‘Square One’ by Mohamed Shafiek

Chapter 1 Dysfunctional

 “Two more floors!”

 That was the countdown that ran through my mind as I trudged up the stairs of the apartment complex. I dreaded the prospect that my summer would now be taken up by me assisting someone else who was technically my rival. However, I was told to look at him as a teacher. After all, that’s exactly why I was walking up to his apartment. My publishing company, BanBan Comics, gave me some insight on his past and present work, in which they relished him with praise and awards. Apparently, my work was “inadequate” compared to his. Truthfully, I wanted them to drop the euphemisms so it would give me a fair reason to cuss them out spitefully.

 “One more floor!”

 I already knew that I wouldn’t be the next Dragonball. Reaching that level of popularity was about as easy as breaking down a giant cement wall equipped with my bare fists. But, to be told my work wasn’t even good enough to run in the monthly magazine was a crushing blow. While other manga, that shouldn’t be considered “good,” passes on to the serialization phase, mine was selected to take an all-expenses paid trip to the metaphorical trashcan.

 Now here I am standing at the apartment I was told would become my new workspace for the coming months for the sake of “training.” All of the cicadas buzzing in response to the sweltering summer heat were now drowned out by the muffled fast-paced Jazz music coming from the other side of the wooden door. I knocked twice loudly. Not only once in case, nobody heard the first knock and not three to make myself sound annoying and desperate. The music from inside stopped, meaning someone must have heard me. I took a deep breath as the door opens and my life flashes before my eyes as a G-Pen flies right by my head, barely missing me by a hair. At least, that’s what I thought until the man in the black shirt and glasses standing before me asked me not to sue upon seeing my cheek start to bleed.

 “Hey, Suzuko! Mai! STOP THROWING YOUR SUPPLIES AROUND!!” He yelled, looking back into the apartment.

 I tried to peer inside past him, expecting one of them to respond. However, I couldn’t see because my eyes hadn’t adjusted yet to the dark interior. Sure enough, a girl with a high pitched voice yelled from inside.

 “It wasn’t Mai! It was Suzu! Suzu!!”

 The man in the black shirt shot her a look of disappointment and turned his attention back to me.

 “So where is the pizza?” he asked condescendingly.

 “P-pizza? N-no! I’m Akari Ise!” I responded hastily.

 His expression didn’t change. Which worried more than it should have.

 “So you’re not the pizza guy. Thanks for wasting my time!” the man said, his hand ready to shut the door in my face.

 “Aren’t you Agito Karasu?! I’m supposed to become your new assistant!” I exclaimed angrily.

 “I’m not Agito Karasu. Wrong apartment kid.” the man said in an assertive tone.

 At that point, I accepted that I must have gotten the wrong apartment.

 “I’m sorry for wasting your time,” I said defeated, turning around toward the stairs once again.

 I took the walk of shame knowing that I had no clue where I was going or where the apartment was supposed to be. I approaching the flight of staircase that took so much effort to scale. Suddenly, I turned my head back to the apartment after hearing snickering. The snickering then turned into horrendous laughter.

 “I was so close to keeping a straight face through all of that! Dammit!!”

 I looked behind me at the man, hunched over in laughter.

 “Bastard,” I said under my breath.

 He sighed and then gave me a genuine smile after wiping the tears from his eye.

 “There’s no need to worry, Akari. I know you’re not the pizza guy. But, if you’re really gonna be my newest assistant, you have to know lesson #1: Learn to take a joke!”

 I didn’t know what he was going on about, but I went with it for the sake getting this summer done so that I could resume my **real** work. I lazily walked into the apartment behind him and was welcomed by three more people who I assumed were his other assistants.

 After settling in and being surrounded by the human equivalent of hyenas, they each started introductions that seemed more or less scripted for a school opening ceremony. First was the man in the black shirt and glasses.

 “So the publishing company assigned you to me. That means you gotta learn to work by our rules now.”

 I found it hard to believe there were **any** rules judging by the flying G-Pen incident from earlier. I already assumed he was the mangaka in charge. His snarky attitude gave off a distinctive air of superiority. But, what caught me off guard was his name.

