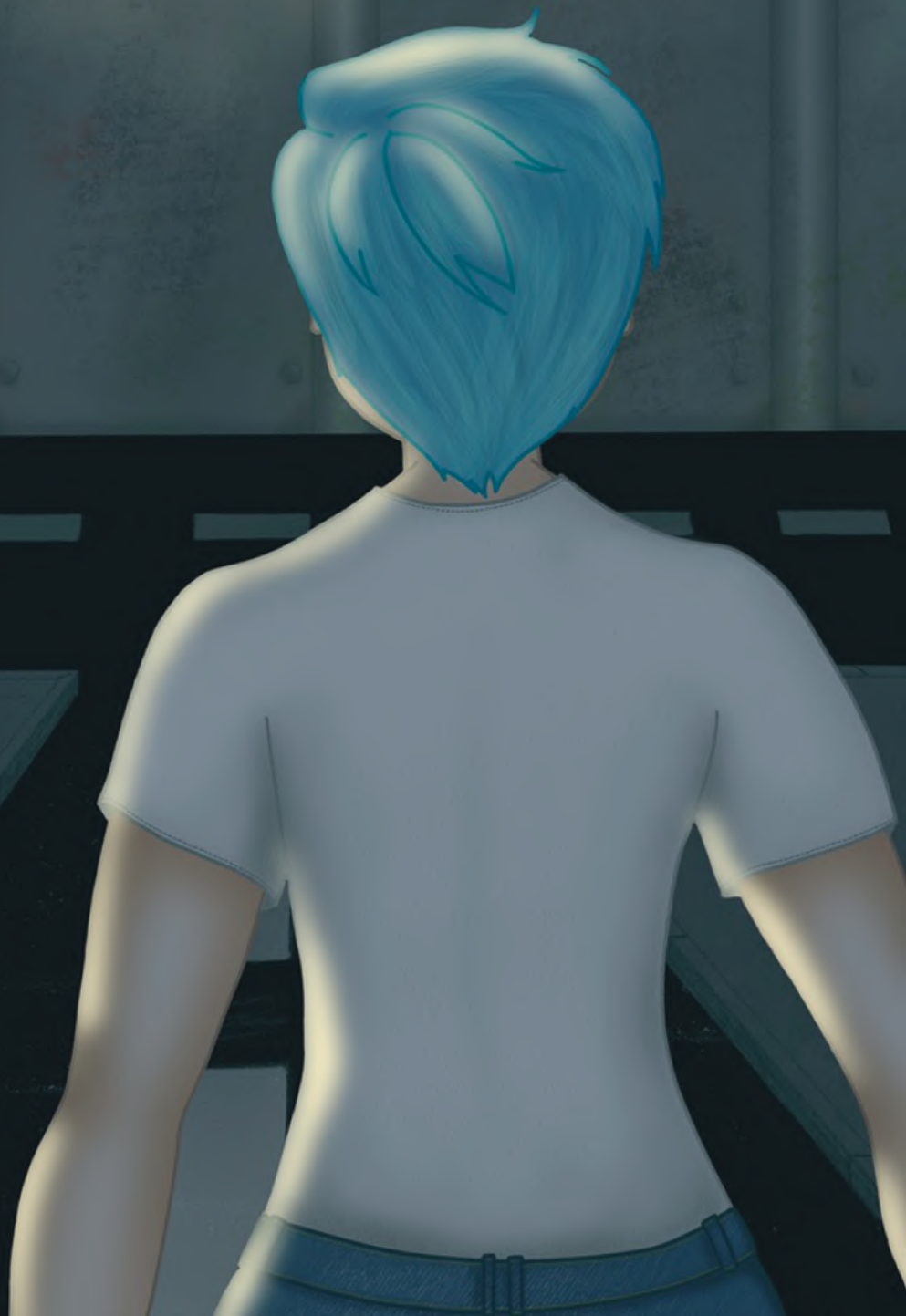


SHIKOBA



**MARINA
LUNSING**

Chapter 8.1

Luna woke up in a pitch black room with naught but a bed, tiny bathroom with a sink, shower, and mirror, and a drawer full of nothing but identical black suits. Every day was the same for her. She woke up, showered, got ready, and walked out the door to report to the head of the Sanctus Special Agency. For about what must've been around a year now, she lived in that tiny apartment, on a high floor inside the ministry of defense. Wherever she went, the office's security cameras followed. There was no escape from the minister's watching eye.

"Good morning, Princess." Alba 'greeted' Luna as she walked into the SSA's lounge room.

"Good morning." She stoically answered, and sat down on the comfortable, circular black leather couch. All she had to do now is wait for her name to be called.

The room was almost entirely dark, if not for the oil lamp dimly shining down on the glass table and the couch it surrounded. There was a lonely and dull looking potted plant on the table, but it did little to improve the soulless atmosphere.

"Hm!" Alba giggled cynically as she sat down. "I wonder what your assignment will be today."

"I presume to watch Shikoba Bullard."

"You are so intelligent and perceptive!" She mocked her, "Your talents are wasted here."

"..."

Luna was going to say she agreed, but that would potentially be considered stepping out of line. She had to watch her tongue, lest anyone in the building considered her to be misbehaving.

“Luna Snowfield, come in.” The intercom’s robotic voice called out from the speakers.

Her cue. She stood up and walked up to a door at the far end of the room. There, she looked into a camera, and let it scan her face. Two seconds later, it beeped affirmatively, and the door opened for her.

In front of her, behind a wooden desk, sat a young man with short and bland black hair. His purple eyes shone despite the dim lighting at his office, and he wore a sleeveless suit over a grey shirt, unlike the rest of SSA personnel. Shamus, his name was, but Mr. Monaghan was what she had to call her. His posture was peculiar, lying his legs to the left and leaning his head onto his right hand. He weirded her out.

