. It's not going too well."  
Isinachi admitted. "Still, I hope you'll leave it to the two of us."

"No problem." Mach shrugged. "You were a pain in the ass to convince too. It's an art form, you know?"  
"I'm noticing."

Shikoba then stood up; "No way in hell we don't get the Benningtons on the team eventually! Leave it to us!"

Roxanne and Mach nodded in agreement as she sat back down. It was all bark and no bite, though. She had no idea what to do about Eric. Still, she didn't have a choice. After all...

if she couldn't even convince a former LISA member, she shouldn't be here at all.

"Hello? Shikoba?" Roxanne waved her hand in front of her face.

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry, what's up?"

"You were spacing out. I asked you about the mundane task you wanted Mach and I to perform."

"Oh, shit, I'm sorry. Tell me about it."

"The Blue Bulldog's sleepy today, huh?" Mach leaned back in his chair.

Shikoba laughed, "What the hell's with that nickname?"

"Dunno, people have begun calling you that around Ignis. Sounded cool to me."

"Anywaaaay..! Roxanne!"

"Ah, yes!" She began, "See, the person making the request came up to me, and asked us to... 'investigate' a person. Figure out their likes, dislikes, hobbies, and so forth. Presumably to ask them on a date with this knowledge in mind. I want to hear your thoughts on this, as well as everyone else's."

"Sounds fucked up. We're allowed to do a lot, thank you Skye, but are we allowed to do shit like this?"

"Question." Mach rose his hand, "Roxanne, who was this person?"

"Oh, it was Byron Underhill, from the Ignis Times."

"This is a trap." He then said, crossing his arms.

"Can you explain? I am sure he is no fan of our club, but Byron does not strike me as actively hostile."

"We're known as a group that opposes the surveillance state, with your comments against the IVB, Isinachi being Lisa's best friend, my own snarky remarks against the Governor, and Shikoba being, well, Shikoba."

"Mach, get to the damn point, you smug bastard."  
Shikoba hit his elbow.

"Rude." He smirked, "But anyway, without you, the Ignis Times is probably starving for interesting content. What do you think the Ignis Times will do once we, the pro-privacy club, start digging into other people's private lives?"

"Ah." Roxanne realized, and so did Shikoba.

"We'd be fucked forever."

"Good call, Mach." Isinachi said.

"No problem. Nobody out-schemes the likes of me."

“Oh!” Roxanne suddenly realized, “If we are not to engage in that request, Mach and I can finally clean the clubroom!”

“Do I have to..?”

“Ha! Get fucked, asshole!” Shikoba laughed, “Come Isinachi, let’s go outside and do actually interesting shit!”

“Good luck, you two.” Isinachi grinned as well, following Shikoba out of the clubroom.

“Good thing we have Mach.” Isinachi said as the two of them walked through the hallways.

“Damn right. We could’ve taken that job and ended up screwed!”

And she was damn blind to see it. She needed to pay attention more! Around every corner, authorities wanted her finished. Act like it, Shikoba! This wasn’t some college past-time!

Despite that fact, Isinachi and Shikoba knew there was only one spot where they could ever go to brainstorm.

“Aargh! Almost!” Shikoba complained as her shot made the ball ricochet off the side of the basketball net. The two of them were messing around with the ball at Ignis Village’s playground, which included an outdoor basketball court.

“You need to aim a little higher. The arc was already good. The net is just higher than you realize.”

“Alright, got’cha!”



"Basketball seems like an interesting sport." Luna 'greeted' them as she sat down on the bench next to the court.

"What do you mean?" Shikoba asked while Isinachi smoothly and casually scored a three-pointer.

"I have never seen anyone play it. It looks interesting, the way you move the ball around. That is all."

"Never seen anyone play?" Isinachi joined the conversation, confused, "It is the biggest sport in Sanctus City."

"So I heard. I know you guys are no fan of me, but you did shake my hand as my opponent, so how about we play a one on one?" Luna proposed.

"Why are you suddenly asking to play basketball with us?" Shikoba asked.

"Because I am bored, and it looks fun. I am a human being, not a surveillance robot."