 “Since you were supposed to read the first three volumes of our current project, ‘One Percent’ to familiarize yourself, it should be noted that on the cover it says, ‘story and art by Akito Karasu.’ I know earlier I said I’m not Agito Karasu and that still stands because that’s just a pen name. Since you’re part of our team, you can call me by my real name, Roman Kohaku.”

 So, now “man wearing a black shirt and glasses” had a name. Roman. Taking a quick look, Roman looked like he was fresh out of college, fairly skinny with stubble at the chin to boot. He had scruffy and disheveled hair that was tied up slightly in the back. He then gestured his hand toward my assailant from earlier.

 “The girl who cut you is Suzuko-”

 As I was about to take inventory on Suzuko, she immediately pulled out a G-Pen and stabbed the wooden coffee table we all were sitting around. Nobody reacted except me who jumped back in my seat with a yelp. She kept her hand steady on the pen, attempting to impale the table more than she already had. Needless to say, I felt for sorry for the table after the initial shock left. She looked up to me with an uncanny smile.

 “My name is Suzuko. Nice to meet you! I hope we can become great friends and I apologize for stabbing you earlier. Looking past that, as long as you don’t get on my nerves like Mai does, we should have no problem. Message received?”

 “Oh yeah, message received… *Are you out of your goddamn mind woman?!*”I panicked impulsively.

 Roman moved his chair back as Suzuko managed to get the G-Pen two inches deeper into the table with another forceful downward push.

 “I’m gonna… forget you said that. For the sake of being coworkers…Okay?” Suzuko threatened softly.

 It was then I understood that I ticked off probably the worst of them.

 Suzuko had on a brown jacket with a tan turtleneck sweater. Her jacket had exposed her shoulders and had been held in place by mini straps on her arm. She wore a skirt with high gray boots. Her hair was long and cherry red. Her eyes complemented her hair with the same red tinge to them, to which I aptly attributed to the devil himself hiding behind her retinas.

 When I shifted my attention to the girl next to Suzuko, she seemed very excited to introduce herself. Almost to the point where if she had been vibrating in her seat any more than she already was, you would think that she was having a seizure. She looked as if she had just graduated middle school. Her hair was tied into twin tails and dyed it with pink to complement her natural golden hair. Her eyes were as blue as the summer sky and had calmed down from my “introduction” to Suzuko. She wore a pink dress with the bottom half being puffed up. The frills around her neck came complete with a black bow. Finally, she wore white stockings and shoes that identified with that of a school uniform set. She leaned in over the table as if she was about to jump over it and started speaking fast enough to break the sound barrier.

 “Akari?! That’s a good name! Mai is very happy to meet you! I hope we work hard and become good friends like Suzu said!”

 Her voice immediately struck me as the same one that yelled from inside the apartment from earlier.

 “What did I tell you about calling me that?” Suzuko said subtly.

 “But Mai likes calling you Suzu, Suzu!”

 I wanted to call Suzuko Suzu too just to tease her but, I thought about how awkward it would be if I had to tell my folks that I ended in the hospital because I was attacked by art supplies. Instead, I nervously laughed. Mai looked over to me and started laughing too, while Suzuko turned away from me.

 “Why are you so angry?” I asked Suzuko.

 With the word ‘angry,’ I expected the next time I opened my eyes to be staring at the sky as I would be rolled away on a gurney. Surprisingly, she answered calmly.

 “I don’t do well with new people. Or loud people like Mai.” She said.

 “So you’re mental…” I said sarcastically.

 “I will pull this G-Pen out of the table and-“

 “How about we move on to Kaede,” Roman interjected laughing nervously.

 I was thankful Roman stepped in because as soon as I made my snide remark, my bravado collapsed in on itself.

 The person next to Mai must have been Kaede. He seemed to fit the physical appearance of a typical city hoodlum. He wore a green parka with a fur-brimmed hood. His hair was orange, cut short, and combed modestly. He looked at me sternly, which gave me the impression that he would be just like Suzuko. I didn’t know if I should have spoken up or stayed quiet. He then gave me a smile you would see an American superhero do after triumphantly defeating a bad guy in a comic book.