“Luna!” He cheered, “A pleasure to see you, although it won’t be for very long this time. This time around, I have a unique task for you.”

A different assignment? How unusual. She was under the impression that making her watch Shikoba was a cruel joke they did not intend to deviate from.

“I will execute it without fail.” She said.

“Of course you will! That’s what you’re here for, am I not correct?”

“You are, Mr. Monaghan.”

“That too is correct!” He sat up straight and cheerfully clapped his hands. “So! I was supposed to send you to the governor’s private office today, but as I have found his message to you in written form within his files already, I shall present you the order here nonetheless, so that our great governor can take more time preparing his far more important yearly gala!”

“How... thoughtful... of you.”

She couldn’t help but show a confused frown. The governor wanted to speak to her? ...Shamus had access to the governor’s private computer? Oh well, the latter wasn’t her problem, or relevant at all.

Shamus, instead, beamed too proudly to notice her concern. “Quite so, don’t you agree? I’m rather proud of myself!”

Was he like this to show off, to feel good about himself, or was he just that much of a suck up for the governor? Luna had no clue. She wasn’t really in a position to bring it up, either.

“Anyhow,” Shamus returned to the topic at hand, “your assignment today is highly confidential. Do not speak of it to anyone, even colleagues. Can you promise me that, Snowfield?”

“Naturally. It comes with the job.” She answered almost robotically.

“Correct, it does! Anyhow, here’s the objective. You are to separate Shikoba Bullard from her merry band of friends and protect her from assassination!”

...Huh?!

Luna's mouth gaped wide open. Assassination?! By who?! With what motive?! And why would the government not want this? What was going on here?!

"If I may ask a question." She calmly requested.

"You may!"

"Thank you very much." She bowed before continuing, "why are we safeguarding the governor's most vocal critic from assassination?"

"Ah, that is quite simple!" Shamus clapped his hands, "because we do not want to appear willing to assassinate anyone who speaks ill of the government! We cannot repeat a Lisa Jackson incident, for we would risk people incorrectly identifying a pattern and putting the blame on us! Imagine the unrest!"

"I must apologize but; is the government... not... responsible for Lisa Jackson's disappearance?"

"Ah, bless the skies no." Shamus laughed, "it is most certainly unclear even to us who the culprit was. The only thing proven correct about her death was that it has not been beneficial to us whatsoever!"

"I see. Thank you."

Suddenly, his smile faded. "Keep your mouth shut about this." He said in a much lower tone, his glare piercing through her soul.

Gulp.

"Y-yes, Mr. Monaghan. It is only natural."

“Correct!” He cheerily nodded as if nothing happened, “anything else you’d like to know, within the context of the assignment?”

“One last thing.” She nodded.

“Do ask away.”

“Thank you.” She bowed again, as much as it hurt her pride, “is there any intel on the planned method of assassination?”

“Ah, yes. It shall be by drone.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“By drones!” Shamus repeated with a strangely joyous tone. “Apparently, a rogue civil servant sold military drones to HighLife Inc.’s CEO without authorization. We believe the risk of an assassination is high, due to the bad blood between them.”

Luna froze, shivers violently shooting down her spine as unwanted memories rushed through her brain. Gareth Bullard was the most terrifying man in the world to her, and it proved tough to not show it.

“Um, Lunaaa?” Shamus waved his hand in front of her, “Are you still listening?”

“A-ah, yes, I heard you loud and clear. My apologies.”

“Good!” Now, I suggest you prepare yourself swiftly, because as per usual, we will not grant you authorization to use any weaponry of equipment.”

“Of course.”

“Well then, you are dismissed! Your mission begins... this very second! Fail, and you do not get paid this month.”

“Understood!”

As she walked out the door with the that added pressure weighing on her shoulders, she found that an even less pleasant ‘colleague’ than Alba had presented themselves at the lounge.

Gottschalk Firebrand was the man’s name. A broadly built middle aged general with short, spiky red hair and a full beard, wearing a leather military uniform. Luna’s heartbeat sped up knowing that she was going to have to endure him for a minute.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t the Priestess! Or what’s left of her anyway, harharhar!”

“Good morning, General Firebrand.” Luna avoided eye contact and speed-walked onwards, but she knew she hadn’t escaped yet.

“Hey, hey! As comrades in arms, just Gottschalk is fine, you know?”

“I won’t indulge in informality even if you insist, General.”

“Bah, be that way.” He scoffed, “You’re no fun, Priestess.”

...Luna grit her teeth. She couldn’t help but take the bait.

"I request you stop calling me that."

"Denied!" He immediately answered in a mockingly gleeful tone, "If you want something from me, the least you can do is look me in the eyes, oh, Priestess!"

"Fine."

Mustering her strength, Luna jerked around and glared straight into his greenish-yellow eyes. Unsettlingly, all high ranking military personnel had these very same eyes, with the same red hair to match. Gottschalk was merely one of these vile monsters.

"Well, well, well! That's definitely a different look from the first time we met! Same fear underneath, but you're masking it better! Good for you! Maybe you'll convince yourself eventually, Priestess!"

"The request was for you to stop calling me that. Could you please accept?"

"What? Of course not!" He said, and proceeded to laugh out loud. "You really thought I'd obey a request from a runt like you?! You may as well be a slave! Go do your job! That's all you're alive for!"

Luna turned around as fast as she could and walked away, struggling to ignore the bellowing of the man's mocking laughter on her way out the door.

She bit her lip as she mustered every last bit of her focus to think about the mission. If her objective was to keep Shikoba safe, not to capture the assassin, then she knew what to do.

...