"Very well." Isinachi smiled, "I must warn you, Shikoba knows how to play, and she's not beaten me once."

"Warning received." She smiled back, "Show me how good you are."

This was absolutely the most human Luna had ever looked in Shikoba's eyes. Up till now, she'd been thinking of her as exactly what she said; a surveillance robot. It made her a little curious.

Isinachi tossed Luna the ball as the two stood on opposite sides of the center line. "Come at me." He said. Shikoba watched from the bench. Now, how was Luna gonna take absolute defeat? Would she lose her cool?

“Here I go.” Luna then said. And in a flash, she got past Isinachi, the ball only bouncing once. She then stopped and tossed the ball into the net with her left arm, as if touching a plastic cup in a garbage can.

“You’re... fast.” Isinachi told her with widened eyes as Shikoba could only stare, astonished.

“First to five?” Luna suggested, “I know I’m not supposed to beat the best basketball player in the country.”

“First to five.” He nodded. Heh, that was his game face, Shikoba recognized. That’ll be the end of that!

Isinachi tossed the ball to her again. “Come.”

“Watch me closely.”

They began again. Immediately, Luna kicked herself up, soaring into the sky as she shot from center field, placing the ball perfectly into the net again. Shikoba had no idea what Isinachi’s reaction looked like. Her mind flashed back to terrifying memories, while Luna and Isinachi continued, not noticing her spacing out again. She moved like some kind of... super soldier. Looking at Luna’s white hair... there was no way, right?

“And that marks 5-0.” Luna smirked triumphantly as Isinachi could do little but stand there in amazement. “My apologies, I did not simply come here to taunt you. I genuinely wanted to play.”

“I could tell.” Isinachi told her.

“Oh?”

“I can always tell. When someone enjoys basketball, that is.”

“If you miss basketball, you can always change clubs again.”

“I don’t intend on being that convenient for you.”

Isinachi smiled.

“On a personal level, I don’t mind either way. It is true that if I were to persuade you to do so, I’d probably get a raise, though.”

“Heh. Too bad.”

“Too bad indeed. Oh, by the way,” She turned to Shikoba.

“Oh, yeah? Sorry, I was uh, lost in thought.”

“I stalled your brainstorming, I’m afraid. But you entertained me, so I’ll help remind you; you have an appointment with Skye today.”

“Do I? Wait...”

Oh, shit!

## Chapter 7.2

“Uuugh...” Shikoba dropped her forehead flat onto Skye’s office desk. “Why’d you have to make *me* the club president, Skye?”

“You’re the one who created it.” She chuckled, “If we’re to be a legitimate club, we’ll have no choice but to play by the system’s rules. Whining isn’t gonna bring us any closer to justice.”

“I know that!” Shikoba lifted her head again, “But writing activity reports is so fucking boring!”

“Language, please.” Skye smiled, “I’m still your teacher.”

“Yeah, yeah...”

Every Saturday, the club presidents of all the clubs at Ignis wrote a report on their weekly activities to the Student Council. For the Investigation Club, that responsibility fell onto Shikoba, and she hated it with a burning passion. Besides being very, very tedious, and deeply authoritarian in its purpose, it posed a weekly challenge for her club in particular, considering the fact that a lot of what they were doing had nothing to do with their club’s supposed purpose. The only reasons for why the club could still stand on its feet, was that they *did* investigate nonsense on the whims of students, and, more importantly, that their supervisor was Skye. Never in their lives would the headmaster aim his sword at her.

For some reason.

“Hey Skye,” Shikoba dropped her pen for a second, “you don’t really hide how much you hate elites, do you?”

Skye took a second to respond, first taking a long sip from her cup of black coffee. “I’m not on your level of open about it.” She then said, “But you’re right, I don’t mask it as much as others would.”

“So how come you have that big fat portrait of yourself behind your desk?” Shikoba asked, “Hell, how’d you even get the office? Only a few teachers got one of those!”

“It’s... a bit complicated.”

Did Skye... avoid eye contact there? That wasn’t like her at all. Did she stumble onto a sensitive subject? Either way, it made her incredibly curious!