 “Akari Ise! It’s a pleasure to meet you! Welcome aboard soldier!” He obnoxiously shouted.

 I looked to Roman for an answer for what I just witnessed.

 “You can say Kaede lives in a manga of his own. He’s very dramatic, but it does help when I need to frame a new character archetype.”

 So that was all of them. Or so I thought.

 “Lastly, Midori.”

 I was confused. There were only three people when I walked into the apartment earlier.

 “Roman, there’s no one else here,” I said hesitantly.

 They all smiled almost maliciously.

 “Yes, there is! Mai sees her right next to you!”

 “Look next to you,” Suzuko said coldly.

 “How can you be so blind, Lieutenant?!” Kaede yelled as he smashed his palm against his forehead and threw his head back.

 Following their directions, I looked next to me and my heart jumped into my throat. Next to me was a girl sitting with a bored look on her face. She was so silent; I didn’t realize someone was sitting next to me. She had short white hair that accented her cobalt blue dress. Her dress reminded me of Mai’s, the only difference being that he legs were covered up more. She had no expression, which scared me a bit, but I got the distinct feeling that she was the first one out of all of us who was taking inventory on *me*.

 “Nice to meet you,” I said awkwardly extending my hand out.

 Not a word. Her eyes spoke no words, just a blank stare. I moved my body back, frightened by her familiar stoic nature.

 “She doesn’t talk much, but nonetheless, she’s part of us here,” Roman chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck.

 So this was my new “team.” A smartass, a psychotic girl, a hyperactive loli, an overdramatic guy, and a mute girl. If I hadn’t known this was a mangaka team, I would have contemplated whether or not I had stumbled into the world’s first apartment-based circus.

 “So what is Akari going to help us with, sir?!” Kaede asked brazenly as if responding to a general.

 Roman stroked his chin and looked up.

 “To be quite honest, I don’t know. BanBan acknowledged that he did a one-shot, but that doesn’t give us a lot to work off of in terms of giving him a specific position yet.”

 “Hey Akari, do you have anything you’re good at specifically?”

 I was a one man team already, but saying I could do almost everything would sound too pretentious.

 “I don’t really have a specific area I excel at,” I replied cautiously.

 Suddenly Mai threw up her hand in the air and waved it around wildly as if this was a classroom.

 “Mai has an idea!!” Mai exclaimed.

 Roman bobbed his head to give her a chance.

 “Mai thinks we should give Akari a day with each of us! It would be easier to see what he can do after he narrows it down!” She suggested exuberantly.

 “I agree! That is truly a spectacular idea!” Kaede added.

 “As much as I hate to admit it, Mai does have a good point,” Suzuko said reluctantly.

 With a silent agreement, they all turned their attention to me.

 “So what do you think Akari? Monday could be with Suzuko, Tuesday with Mai, Wednesday with Midori, Thursday with Kaede, and Friday with me. By the end of Friday, you can make your decision.” Roman suggested.

 Although I was still reeling from the cast of characters before me, I thought it was a good idea at the time. If I really was going to join these people, it would be a smart to get to know them. After all, I had to keep in mind that these were the same people who made ‘One Percent’, which was deemed better than my original one-shot. If I were to learn to how to become a better mangaka, I had to take this training as seriously as I can to make it worthwhile.

 “I’m willing to give it a shot,” I answered dubiously.

 “Alright! Welcome to the team Akari Ise!” Roman said smiling as he wrapped his left arm around my neck triumphantly.

 And so my first week began. 10:45 AM, I arrived at the apartment complex and was greeted by an eerily smiling Suzuko at the door. I smiled back to hide the fear I felt towards her as I stepped closer to her blazing aura. We walked into the apartment and I pulled up the chair next to her desk, which was closest to Roman’s main desk. From the setup, I gathered that each of them would play hot potato with each page, passing them down to the next person until the last person in the line finished it. Being situated the way they were, the order started Suzuko, followed by Mai, then Kaede. The strangest part about the ‘production line’ was Midori’s placement. She didn’t sit with everybody else in the center of the room. Instead, her desk had been placed facing the wall. I pondered why for a second before Suzuko summoned my attention back to her by tugging at my sweater.