Monsters. All of them. Gottschalk, Shamus, Flann, Morsus, all of them. Vile, disgusting monsters. Still, they didn't compare to... him.

She had to hurry.

Chapter 8.2

Driving her black SSA limousine through the busy streets of Sanctus, Luna braced herself for the expected outrage of the blue bulldog she was going to have to put on a leash. Knowing her, Shikoba was probably intending to spend her weekend bothering Eric Bennington again. It was going to be hard to convince her to do virtually anything, much less to come with a 'blacksuit' for 'safety'. Nonetheless, it had to be this way.

Luna parked the car on the pedestrian path right before the corner into the dead-end street where Shikoba lived, and walked around that corner. With a good pace, she walked around the children's playground in a half circle, smiling at the playing children before knocking on Shikoba's door.

"Uuuugh...!" Shikoba's sleepy groan was audible as she got close to the door. Then, it opened.

"Luna..? Why the hell are you here..?"

"Get dressed and take some essentials and entertainment with you. You're coming with me."

"Huh?!" Shikoba shook awake, "Nuh-uh! I don't have time for this shit! I've got other plans!"

"Not anymore, I'm afraid."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

Luna lowered her voice.

"You're not safe here anymore. I hope you can believe me, but I've been assigned to protect you."

Shikoba's face turned solemn. "My father's trying to kill me, isn't he?"

"Well... that is the government's suspicion, yes. You catch on quick."

"I've been suspicious ever since I got invited to the Governor's Ball. Guess I was right to be. He's plotting something fucked up again, probably."

"I expected you to be more wary of an SSA agent telling you this, to be honest."

"Fuck the SSA and fuck the government, but killing me so soon after Lisa vanished would be a dogshit idea for them, especially with how well known I am, and with my club mates still around to cause a ruckus about it."

"...Correct. You're smarter than you appear."

"Guess we're both full of surprises."

Luna showed a subtle grin. "Explain the situation to Mach and get your stuff. Make it quick."

"Got'cha."

That went much smoother than expected. Now, all there was left to do was look out for any drones flying around. It seemed like the ones Alba controlled for the sake of surveillance weren't around for now. That made sense, they'd make it impossible to tell whether or not they were in danger, after all. Have fun while your freedom lasts, Mach.

"I'm here." Shikoba opened the door again, carrying a bag with her this time. "Never thought my first sleepover was gonna be with a blacksuit, but better than die."

"Exactly." Luna nodded. "How did Mach react?"

“He thinks you’re lying.” Shikoba shrugged, “But he also said that he trusted my gut.”

“That is good enough. Now, get in the car, we should leave here as soon as possible, before the drones strike your house and Mach ends up as collateral damage.”

“Roger!”

As they walked toward the car, Shikoba tapped Luna’s shoulder.

“Do you personally care about that?” She asked.

“Do I care about what?”

“Mach’s safety.”

“Of course I do.” She swiftly answered, “I don’t dislike any of you personally. My job is just inherently adversarial towards people like you. I cannot be anything but an enemy if I want to do my job correctly. Most of the time, at least.”

“Today’s a pretty big exception.”

“True. Let’s enjoy this truce while it lasts, shall we?”

“Sure!”

Luna couldn’t help but smile a little. Finally, she was on speaking terms with Shikoba Bullard, the only Sanctus resident to have ever shown her sympathy.

With nothing stalling them any further, the drive began. Shikoba was not in the passengers’ seat, but rather in the back, where the windows were blacked out. They may have reached speaking terms, but once alone in the car, they were both silent. There were so many things Luna wanted to ask or say, but given their past, it was difficult. Besides, even if Shikoba trusted her, she looked uneasy. Not that she blamed her.

"Say, Shikoba?" Luna decided to fill the void.

"Yeah?"

"Since I wouldn't have been your first choice to have a sleepover with, who would it have been?"

"Why'd you ask?"

"Hm? No reason. I was curious, is all."

"I've been meaning to say, but I feel like you're doing way more than just not being mean anymore. Are you really Luna?"

"It's not that I'm not being myself. On the contrary."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't worry about it. Just know that you're safe with me, and that we're going to spend quite some time together. Better get used to each other, agreed?"

"Yeah, you're right."

"So then, who would it have been?" Luna grinned at Shikoba over her shoulder, who returned the favor, shrugging.

"Roxanne."

"Oh? That's surprising." She said as she turned her eyes back to the road.

"Is it? Who'd you have guessed?"

"Isinachi." She answered. "You two look close for how long you've known each other."

"We've got some shared experiences, kinda." Shikoba explained, "But you can't really play basketball during a sleepover, and as much as I like the sport, I've got a hobby I'm more passionate about in common with Roxanne."

"Is that so? What is it?"

"Oh, reading!"

She really didn't know anything about Shikoba. That much, this car ride quickly made crystal clear. She wouldn't have guessed that answer in a million years.

"I didn't take you for a bookworm."

"Neither does anyone else!" She chuckled, "To be honest, I've always been a bit embarrassed to admit it. Having Roxanne around makes it easier."

"Why would you be embarrassed?" Luna tilted her head left, "Are you a super fan of a series or author or something?"

"...Of an author, yeah."

"There's nothing wrong with that, you know? You should cherish whatever is special to you. What that is, nobody else can decide for you."

"I guess not. We've all got something we care about a little more than normal, right?"

"Certainly." Luna smiled.

"What's that something for you, then?" She leaned forward, curious like a puppy, "What do you do when you're not wearing a suit and stalking people?"

Pfft. How rude!"

"I say I'm allowed to be a little rude by now!"

"Hm, maybe keeping you alive isn't worth it after all." Luna joked.

"Alright, alright!" Shikoba laughed, "You've made your point! Please don't let me die!"