“Just so you know, I’m fine with a complicated story!” She assured her, “If it’s a secret, I’ll keep my mouth shut! I’m super good at that y’know? I’ve done it for over twenty years!”

“It’s hard to believe, seeing you now.” Skye chuckled.

“Right? Your secrets are safe with me!” She gave her a thumbs-up and a dumb smirk, “But if you don’t wanna, I’m not gonna push you anyway. I’m not recruiting you, after all!”

Skye sighed smilingly. “Fine, I’ll share a bit of it, just because it’s you. Just... don’t tell anyone else, okay? Seriously.”

“I’d rather die than betray your trust.” She insisted.

“Thank you. But please, don’t die.”

“Wasn’t planning on it!”

Skye sipped her coffee, took a deep breath, and then started talking.

"I won't share any names, but when I was young, I was exploited by a powerful man."

"Exploited? How do you mean?"

"I'd say he made me a teen mom, but calling me that would imply that I actually got to see the children."

"Wait, you were...- that's so fucked up!" She couldn't bring herself to even say the word. "I'm so fucking sorry for making you tell me this!"

"Don't worry." Skye shook her head, "I decided to tell you this on my own. Shall I continue?"

"If you're comfy with it."

"I am. I trust you." She faintly smiled. "So, to keep me quiet about it all," she continued, "he put me into a predicament. He would use his connections to make sure I'd live a comfortable life. As a result, I get privileged treatment wherever I go. Regardless of what I think of him, he is nonetheless fond of me, in a warped kind of way."

"That's gross as fuck."

"I know." She nodded, "The flipside was that if I ever told anyone, he would... kill them."

"He'd kill them? How's he supposed to know who you told this? Is he the head of the SSA or some shit?"

"No, you're misunderstanding." Skye shook her head, "He'd kill the children."

"WHAT?!"

"Yes, exactly." She sighed again, "He's evil enough for me to believe that he still would, even today."

"Again, I'm so fucking sorry!" Shikoba stood up, "What in the damn world did you do to deserve this?!"

“Your outrage makes me feel a bit better. Thank you for caring.”

“Of course I care! I’d be nothing without you! It’s thanks to you that we can do everything we’ve been doing! Your children were robbed of an awesome mother!”

Upon saying that, it was Skye who lowered her head onto her desk, as she immediately burst into tears.

“Thank you..!”

That explained it. Skye too had seen Sanctus’ dreadful underworld. No wonder she supported her so willingly. Once the demons get a hold of you, you want nothing but to eradicate them all. Judging by how she was now, Skye was probably the strongest person she ever knew.

After she finally finished her paperwork, Shikoba closed the door to Skye’s office behind her, and was greeted by Luna.

“Thanks for reminding me, I guess.” Shikoba awkwardly told her.

“No problem. I had fun playing basketball with you. Or, well, with Isinachi. My apologies for stalling your brainstorm session though. That’s not my job to do.”

“N-no, it’s fine, Isinachi and I will just brainstorm tomorrow.”

“Never a day of rest for you, hm? I’d appreciate it if you gave me less work to do.”

“You’re being unusually nice today, you know that?”

"Let's strike a deal." Luna then said, "I keep up the light attitude, and you stop assuming what I am like as a person. Sound fair?"

"I'm sorry, what?" Shikoba frowned in confusion, "Explain."

"Yesterday, you said something along the lines of being happy that I don't make the rules at Ignis, for example. I am not an SSA agent for fun. This is just my job. You don't know me as a person, so I would like it if you didn't assume things about me based on, well, things I am told to do."

"The way you screwed Mach was definitely personal." Shikoba crossed her arms.

"I... regret that, actually." Luna admitted. "I was in an unusually bad mood. That is not an excuse. I've been meaning to apologize for that."

"...Huh. It's hard to be mad at you when you're like this. Fine, I'll take you up on that deal."

"Thank you."

Her perspective of Luna was thrown for one hell of a loop today. Between this bearable behavior, as well as...

"Do you have anything left to say? I'm free early today." Luna asked.