 “Pay attention. I’m in charge of drawing in the backgrounds for each page. I want you to watch closely.” She said trying to maintain a serious atmosphere.

 She picked up a stack of post-sketched papers to her right and picked up a G-Pen. Being traumatized from yesterday, I leaned away from her. She sank her pen into the ink bottle and started drawing the background for a cityscape.

 “This was my chance to get some pointers.” I thought to myself as I focused intently.

 However, as she kept drawing, I noticed the perspective for each panel was completely ignored. Everything was drawn as if it was all on the same plane. I was about to open my mouth until she slid a page in front of me.

 “Do what I did,” Suzuko commanded.

 I looked into her eyes and immediately understood that she was not going to repeat herself.

 “Alright…” I said nodding my head.

 I decided that I could make her idea of perspective easier by showing her how it was actually supposed to be done. As I finished the first building, she grabbed the paper and held it in my face pointing at it.

 “What the hell is this?!” She yelled, standing up from her seat.

 “It’s the building with **actual** depth,” I argued.

 She stabbed at the table with an unused G-Pen.

 “*You’re really annoying me! I don’t care if it has depth! Leave it to the rest of them to take care of that*!!” She asserted.

 “Why?! If you do that, it makes no sense!!” I yelled back.

 “You’re on thin ice! Besides, we have our way of doing things here so get used to it.” Suzuko said trying to calm down.

 “Fine,” I sighed.

 “Good. At least I know you’re not totally lost. I really am trying my best to be nice but, at the same time, you have to understand that…”

 Suzuko’s monolog trailed off in my head because from behind her, I could see Mai puffing up her cheeks as she steadied her aim with a marker at the back of her head. Immediately, I threw up my hands and waved them back and forth frantically to call Mai off.

 “Are you even listening to me?” Suzuko said monotone, looking down at me.

 I nervously laughed, hoping she would laugh too. I was stupid for even trying. Instead, she ended up chasing me around the apartment for the next two hours assuming the stance of a serial killer.

 “Someone save me!” I shouted repeatedly, hoping for someone to take the G-Pen away from her. After confirming no one wanted to get between me and her, I ran out of the apartment, concluding my Monday. The expectation was to finish ten pages of background art that day. We only got four done. Even worse, Suzuko probably had it out for me now.

 I returned on Tuesday morning for Mai’s day. Upon walking into the apartment, Suzuko shot me a glare of anger and immediately resumed her work. I could tell she was mad at me because she blamed me for having her pick up yesterday’s slack including her work for that day.

 I sat down next to Mai who was meticulously busy connecting the ends of markers into a pole.

 “Morning Mai,” I greeted.

 When she noticed me, her face lit up and her frenzied jitters caused her marker pole to break.

 “Morning Akari! Mai is ready to do her best today!” She said cheerfully. Mai was the exact opposite of Suzuko which comforted me.

 “So, Mai’s job is to color! It’s the best job ever!!” she said pointing a finger at me.

 She did seem like the type to be the colorist. Spontaneous being her nature, Mai would always know what the right colors for a scene would be without breaking a sweat.

 “Does Akari like coloring like Mai?” She asked curiously, leaning in with an O-shaped mouth.

 “If I know what to do,” I answered.

 I’ve never been big into coloring. That was the main reason manga drew me in since it mainly boiled down to black and white. Coloring was merely an afterthought.

 “Dummy! It doesn’t matter if you know what to color! It’s about just coloring!” she lectured.

 She started to color in a page that was labeled: One Percent Volume Four. I was ambitious to see the skill behind the beautiful covers for the first three volumes.

 “See?!” She said.

 She held up the cover art, which now sported blue, green, and purple smiley faces over the intense formulaic amount of detail Roman had put in.