"Hahahaha! Don't fret. As your government-mandated guardian angel, you'll be safe with me."

Shikoba stayed silent.

"Shikoba? Are you alright?" Luna asked.

"Oh, y-yeah, it's just, your laugh is fucking stunning. It caught me off-guard."

Without even realizing it, she blushed. "I thought Mach was the flatterer between you two."

"The differences between me and him are uncountable!" Shikoba jokingly rose her fist in faked protest, "My intent isn't to mess with you for entertainment, and I mean what I say! There's no hidden meanings or teasing involved! You should laugh more! End of story!"

"Hahaha!" She was made to laugh again, "It's not like I don't laugh because I don't want to, Shikoba."

That solemn look Shikoba showed her in her rear mirror... Luna knew what she wanted to ask about.

"We can talk a bit more freely once we arrive at our destination." She told her before she opened her mouth. "Bear with it for now."

"Got'cha." Shikoba nodded. "What *is* our destination, anyway?"

"My apartment. Drones won't strike there."

"You're awfully confident about that! What makes your place special?"

Luna then steered the car off the road and into the open garage, passed some guards, and then parked it. "It's because we're here."

"Wait, I didn't pay attention, where are we?"

"The ministry of defense."

“Wait, wait, wait!” Shikoba put her hands forward, “are you trying to tell me that you LIVE here??”

“It is the truth, I’m afraid. Regardless, there is no safer place to save you from a faked government assassination than inside a government building.”

“Heh, I like that way of thinking. Simple and sweet. Checkmate.”

“It is how I like to roll.” Luna smiled. “Let’s get out and head to my room. I’m sure nobody is going to like seeing you of all people wander around the ministry.”

“Yeah, good call. Let’s go.”

Luna and Shikoba walked through the hallway and reached the floor Luna lived on through the elevator, where all security cameras erratically turned to the two young women with every step they took until they reached Luna’s front door.

“We are here.” Luna said, holding a checker attached to her keychain against the dark metal door, which made it open after making an affirmative beeping sound. Once they entered, the door closed on its own, and Luna sat down on her bed. “I apologize,” she said, “I only have the bed or the floor to offer you.

“Damn, you live like this?” Shikoba scratched the back of her head. “Why?”

“It was not my choice.” Luna shook her head. “As I said yesterday, there is a lot you don’t know. All we can do now is wait until the government resolves this.”

“Gonna be a long wait. They’re not gonna take action against my father. Their interests are jumbled together too much.”

"...For now, why don't you sit down? There isn't much else to do here, so you might as well relax, right?" Luna suggested to her. This room was way too small for the both of them, but it was the only surefire road to safety that she could think of.

After silence and then a defeated sigh, Shikoba took off her shoes and let her butt land onto the bed.

"Your life's been nothing but pain, huh?" Shikoba looked at her almost like a sad puppy.

"Not true," She shook her head, "I had a good life, up till a little more than a year ago. After that, it has been misery."

"I... assume we can talk freely here?"

"Here and only here, excluding areas where you're prone to, well, assassination."

"I wanna know why you acted like a villain up till now."

"In a way, I was, and am, a 'villain' to you, aren't I?"

"Nah."

Huh?

"No?"

"I thought so, but nah." Shikoba shook her head, "You're forced to live like this against your will. That means you probably hate your job and were forced into it, yeah?"

Silently, Luna nodded.

"And..." She paused, but Luna already knew what she was going to say. "...You were the woman I saw in my father's private lab, right?"

She clenched her teeth and clawed into her pants, accidentally tearing them a little as a few teardrops fell down on them.

“Yeah.” She whimpered.

“Then your hatred for these fuckers probably burns brighter than my own. You’re no enemy of mine.”

“I...” Luna took a deep breath, “was trying to fuel your rebelliousness.” She said. “When I was given the assignment to bring you under surveillance, per your father’s request, by the way, I was never told to threaten you with jail.”

“Wait, you made that up?” Shikoba leaned back with surprise.

“Yes.” She nodded.

Luna took another moment to calm her heart, and rid herself of nervousness, with a deep, deep breath.

“I wanted to portray myself as the epitome of everything wrong with this city. Cold, smug, elitist, cruel, and, above all, powerful.” She then explained. “That is part of why I got Mach involved, too. Though I do not feel good about having done that, I do not regret it, either.”

Looking at Shikoba’s expression of utter bewilderment, Luna gave her some time to process this bombshell of knowledge.

“...But, you didn’t even know me yet! Why would you...” She turned a little restless, “why would you put so much stock in me?! What were you thinking?!”

"I knew your anger was, at least in part, because of Project Euphoria. I knew that 'Shikoba Bullard' was the name of the daughter of Gareth that saw me in the lab. He ranted about you frequently. Besides, you threw away your wealth to rebel against your father. I saw a warrior of justice in you."

"Luna..."

"That being said," She continued, "I stoked the flames, and gave you a friend. One who, during my pursuit of you that day, seemed cunning and rational in how he hindered me. I believed you needed allies, so I gave you one. He didn't deserve this, but it had to be done. In summary, I played the part of the villain to push you on your path, and let myself be conveniently 'distracted' by you and your friends when it was necessary for you. If I was serious about stopping you, your basketball game with Isinachi would never have happened, for instance."

"So... all this time, you've shielded us from actual meaningful surveillance? Is that what you're saying?"

"More or less."

"Then what about the time you locked us up in our own home?"

"I was still an SSA agent on a payroll, and while I cannot leave, I did need that money. I have done everything I can to, and will continue to, support you in this fashion."

Shikoba, in complete silence, stared into her eyes. For the first time, Luna noticed the freckles under her eyes. She was... rather pretty.

“Alright, that adds up.” Shikoba broke off the intense eye contact.

“You were thinking about whether or not to believe it?”