"Huh? Free early? Then who's watching me?"

"Drones. They always are. Have you never noticed them? I'm just here to listen in on you. You're being recorded 24/7."

"What the hell?! Since when?!"

"Since Day one." She shrugged.



For a moment, Shikoba was hesitant. She knew that she shouldn't, but she really, really wanted to... okay, fuck it!

"Hey, Luna, can I ask you something?"

"Sure..?"

"This could sound like crazy talk, but... do you know of Project Euph-.."

Before Shikoba could even finish her sentence, Luna slammed her hand onto her mouth and pushed her against the wall.

"I know you're the reckless type, but you've gone absolutely nuts, haven't you?! Don't ask me that, don't force me to write down that you said that!" Luna said, her eyes watery and her body shivering. That told Shikoba everything she needed to know.

"I'm sorry. I won't try to ask anything like that again." Shikoba said once Luna removed her hand.

"I am going home." Luna told her, and true enough, she power-walked away.

Shikoba felt really bad, and not just because she felt guilty for giving Luna a heart attack like that. She couldn't possibly imagine what it was like to be her. If she was the girl she met in that freak lab that day...

Her teeth clattered at the thought.

## Chapter 7.3

Holy fuck, what a day this had been, Shikoba thought to herself as she walked through the hallway. She was really starting to feel the exhaustion. Skye's story and discovering who Luna was really fucked with her. But she couldn't let it show. These were the people she did this for! For those who had to live through hell because they don't get a say! This was exactly why she had to keep pushing onwards. She couldn't feel sorry for herself. Compared to their struggles, hers were nothing!

Get it together!

After splashing some water on her face in the bathrooms, she opened the clubroom door. Let's see what Mach and Roxanne were up to.

"Stop!!!" Roxanne immediately yelled. All the chairs and tables were moved to the far end of the room, and there was a vacuum cleaner lying in the middle of it.

"Take your shoes off or do not enter!"

"A-ah, got'cha!"

Quickly, Shikoba took her shoes off and hurried over to sit on one of the tables in the back.

"Busy cleaning?" Shikoba asked, loud enough to make herself audible through the noise the vacuum cleaner made.

"Somebody has to do it!" Roxanne said, "I am more than happy to be a member of this club, but I insist on at least a little bit of hygiene! It was unbearable!"

"Sorry, sorry!" Shikoba chuckled.

It was then that Shikoba's eyes drifted to her side, where she found a book with a pink, plastic bookmark somewhere in the middle. It had a scarlet red hard cover with pretty, golden text. Shikoba recognized it immediately.

*Artificial – Eliza Humphrey*

"Damn, you're pretty far in already! I only got my hands on a copy yesterday!"

"Oh!" Roxanne quickly turned off the vacuum cleaner, "I didn't know you read Humphrey! How much have you read so far?"

"Four chapters!" She almost bounced a little in excitement, "It's super good! If you spoil me I'm gonna kill you!"

"I would not dare! If the roles were reversed, I could cry! It's a new Humphrey! That would be a serious crime!"

"I know right?"

With a beaming smile, Roxanne dropped the hose in her hand on the floor and skipped to Shikoba's side, hopping onto the table to sit next to her.

"Why do we not just read some together right now? I trust you have your copy with you?"

"Well, yeah, but what happened to cleaning?"

"Neither of us have parents waiting for us to return home or anything. We can take our time."

“You say that like it doesn’t bother you at all, huh?  
Does it?”

“Of course it does.” Roxanne showed a pensive grin, “My family ditched me for the decision I made. To stand by your side. That hurts. But I do not have to fear their rejection anymore. I am already suffering it, after all. I am more free now. By your side, I can do as I please. I am thankful for this club. Rough times are ahead, but I believe in us. Do you not?”

“Of course I do!” Shikoba pumped her fist, eager to assure her. Roxanne didn’t even give her a chance to feel bad about her. “I won’t rest until there’s justice in this city!”

“I will do my part too! However...”

Swift as lightning, Roxanne’s hand shot towards her and pinched her cheek.

“Ow!” Shikoba cried out, “What was that for?”