 “M-Mai…? Are… Are you…”

 I was at a loss for words.

 “Are you okay, Akari?” She said peeping out from behind the ruined cover art as if nothing was wrong.

 “There’s nothing to worry about. Roman always makes copies in case Mai loses her focus and trails off to draw something else on the same paper.” Suzuko said, keeping her intense focus on the background art before her.

 I was shocked to find Suzuko’s voice to be the one that allowed for me to sigh with relief. Mai turned her body to Suzuko and putting her hands on her hips, pushing down the puffy lower part of the dress.

 “I don’t lose my focus Suzu!”

 Suzuko grabbed another G-Pen from next to her and held it up to Mai’s face, still keeping her focus on drawing.

 “Don’t call me that.”

 Before another incident like yesterday would erupt, I tried to get Mai’s attention away from Suzuko.

 “How about we try coloring this again, right?” I asked desperately.

 Her expression changed like night and day.

 “Okay! Mai will get Akari another page to try!” She sang getting up from her seat.

 She skipped around the coalition of desks to a nearby printer. Mai stood there inspecting the pages as if they were different. Finally, she sat back down and handed me the same cover art page.

 “Akari, it’s your turn now!” She said.

 I picked up an alcohol-based lilac Coatric marker and started detailing the jacket of the girl on the cover since I already memorized all the character color schemes. As I colored in the cover with extreme discretion, Mai intensely stared at my face and kept walking around me like an inspector. Finally, I finished it and presented it to Mai.

 “What do you think? Pretty spot on, huh?” I questioned confidently with a smug grin.

 She took the paper and held it up to the light, followed by her bringing it extremely close to her face. She went back and forth between “hmmm”, “oohs”, and “aahs” each time she shifted page around.

 “Mai thinks you did a good job!” She said slamming the paper down in front of her.

 “Thanks!” I said enthusiastically.

 “But, Mai didn’t like the way you colored it. Did you?” She asked looking down.

 At first, I didn’t know what she meant.

 “Did you like coloring it, Akari?” She interrogated again.

 “Yeah of course…” I answered, scratching my head.

 Honestly, I didn’t. Not only was it annoying to switch between colored markers, breaking the workflow, but I also didn’t like how it came out overall. I felt like I could have made so much more improvements with blending techniques and maybe not oversaturating the colors as much as I did.

 “Mai knows you lying Akari.” Mai accused, pointing her finger at me.

 I averted my gaze from her.

 “Okay. Maybe I wasn’t too psyched about coloring it but…”

 “That’s okay! We can do another one!” Mai said flipping her expression back to happy.

 I resumed my eye contact with her and starting smiling impulsively. It was just something about her that exuded “happy.” You really couldn’t stay upset at anything around her, even yourself.

 My smile turned into a jaw drop when she brought over a stack of copies of the volume four cover. Suffice to say, we didn’t get anything Mai liked that day from me and now Roman has to restock a good majority of his Coatric colors.

 Today was now Wednesday, which meant it was time for me to learn with Midori. I considered today to be the easiest since Midori never spoke but, that would make the day painstaking. Also, for some reason, Roman said for me to arrive at his apartment early. The sun was blotted out by dark gray clouds overcasting the town.

 I arrived at 7:45 AM to find only Roman and Midori there. Roman was already working, with accidental ink splatters on his face.

 “Mornin’ Akari! Midori is right over there!” Roman said wholeheartedly before resuming his work.

 Midori once again evaded my initial line of sight even though she was sitting still on the couch looking right at me.

 “Morning,” I said.

 Like I was expecting, she just ignored my greeting. She gestured me to me follow her to her isolated desk. There were copious amount screen tone scraps on the ground around the desk. I sat down and watched as she held a xacto knife to the screen tone for a couple moments. I folded my hands and bit down on my bottom lip, eager for her to start.

 “Are you going to cut the-” I started.

 I was stopped short by her hand moving like lightening as she cut a portion of screen tone out and stuck it to the manga page with ease. I couldn’t believe it. She cut out the exact shape she needed, nothing excessive.