“It’s a lot to take in, you know? We *did* spend a lot of time being really fucking mean to each other.” Shikoba threw her hands behind her head as she let herself fall down on her back.

“I know. My apologies.”

“But...” Shikoba turned her head toward her, “Why reveal this now? Why not earlier? Or never?”

“Because...”

Luna breathed in... and then breathed out before finishing her sentence. Her heart ramped up its pace, but she was going to tell her anyway!

“I couldn’t take it anymore.” She finally whimpered, her eyes watering and her breathing heavy. “For the entire time I’ve been here, I haven’t met a single person that wasn’t hostile to me, and it was going to break me. You’re the only one to ever show me a hint of kindness, in the laboratory that day. I’m a talented actress, but I... couldn’t keep up the façade any longer.”

Shikoba sat up again, and looked her in the eyes. What they communicated was extremely straightforward;

“I know your pain.”

Chapter 8.3

*Your life in the snowy mountains was peaceful.
Until the colonizers came.*

*You fight them, but you were captured.
Your freedom on the mountains died.*

*Its killers handed you over to a demon.
Its lair was your prison, its pills your rations.*

*The demon's first pill paralyzed you.
All then you could do was watch.*

*The second pill gave you strength.
How much, even the demon did not know.*

*But it would soon find out.
For that reason came the demon's trials.*

*You were beaten, stabbed, suffocated, and molested.
The last part served no purpose.*

*And then, you died.
Afterward, your neighbor's turn came.*

*This continued forever.
Until the demon got what it wanted.*

*Finally, it did.
A captive passed the trials.*

It was me.

But I wish it was not.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!” Luna shook up from her sleep, shrieking. All her energy then went into calming down her heavy, heavy breathing. The memory of being completely motionless as a man in a foreign place forced a pill down her throat was one she could sadly never forget. Way worse things were done to her afterward, but not one of those things equaled that initial feeling of pure terror.

“I’ll never forgive him.” Shikoba said.

“Eek!!” Luna briefly shook up again before realizing, “Oh that’s right, you’re here. I’m sorry.”

“You’ve got your excuse.”

“Thank you.”

Luna turned the light on, albeit dimly, as she let her heartbeat slowly calm down. Shikoba was sitting all hunched up in the corner, holding a piece of paper.

“Is that..?”

“Tell me about them.” Shikoba then said.

“About what?”

“These snowy mountains you wrote of.”

“You’re unusually calm ever since I picked you up, Shikoba. How come?”

“I can tell you’re dodging.” Shikoba chuckled softly, “I’ve seen this trick before.”

Luna paused.

“Is that not okay?”

“It’s fine. You don’t have to say shit if you don’t wanna.”

“Thank you.” Luna let out a sigh of relief.

"You're welcome. Besides, I've already learned plenty."

"What have you learned? That the world is larger than Sanctus?"

"That the hellspawn that rules us is even worse than I thought."

Silently, Luna looked at Shikoba's face as it was lost in thought. There was so much anger, but also so much empathy, just oozing from her focused expression. She was impulsive, and a bit crazy, but...

"I'll ask you genuinely this time," Luna started, "you've been a lot calmer than usual ever since you came with me. How come?"

"I'm still just as emotional." Shikoba said, "But with everything you've been telling and showing me, I decided I should shut the fuck up and listen."

"I'm sorry, thank you again."

"The hell are you apologizing for?" She smiled, "I'm finally getting to know you. I should be the one thanking you!"

...It really wasn't hard to imagine why Mach fancier her. Regardless of how rational this thought was, Shikoba struck her with a feeling of safety. A silent reassurance, that everything would be alright.

Shikoba's presence allowed her to simply...

breathe.

"You should go sleep, too." Luna told her as she lied back down.

“One more thing,” Shikoba said as she did the same on the floor, “Since you’re so strong, what keeps you here? If you know where you came from, couldn’t you pull off returning?”

“I’m not strong enough on my own, trust me. I doubt my ability to defeat just one of Morsus’ generals. They are monsters, and I am unarmed. But that aside, I don’t even know how I was transported here. It is a mystery how one enters or exits this place, if not through the daunting city walls. Besides...” She paused, “I can’t leave yet.”

“Why not?”

“...Is it not okay if I keep that to myself?”

“Nah, it’s fine. Must be heavy stuff. Share when you’re ready. Or not. That’s up to you, right?”

Luna had no choice but to crack a little smile, giggling softly. “You have a reputation for being incredibly pushy and persistent, but somehow, I’m not seeing that from you today at all.”

“I don’t push people to expose their traumas to me!” She said. “I know I’m annoying, and sometimes that’s the point, but I hope people get that I’m trying to *help* them, not make them do what I want!”

“With the Benningtons, I think you should tell them that.” Luna opened her eyes again to look at her. “Some people react aversely to your standard method.”

“I suck at that.” She shook her head. “I suck at gently supporting others. It’s hard to understand them, and to say the right shit.”

“You did a fine job today, tough.”

“Heh, you’re different.”

“How so?”

“We’re victims of the same man, aren’t we?”

Luna’s heartbeat intensified a bit again, but she calmed herself down with a deep breath. “I suppose that makes us kindred spirits.” She then said, afterward smiling as she saw Shikoba’s face light up.

“In a fucked up kinda way, yeah!” She beamed as she cracked a little laugh. It was contagious.

This was pleasant. It had been so long since she had genuinely laughed. But this kindred spirit’s home wasn’t here. She should be with Mach, Roxanne, and Isinachi. Still, all Luna could do was enjoy her company while it lasted. It wasn’t her who was keeping her here, so there was no need to feel guilty. Or so she told herself.

“Go sleep, Shikoba.” She told her, “Ignis Academy is going to be rough for you if you destroy your sleep schedule while you’re here.”