“Mach isn’t much better, and Isinachi is used to Lisa, so he will not make you do it either. It falls to me, then.”

“What does? What are you talking about?”

“You *will* rest! I will make you. You were going to bother Eric again after this, were you not?”

Shikoba looked away. “...Maybe.” She muttered as Roxanne giggled.

“Take a breather, okay? Get your book out, and we will read together. Sound good?”

“Yeah.”

Shikoba did as she was told. Heh, Roxanne was being such a mom. Shikoba didn't mind, though. She was right, after all. She was going to overwork herself if this kept going, and Mach wasn't going to stop her from doing so in any universe.

Feeling the warm summer breeze blow through the windows, Roxanne and Shikoba were engulfed by the story they were reading, only acknowledging the real world in the milliseconds they had to reserve for turning its pages. All of a sudden, she was distracted from the story by an unexpected weight on her right shoulder. It was Roxanne's head. "Pfft! Hypocrite." She quietly laughed at her sleeping reading partner. Seemed like she was just as tired as she was.

"Looks like the two of you are getting along." Isinachi chuckled. Mach was standing next to him.

"Huh?! When'd you two get here?!"

"A while ago."

"We couldn't possibly interrupt two ladies reading in peace, could we?" Mach lifted his shoulders with a satisfied grin on his face. "You two must really love that author."

"Well, yeah!" Shikoba leaned forward, "Her stories were all I had to escape my shitty situation!"

"Heh." Isinachi let out a happy sigh, "No wonder you understood me so well. You're even more like me than I thought, Shikoba."

"I told you, didn't I?" She crossed her arms, pretending to be proud of herself, "When it comes to running away from misery, there's nobody more experienced than me!"

"That's so sad." Mach joked.

"Oh fuck off!"

"I-it was the same for me." Roxanne added, "With Eliza Humphrey's novels, I mean. I had no friends and I was not on good terms with my parents. Reading gave me an escape, and Eliza's novels came out frequently and always hooked me quick."

"Right?" Shikoba hyperactively nodded, "Getting like three or four books a year is fucking awesome as a fan!"

"That must've been nice." Mach smiled, but...

He looked like he was gonna burst out in tears at any second. Whether it was of sadness or joy, she couldn't tell, but the water in his eyes betrayed something, at least. She wished she could ever get a read on him, but...

"Hey, earth to Shikoba?" Mach poked her shoulder.

"Huh? Oh, sorry, you asked something?"

"Yeah, I asked if you saw my text."

"Oh, I dunno, probably not, I'll look right-.."

...now, she was about to say, but when she reached into her pocket...

“So uh, I’m gonna have to go search for my phone! Mach, if I’m not back soon, here’s the keys, you can lock the classroom!”

Dammit, Shikoba!

## Chapter 7.3

“You should be more careful with your belongings, Shikoba!” Skye shook her head as she gave Shikoba her phone back.

“I know, sorry for being a bother.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just be careful.”

“Aye’ aye!”

Skye then closed the door to her office again, and Shikoba, after checking her phone, went straight home. Mach had messaged her in advance, saying he closed the classroom and went home early. What a bastard, Shikoba grumbled, he could’ve at least waited for her! Now she had to walk home alone! Boring!

As she was about to leave the school building, she was called by her least favorite voice of all time.

“Ah, Shikoba!” Madeline called with an unusually peppy tone as she walked into the hallway and approached.

“What do you want?” Shikoba growled, “You’re the last person I wanna talk to right now.”

“And so are you for me, but unfortunately, I’ve been requested to play messenger.”

“You don’t *look* like you’d rather do anything else.”

“Of course not. I have just acquired a fancy dinner date with Eric Bennington for tomorrow. You’re incapable of ruining my mood at the moment.”

“Seriously?! Eric’s got shit taste in women.”



“He is no match for Mach in that respect, I am afraid.”  
Madeline grinned.

“What?! I’m not his girlfriend, you know?”

“Oh? My little jest was in reference to Roxanne. Did I stumble upon some unresolved tension?”