 “Holy crap! That was amazing!” I exclaimed, astonished at her precision.

 She then held up the paper and pointed to a part of tone that stuck out from the original shape on the page. But to me, it didn’t matter because it was such a small miscible mistake. Midori then crumpled up the paper and threw it in the trashcan adjacent to her. I sighed because I knew something like this would happen. Nothing with Roman’ team was normal, even Midori, who I found out was an extreme perfectionist.

 She held out to me a couple pages of screen tone, a page of manga, and a xacto knife.

 “You want me to do what you did?! There’s no way!” I said nervously.

 She nodded her head, which only skyrocketed my anxiety. Doubtfully, I took the materials from her hand and set them up.

 “Aright, here I go,” I said shakily, inching the knife closer to the screen tone.

 She looked down as I carefully carved out a shape of tone, leading to jagged edges of the cut shape.

 “H-hey! What are you doing?!”

 She grabbed my wrist and moved my hand faster for a smoother cut of tone. I blinked my eyes when the tone shape was completely cut. There was a fair difference in my attempt versus her assistance.

 “Thanks, but I could have done that by myself you know,” I said looking up at her.

 She let go of my arm and let me place the screen tone by myself onto the manga page. It felt like I was just learning how to write cursive and the teacher was trying to keep my hand steady as I wrote out each letter.

 “Does that look, right?” I asked her as I pulled my hands away from the page.

 Midori looked down at the page and I couldn’t tell what was running through her mind because of her ability to remain expressionless. I immediately assumed the worst since everybody else seemed to put me down whenever I did something which I thought was correct. She then raised her head from the page and gave me thumbs up. I don’t know why, but I was very happy to see someone finally giving me a positive result. She then got up and walked toward Roman.

 “Midori?” Roman mumbled, looking up at her.

 She leaned down and whispered something in his ear. I knew it was too good to be true.

 “I see,” Roman said, turning to me.

 “You can go home for the day. You’re all done for today, Akari!” He said smiling.

 “But… that’s it?” I asked, surprised at his order.

 “That’s right! Besides, today is usually when the assistants take off for a mid-week break.”

 I was a bit annoyed with him for not telling me today was a break day.

 “Why did you make me come here so early then?!” I asked with annoyance.

 Roman looked up at Midori surprised.

 “You didn’t know? Midori wanted you to.”

 “Sh-she did?” I said flustered.

 It was a strange realization since Midori never uttered a word before to me. She waved goodbye to me as I gathered my canvas bag and walked out of the apartment. As I pulled the door in behind me, I heard a page being crumpled up and tossed against the metal side of the trashcan.

 Thursday arrived and everyone was back from their break. Suzuko actually said good morning to me, which gave me hope that she was warming up to me. As I was about to greet her back, Kaede pulled me with him to his desk.

 “Welcome to boot camp, Akari!” Kaede enunciated.

 Without a second thought, I decided to have fun today and play along with Kaede’s dramatic nature.

 “Yes, sir!” I said saluting to him.

 He started to smile and I could tell the big guy was happy someone actually went along with him.

 “Alright, first things first, you must know your objective! We have one of **the** most important jobs for making manga!” Kaede commanded.

 “Of course sir!” I said.

 Behind us, I could hear Roman, Suzuko, and Mai giggling to themselves.

 “At ease soldier! Today, all we have to do is write dialogue from this script sent from General Roman Kohaku into the text balloons.”

 Kaede handed me the 26-page script of the chapter we had been working on over the week.

 “Think you can handle this?” Kaede asked me.

 Just transcribing from a script? It was probably the simplest job I’ve gotten all week.

 “You can count on it!” I accepted confidently.

 Kaede started shortly after me. The first couple of pages were easy until I hit page twelve. What I noticed about the script was that it was really excessive in its dialogue. At times it felt like it would be impossible to fit all the words into their designated balloons.

 “Hey, Kaede? What are we supposed to do if we can’t write more into the balloons?” I asked curiously.