“You’re right. Well, good night then!”

“Goodnight Shikoba.” Luna said it back, and turned off the lights again.

Chapter 8.4

“Tell me, what is *she* doing here, Princess?” Alba, standing next to them, pointed her finger at Shikoba, who sat across the table from Luna at the ministry’s cafeteria.

“Confidential.” Luna immediately answered.

“Confidential?! Luna Snowfield, do you think you have the authority to hide things from your colleagues?”

“I have direct orders from Mr. Monaghan to do exactly that, yes. I do not have the authority to speak of my current mission with anyone. ‘Anyone’ includes you, I would imagine?”

“I would just like an explanation for this farce!” She put her hands on her hips, “The one day, I’m told I cannot fly my drones anymore, and the next, I see my partner agent dining with Shikoba!”

“I’d hardly call this dining, I can find better food at the damn grocery store.” Shikoba growled.

“You stay quiet! Now, Princess, tell me-..”

“Like hell I will!” Shikoba barked straight through her, “You heard her, right? If you wanna know why you’re being left in the dark, go ask your master!”

“Calm, Shikoba.” Luna said, “But blunt as she may have worded it, Alba, she is correct. If you have complaints, please voice them to Mr. Monaghan.”

“Ugh. I will!”

“Oh, and before you leave.”

“Yes?”

"The nickname you always call me by, you have it mixed up." Luna turned to her with a smug grin, "Priestess. That is what General Firebrand calls me. That's who you were trying to mimic, right?"

Alba looked offended, but didn't say a word, she just rushed away, ill-maintaining a veneer of composure as she stomped toward her office, or wherever else she may have gone to. Luna didn't know nor care.

"Everyone here treats you like this, then?" Shikoba asked after taking a bite of her dull sandwich.

"Unfortunately so." Luna sadly nodded.

"I'll make sure this regime collapses. For your sake, too."

"I would not advise you to say such things here."

She gave her a smug look; "I am *the* Shikoba Bullard. What difference does it make where I say the shit I always say?"

"The 'for your sake' part."

An awkward chuckle followed, "Ah. Right. Whoops!"

"Hahahaha!" Luna couldn't help but giggle. "You're very endearing when you're not hostile, Shikoba."

"...Thanks."

When she said that, Shikoba's body tensed up, and her face changed color to turn pink-red. Luna couldn't help but notice her freckles again, for reasons she didn't know herself. Better not dwell on it.

"Why are you so flustered? I refuse to believe you never get compliments." Luna chuckled.

"I do, but it's all from Mach, and he's a little shit when it comes to that."

“Oh? How?”

“He does it to tease me. He’s great and awesome, don’t get me wrong, but he confuses the fuck out of me. I can never tell what he’s thinking or feeling or whatever else.”

Good thing everyone else had returned to their offices by now, Luna thought. Anyone overhearing this conversation would’ve been embarrassing for her.

“You should probably talk about that with him when you’re back home.” She said after finishing her own sandwich, “Communication’s the most important part of a relationship, right? So they say.”

“In a what now?” Shikoba paused.

“In a relationship.”

“I’m not in one, though?”

“...Sorry?”

“Did you think Mach and I were...?”

“Yes? I think most people think that?” Luna told her, still flabbergasted.

“Huh? Why?”

“Why? You live together, you’re basically inseparable, and you share a bedroom.”

She could tell from Shikoba’s stunned expression that this was genuinely surprising to her. Hopeless.

“I guess I can see the confusion? It’s not like there’s nothing there, but...”

“It’s complicated?”

“Yeah. I don’t even know what *I* want, to not even *begin* speculating about that little fuck.”

Luna couldn’t help but giggle a little.

"Hey! Are you laughing at me?" Shikoba jokingly protested.

"No, no. You're fun, that's all."

"Well, I did tell you to laugh more, so I guess that's on me!" She chuckled herself, too.

If only she got to meet her as an Ignis Academy student instead, Luna thought to herself before shaking it off. It was pointless to dwell on such thoughts.

"Sorry for bringing this on all of a sudden, by the way." Luna then said.

"Don't sweat it! You just assumed something, it's whatever. I do wanna return to him soon though. Him and the others."

"We'll have to wait and see how the minister handles this before that, I'm afraid."

Suddenly, Shikoba shook up.

"Wait!" She slammed her hands on the table, "I don't have time for that! Mach and Ace put their faith in me! I need to make it to the Governor's Ball!"

"How? It's not that long from now." She told Shikoba, "We have no influence over this."

"Not with that attitude." Shikoba said, and then closed her eyes.

"Shikoba?"

"Be quiet for a sec. I'm thinking."

And so, she waited. She waited, in fear of what unhinged plan Shikoba would come up with, and by extension, what she was probably going to wind up agreeing to help her do.

“Alright.” Shikoba said. Her eyes slowly opened, and they showed a zealous determination unlike anything she had ever seen before. “I have a plan, but it’s dangerous.”

“I’ll hear you out, kindred spirit.”

“First, I’ll need a motorcycle.”

“You can borrow my SSA one. I never use it.”

“Great. I’m awesome with motorcycles, so don’t worry about that part.” She assured her. “My plan is to drive around the city until drones come and attack me.”

...

What.

“Excuse me?” Luna raised her eyebrows, “How exactly do you plan to survive this?”

“Hey, it’s your job to protect me.” She smirked.

This girl..!

“It’ll be a challenge without equipment or weapons, but...”

She thought for a second. She hadn’t fought anything or anyone since taking Gareth Bullard’s pill, but... she knew her strength was absurd. After all, it was designed to surpass... them.

“If need be, I’ll pull it off.” Luna nodded. “But you better have a good reason for this.”