She could feel her heart aching with rage as she stared down Madeline’s smug smile while gritting her teeth and folding her hands into fists. “Get to the point! Tell me your message, or I’ll deck you!”

“Bring harm upon me, and you and Mach shall both go to prison. That’s what it entails to be under surveillance. Don’t forget, dear sister.”

“Go to prison for what?!”

“Evasion of law enforcement, disorderly conduct against law enforcement, promoting radical ideology, encouraging dissent, I could continue if you wished it. If the government desires you in jail, they shall find an excuse. I thought that was why you despised the governor so much?”

“One of many. Now tell me what you came here to say, so I can fuck off!”

“Sigh. I miss the time when you were not so vulgar. Anyhow, here.”

Madeline handed Shikoba a paper ticket, with on it a very impressively drawn artwork of a green dragon sitting on top of a mountain. The backside of the ticket was black, with Shikoba’s full name written in gold letters.

"The fuck? Why do I get this?"

"Surely I don't need to remind you what the Governor's Gala is?"

"Of course not. Dumb, boring party for rich, elitist snobs to eat caviar, drink wine, and dance every year. I'm not stupid."

"A disputed claim."

"Fuck you. Why am I invited?"

"Father invited us both, as he does every year. It's all rather conventional."

"Wait, Dad just kinda... has me on the invite list as part of his family like normal?"

"Yes? Any other questions?"

"I've got tons of 'em, but they're not for you."

"Then proceed to go back home. My message has been delivered."

And with that, Madeline walked away, probably to the student council room. Shikoba couldn't believe it. Why was she invited back? Governor Morsus handed invites to politicians, businessmen, Ignis Academy staff, and prestigious artists, actors, writers, and the like. The first two categories of snobs got to bring their family, which was why Madeline and Shikoba were there every year. But since it's up to them, her father didn't need to invite her. Why did he then, if she had ran away?

So many questions, no answers.

“Oooooohh!” A bubbly-sounding girl suddenly showed up from behind, her purple eyes fixated on the ticket Shikoba now held in her hand, “I recognize that ticket! You look shocked, is the reason in your hand?”

“H-huh? Uh, yeah, I guess.”

She turned to make eye contact with the girl. Her long, black hair and purple eyes reminded her of the governor. Her glasses, dorky attitude, and pear-shaped stature made that seem a bit irrational though.

“Oh, sorry! I should introduce myself! I know who you are, but the reverse isn’t true at all! Sorry for just randomly talking to you out of nowhere!”

“It’s chill, don’t worry about it.”

“Cool! I’m Eona Hunt! I’m a friend of Roxanne’s!”

“Oh, you’re Eona? She’s mentioned you! You encouraged her to join our club right?”

“Yup! That’d be me! Your mysterious ally from the shadows, finally revealing her face to you! Was the payoff worth the build-up?”

“Sure?” Shikoba chuckled.

“Good!” Eona pushed her glasses with one finger. She sure seemed satisfied with herself.

“Eona, I gotta ask something.” Shikoba then said, making Eona’s eyes lit up instantly.

“Ooh, by all means, do!”

“If you’re our ally, why not join our club? We can use all the manpower we can get, you know?”

“Ah, no,” Eona closed her eyes and waved her finger, “you see, that I can’t do.”

“Why not?”

“You’ll find out in time. I’m your greatest supporter though! I’ve been paying attention to you ever since you transformed! I can’t join your club, but if you’ll allow me, there’s something I can do!”

“Oh?” Shikoba raised her eyebrows, “What’s that?”

“I want to be a character in your story!”

“I’m sorry?”

“I wanna help you in any other way I can! The shadows have become boring, y’know?”

“Oh if that’s what you meant, you’re welcome! Do you want my number, then?”

“You’ll give it to me?”

“Sure! I’ll shake hands and hang out with anyone who supports the Investigation Club!”

“Yay!” She jumped, “Let’s kick butt together!”

Shikoba had no choice but to smile. “Hell yeah!”

After they exchanged phone numbers and talked a little bit longer, they went their separate ways, and Shikoba could finally head home. She let out a deep breath, drawing attention to herself on the bus. More than usual, anyway.