 He gave me a hard pat on the back and showed me his page. What was supposed to be a paragraph in the script was now trimmed down to ten words in the corresponding balloon.

 “Improvise!” He said with gusto.

 “A good letterer knows where to cut down on filler to maximize the sentence flow where the original script fails!”

 Kaede reminded of a teacher more than Roman was supposed to be. I nodded my head and tried my hand at improvising the paragraphs like he said. My workload then consisted more of sentence analysis rather than just writing text. I finished the last of the pages and handed them to Kaede for review. He flipped through each until he let out a horrifying gasp.

 “L-Lieutenant Akari, I’m disappointed in you!!” he yelled in a hoarse voice resembling that of a samurai’s.

 “You used the wrong ‘your’ on the 24th-page panel four!”

 I understood they made extra copies for Mai because of her coloring fits, but I panicked because I was not sure if they made extra copies of Roman’ regular black and white pages.

 “I-I can fix this!” I said trying to appease Kaede who looked distraught.

 I ran over to Roman’ desk for white out, which he held out to me immediately.

 I rushed back to Kaede’ desk to find that he tore the page in half and balled his hand into a fist.

 “W-why would you do that?!” I yelled desperately at the pages halves floating back and forth toward the floor.

 “It was already too late. No matter what we did, knowing there was a ‘your’ that was never meant to be was sad enough. It tainted the page.” He said coldly.

 I stood there frozen until Mai snapped me out of my trance.

 “Don’t worry Akari; Mai will print the extra copies we keep just in case this happens. Kaede makes mistakes to just like Mai all the time!”

 “I think my head hurts,” I responded, putting my hand up to my head.

 I toward the couch and leaned back, processing the fact that we had a whole theatrical event just because we used bad grammar.

 Before I totally lost all suspension of disbelief, Kaede turned to me.

 “You’re relieved of duty for today soldier. Hopefully, you are well rested the next time you set foot in Kaede’s boot camp!” He said smiling.

 I let out a tiny laugh before I completely let time slip away.

 I finally came back to my senses at around 4:30 PM, half an hour before we were supposed to break for the day. Apparently, I zoned out through another of Mai and Suzuko’s fighting because now there were marked up with ink and Coatric colors respectively. However, all of us paid attention to Roman, who clapped twice.

 “Alright, everybody! As you already know, barring Akari since he’s new, the deadline for the final chapter is on Sunday. Kaede, anything that is done being lettered, make sure it gets to me tonight.” Roman announced.

 “Yes, general!” Kaede responded.

 “As for the rest of us, make sure we finish what we can and get it to Kaede so he can put in the dialogue ASAP. And that’s not all! I want to thank Akari for joining us and tomorrow, we finally are gonna get his decision on what he will be doing for us in the coming future!” Roman said with excitement, pointing both hands at me.

 As Roman pointed out that my decision had to be made by tomorrow, I suddenly remembered **why** I was going through the week the way I was. I would have to pick a position that would influence the rest of my time with them, meaning tonight I had to really think about what I wanted to do. Background art? Coloring? Toning? Lettering? That choice would pair me up with anyone of the others too. There was also the fact that I still had yet to spend the day with Roman, the smartass mastermind.

 When I woke Friday morning, my decision was made.

 I arrived at the complex at the regular time: 10:45 AM. Eager to see what Roman wanted to teach me today, I instead ran into him on the balcony looking out at the city and smoking a cigarette.

 “Roman?” I asked confused.

 He took the cigarette out of his mouth after noticing me.

 “Oh, morning! I don’t like to smoke in the apartment so I stepped out her, but this actually works perfectly!” he admitted with a grin.

 Roman, to me, was the sanest person out of all of them, despite my initial thoughts. But, knowing how that song and dance went so far this week, I wouldn’t be surprised if he outright revealed himself as a serial killer.

 Roman stomped out his cigarette and made his way toward me.

 “Usually, you only see me drawing at my desk. However, on Fridays, I take the time to touch up pages on the computer. Funny thing is… I actually finished all my work for the day before you got here.” He said laughing nervously.