“Well, we’ll see where the drones come from, right? I keep driving in the direction the drones come at us from, and we’ll find the one controlling it! There’s no way my father’s doing it himself! We arrest the culprit, and that’ll be that!”

Luna smiled warmly; “That is the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard.”

Next thing they knew, Shikoba took a seat on Luna’s motorcycle, making the engine roar pointlessly a few times, presumably for the kick of it.

“You gonna keep up with the speed of this monster?” She asked.

“I should be able to. If not, simply slow down a bit, okay?”

“Roger!”

Without warning, Shikoba took off! Heh, ever the eager little bastard! Quickly, she took a start-up sprinting position, drawing attention from her colleagues passing by in the garage. Not that it mattered. What came next would draw way more attention, anyway!

A second later, she was gone! Shikoba was a few seconds ahead, so she trailed after her on foot, sprinting as fast as she physically could!

“Slow down for five seconds!!” Luna shouted at her, and she listened. Five seconds later, Luna was sprinting side by side with Shikoba on her bike, rushing through the city.

“Damn, you’re something else!” Shikoba laughed.

“Stay focused. These drones attack when they recognize the face they’ve been programmed to detect. They’re not manually controlled!”

“What?! Will my idea even work then?!”

“Yes! They require quite some setup and a home base to function in a radius around!”

“All I needed to hear!”

“Eyes on the road now!”

Luna jumped into the air, landing one foot on a speeding car that came up from behind her. This was going to draw some unwanted attention, but there was no time for such worries!

She landed, and while she did, spotted a drone coming their way from her southeast. Mission start!

“Target #1 spotted!” She called, “Turn right ASAP!”

Shikoba showed her a wide smirk in response;

“Roger!”

At a crossroad, Shikoba ignored traffic lights and tore rightward, and Luna followed, making some passerby dive out of the way for her as she rushed past. “Shikoba! Move closer to the right edge of the road!”

“Aye’ aye!”

Their first drone came soaring at them, but with the brick walls of the apartment complexes next to them, she could hit it!

As the drone was about to shoot a laser from its turret, Luna jumped away, kicked the wall, and then with the same leg...

Crack, SMASH!

She bicycle kicked it onto the road, shattering it to pieces!

“Whoahaha!! You’re badass, Luna!”

“Eyes on the road!” She told her, though she could ill hide her smile, “We turn southwest of the ministry of defense! We’ll keep following the last direction the drones attacked us from, until we can see them take off from a starting point! Stay focused!”

“Roger!” Shikoba smirked again. Little devil.

As the duo rushed through the city, leaving behind shattered military drones in their path, the mission became a test of endurance. Shikoba was forced to slow down more and more as Luna’s breath grew heavier and heavier, and her forehead slowly turned into an ocean. If she stopped, Shikoba was going to die! But so long as she could still move, no matter how tired she was, or how badly she wished she could use a sword or a stun gun for this, these puny little army toys had nothing on the likes of her!

SMASH! Luna punched another one into dust as their onslaught brought them into the slums.

“Should’ve known!” Shikoba said, “If you wanna make sure the government doesn’t see you, the slums has gotta be the place.”

“You not worried? Some of your friends live here now, right?”

“A little!” Shikoba admitted, “But it’s not like Colonel’s hiding a military drone operator, fitting as that’d sound!”

Fair point. Sometimes she envied Shikoba’s simple mind.

“Alright, let’s move!”
“Roger!”

Then, Luna’s eyes lit up. She saw three drones fly out from a building that looked like a deserted warehouse from a distance!

“Jackpot!” Luna pointed at it.
“Alright! One more for all the marbles! Go, go, Luna!”

Together they charged through the sand roads, until-

“FUCK!!” Luna heard Shikoba yell as she flew off into the air. The bike jerked itself stuck in the mud! Wasting no time, Luna quickly jumped to catch her in midair.

“You okay?” She asked with Shikoba still in her arms.
“Y-yeah, barely! Thanks.”

“There’s no time to get bashful over being bridal carried!” Luna dropped her on her feet and pushed her behind her with her arm. “We don’t have speed on our side anymore! And they’re coming!”

“Right! Counting on you!”
“Naturally!”

Sweat rolled down Luna’s face. Three at once was a bit dicey, but there was not a second left to hesitate! Here they were!

Without pause, Luna leaped at the approaching drones, her shoe making good impact with the right drone before it was launched into the drone on the left! BAM! But that left the middle one, but she still had time! She just had to jum-...

And then, horror struck. The drone... raised its altitude! She couldn't reach that high! It adapted!

"That one's controlled manually!!" Luna screamed, "Find cover, Shikoba!!"

"Where?!"

She was right..! There was nowhere to hide, and she was too far away from her! The drone's laser fired, and there was nothing Luna could do about it! This was..!

BOOM!

Chapter 8.5

All Luna could see was a cloud of dust at Shikoba's position. Did Shikoba just..?

"Isinachi..?!" Luna heard Shikoba mutter in shock as the dust settled and she stood next to him, surrounded by rubble. It became clear what happened; Isinachi tossed the fallen bike at the laser beam at the exact right time! It was a miracle of luck that he was nearby, and even more so that what he did even worked!

"I heard of the situation from Mach." Isinachi said, "So when I saw you fly by, I followed. I'm glad I made it in time."

"And you're not done!" Luna pointed at her. "No time for chit-chat! Quick, while it's recharging, make your broad shoulders my launch pad!"

"Got it."

Luna dashed as a bright light started filling the turret again. She leapt. She landed on his shoulders. And...

She flew!

"GEEEEEEEEEEEEETTTTT... LOST!!" Luna's fist smashed straight through her target, shattering it violently into a million pieces before she landed on all fours on the dirty road, surrounded by the rubble.