Everyone in this bus recognized her and kept looking her way. She had earbuds in and was trying to read, but with everyone staring at her, it was fucking impossible. This had to end, seriously.

It was never going to, though. She was in the Top 1% most well-known people in Sanctus, especially now. Privacy, even without the SSA stalking her, was never going to be a privilege she'd enjoy again without a change in regime.

Finally, her stop. From here, it was only a very short walk home. All she had to do was walk past the grocery store and just keep walking on the pedestrian path until she could turn right. Around that corner was the isolated little street where her home was. A sanctuary of green in a city full of grey.

After the initial entryway part of the street, it made a circle around a children's playground before looping back into itself. On the outside of that circular street, the houses were placed, hers being right in the middle.

"Hi Shikoba!" One of the kids playing on the playground waved, and she waved back as she walked through it in a straight line to her home. Kids were pretty much the only people in Sanctus that didn't feel the need to have some kind of stance on her existence. This kid was probably going to hate her later in life, but for now, they just saw her as a neighbor.

Enjoy it while it lasts, she told herself.

Grabbing her keys, she opened the front door and stepped right into the living room.

“Mach, you asshole!” She yelled, “I was bored out of my mind walking home alone! Wait for me next time!”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m sorry.” He chuckled. Sigh. It was far too easy for him to make her forgive him. Can’t stay mad at that impossibly good-looking face.

“How was your day, though?” He asked her as she sat down on the couch next to him.

“Exhausting. Eric’s going on a date with Madeline, apparently. We might’ve lost him already.”

“Seriously? Some bad taste he’s got.”

“Ha, that’s what I said!”

“Did you fight?”

“She didn’t get mad. She was over the moon over the date she scored.” Shikoba said, but then turned silent.

“What’s up?”

“She said your taste was worse, talking about Roxanne. Something I’m missing?”

“Huh?” Mach frowned, “I flirt with Roxanne the way I flirt with any other pretty girl. Roxy must’ve really pissed her off with Skye’s Ignis Times article.”

“Do you just... kinda flirt for the hell of it, or..?”

“What do you mean?”

“I dunno, I just...” Shikoba looked away for a second. Why did she bring that up at all..? “Fuck, I have no idea what I’m saying, I’m sorry.”

“Usually, my flirting is just teasing.” Mach said.

“Usually? When is it not?”

“Who knows?” He winked with a sly smile.

“Manwhore.” She grumbled, dealing out a light punch in Mach’s shoulder.

"Ouch, domestic violence!" He laughed, "Also, what's that sticking out of your pocket?"

"Huh? Oh yeah!" Shikoba shook up, "My father apparently still invited me to the Governor's Gala. I guess even now I'm not free from boring snob parties."

Mach was silent for a few seconds before a sly smirk manifested on his face. "Do you realize what this means?" He asked, confusing her.

"Yeah, that I'll be bored to death at best, and pestered by holier-than-thou assholes at worst!"

"It means that you'll be in the same room as the governor. That gives us many opportunities."

"Like what?"

"Bzzzzz... Bzzzzz..." Shikoba's phone went off.

"Hold on." She said, and picked up. "Hello? Who's this?"

*"It's Ace. I saw you on the invitation list for the Governor's Ball. I have an idea. Put me on speaker so that Mach can hear."*

"Oh, uh, sure, will do!" And so she did.

*"Good. I need you to sneak your phone inside, and make pictures."*

"For what?"

*"You've done well to get to this point. Your club now has options. Roxanne Ashworth is a one-of-a-kind talent, and she lives in the slums, where mainstream media does not reach."*

"Ooh..." Mach stroked his chin, "I see you and I had the same idea, Ace."

*“Sharp, as I expected. Outside of club hours, you can try printing your own newspaper and spreading it by hand in the slums. As long as you leave it to Roxanne and Isinachi, the SSA doesn’t have to notice immediately.”*

“Okay, that sounds great and all, but how the hell am I gonna take pictures without making Luna suspicious as hell?”

Ace was going to say something, but before they could, Mach placed his hand on her shoulder.

“I believe in you.”

...

Shivers.