Just in time.

Regaining her calm, Luna got up, wiped some dust off her suit, and readjusted her tie. "Just another day in the office." She said, though right after, she broke character, and let out a deep sigh of relief. "That's a lie, and I'm glad it is. Phew."

"Luna." Shikoba walked up to her, "Thanks. And you too, Isinachi. I thought I was dead."

"Buy me dinner after club next time, and we'll call it even." Isinachi told her, planting his hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry about it." Luna nodded as well, "It was my job. Are you okay?"

"Y-yeah. Bit of a shocker, but I knew what I signed up for."

"In that case," Luna smiled, "I wouldn't mind dinner either. Rumor has it your family's rich. I'm sure you still have a personal account you can draw from?"

"What happened to the 'don't worry about it' from earlier all of a sudden?!" Shikoba cried out, and the three of them laughed, both of joy and lingering relief.

"Well, let's save the banter for later." Luna interrupted, "Let's enter the basement and identify our assassin."

"Right, roger!" Shikoba agreed. "Are you joining us too, Isinachi?"

"If that is allowed." He looked Luna's way.

"I'll allow it."

And so, the three of them found themselves in front of the basement door. Shikoba wasted no time to shake the iron front door, but it seemed like it was locked.

“Argh, damn it!” She kicked it in frustration. “How’d they even get the drones out?”

“It was probably locked just now.” Luna said, “In response to me destroying the manually operated one.”

“Can you break the door?” Isinachi asked.

“Silly question.” She shrugged, and swiftly sent it flying into the basement with her kick. “This is the SSA! You’re under arrest!”

The basement floor was dirty, and small garbage littered the whole building, and Luna could just taste the dust in the air. There, in the back of the place, behind a perfectly square monitor attached to a two meters tall supercomputer, sat a tall college-age guy with blond, spiky hair. He seemed to be wearing a... Sanctus Swans tracksuit?

“A student..? Either of you know him?” Luna looked to them on her side.

“Y...yes.” Isinachi confirmed, shocking Shikoba a little.

“Shi... ko... ba...!” The culprit muttered like a zombie as he got out of his chair, with some difficulty, “How dare you... take my friend away from me..!”

“Noah...” Isinachi bit his lip, “What happened to you?!”

“Don’t bother.” Shikoba grabbed his arm, “Noah’s long gone.”

“Enlighten me.” Luna immediately told her. She recognized that cold anger in Shikoba’s eyes right away.

“I’ve read about this when I snooped around private HighLife documents. It’s another of my father’s wicked, fucked up drugs. It’s the result of Project Soldier.”

Shikoba talked calm, but her clenched teeth and fists told a different story.

“Explain to me.” Luna asked of her as Noah slowly started stepping up to them from far away.

“...It’s a dissolvable pill that permanently fucks your brain. In that state, anyone can prey on the victim’s emotions, and make them do... pretty much anything.”

“I’m lost.” Isinachi said, “Are you saying your father turned Noah into a puppet?”

“...I’m sorry.”

“That’s..!”

It didn’t seem like Shikoba told him of similar things before. Did she keep HighLife’s dark secrets to herself? It must be traumatic to know such things of your father, Luna figured. She couldn’t even begin to blame her.

“Is he physically more dangerous?” Luna asked her.

“No. The opposite. It’s pretty much a failed project. But there’s no point in interrogating him.”

“That’s not up to me to decide.”

“Right. Do your thing then.”

There he came, stumbling her way already. Those eyes, those teeth, the feral noises coming from his mouth... he was more ape than man at this point. She couldn't resist physically cringing. Why would anyone do this?

She stepped up to him, quickly and very easily restrained him, and threw him in handcuffs. "Shi...koba...!!!" He growled, not even paying attention to Luna at all. Noah's eyes were fixed on, well...

"Shi...KOBAAAA!!!"

"I'm not your enemy, man." Shikoba shook her head. "But it's not like you'll understand."

With the exception of Noah's yelling, silence overcame the trio until an SSA car came to pick him up. Isinachi was promptly given a 100 Sanctus dollar bill for his help, and Shikoba was still temporarily kept at Luna's home until Mr. Monaghan officially declared the mission to be over, to be safe.

Luna kept her there alone for a little while, as she went to visit someone.

Content, she walked up to an old man's hospital bed, in a room dedicated to him.

Room 1147

Clifton Snowfield

"Hm! By the look on your face, seems like someone got their paycheck!" The man grinned. His wrinkled face showed his age, as did his grey hair and moustache, both not very well maintained.

"Hey Grandpa." Luna waved him hello as she sat down on a stool next to his bed. "And yes, I did. I secured medicine for you again."

"Hey, Luna..."

"Yes?"

"You look happier. More than otherwise."

"Do I?"

"Let me guess," He got smug, "Did you make amends with that lady you've mentioned?"

"...You read through me so easily." Luna sighed happily.

"So, how hot is she?"

"Grandpa!" Luna playfully nudged his shoulder, "I'm not thinking of that kind of thing here!"

"You're fitting right in when you say that wearing that suit!" He laughed, "Already lying through your teeth, like a true Blacksuit!"

"Hahahaha!" Luna couldn't help herself, "That's so mean!"

Clifton turned silent in awe. "You... really are much happier today."

"I was with that troublemaker all day and yesterday." Luna smiled still, "I think she's loosened me up a bit. I don't know about what you're implying, but..."

"Oh, y-yeah, it's just, your laugh is fucking stunning."

"Tell me about them. These snowy mountains you write of."

"We're victims of the same man, aren't we?"

"I'll make sure this regime collapses. For your sake, too."

"Whoahaha!! You're badass, Luna!"

"Being around someone like her after so long is just pleasant."