 It never did occur to me that he was right. I had never seen him outside of working, save for the announcement and welcoming me. It made me wonder if he actually did sleep throughout the week.

 “So, what am I supposed to do today?” I questioned out loud.

 “Well the others are inside working already, but how about we take the day off?” He remarked.

 “You’re a terrible leader,” I prosecuted.

 “H-hey! That’s not true! You actually believed we were going to just lounge about all day?!” He said panic-stricken.

 It was then he grabbed a stack of manga pages held together with a paper clamp that I recognized the first page immediately.

 “Today, we’re going to take a look at ‘Echo,’ story and art by Akari Ise.”

 “How the hell did you get a hold of my manuscript?!” I yelled, stepping forward shakily.

 “Well, I made a quick call to the publishing company and requested a copy to be faxed over to me.” He said leaning back against the balcony.

 “But, why?” I asked.

 “Because my job is to turn you into the amazing mangaka I know you can be! So, are you gonna follow me or not?!” He exclaimed walking past me to the complex staircase.

 ‘Echo’ is the story of a young girl who wanted to be a mangaka. So much so that she put in hours of effort a day. She promised people all around her that one day she would make it to the top and leave her peers in the dust. However, she couldn’t be any more wrong. Upon not having the confidence to submit her work to a popular publishing company, she kept trying to improve what she already had. Her family tried to persuade her to become something better than a manga artist, but she refused, knowing that they were probably right. Throughout the story, an echoing voice in the back of her head keeps telling her that it’s no use. Her dreams were better off staying where they always were: the realm of the impossible. Determined to make the final push for a chance at a future she wanted, she submitted her first one-shot. The story ends on a cliff-hanger with the phone ringing and the girl picking up the phone. The story ends abruptly after that.

 That was the synopsis Roman gave my one-shot, as he read it aloud to me in a burger joint a few blocks away from the apartment.

 “A cry for help, huh? Not the most revolutionary, but still impressive stuff Akari.” He said, biting into his burger.

 “I guess there’s no hiding it now,” I said burying my face into the table.

 “And you feel ashamed of this?!” he asked, looking down at me.

 “Of course! All that story does is paint me as just a wannabe mangaka.” I said sighing.

 “But, that’s what makes it so great!! Lesson #2: Create what you want because that’s the **only way** to create something amazing. By writing about yourself, you captured your emotions and it made the situation feel exceptionally human!” Roman said excitedly.

 This was the second lesson Roman told me and was universal compared to the first.

 “That’s not what the editor thought. He said it was inadequate.”

 “Oh, it is,” Roman said staring at the page.

 “Thanks for the half-assed pep talk,” I joked trying to lighten the dreary mood.

 “I am a pretty crap motivational speaker, but that doesn’t mean I don’t know talent when I see it.” He said smiling.

 “The reason they said your story was ‘inadequate’ is because they were covering up what they really wanted you to do. Why do you think they recommended you to the mangaka assistant program, Akari?”

 I stayed silent. I would have answered, “I’m not good enough for the real thing.” But, Roman made me think it was something else. It didn’t take long for him to explain it to me.

 “Right now, you’re at ‘Echo’ cliffhanger. You’re at the making or breaking point in your life and from this cliffhanger, I can tell that you’re not sure what will happen and that scares you. The thought of failing all of those people who you promised and maybe even worse, proving the people who didn’t believe in you right is what you’re scared of. BanBan wants you to overcome that.”

 I was astounded at Roman’ spot on deduction. He stared out of the window next to him at the setting sun.

 “I know how it feels when you don’t know what’s going to happen. It feels like having a gun held to your head every minute while everybody casually goes about their day. It’s not a great feeling. I actually was just like you. I hesitated at every turn, but the stupidest thing kept me going.”

 “What was it?” I asked curiously.

 He turned to me and looked down smiling.

 “A quote from a failed mangaka I knew shortly before he passed away. ‘If you ever do try and fail, remember that now you have a kickass manga to show to someone who’s never even heard of the work. That way, they’ll be the ones to see you as the professional you’ve always wanted to be.’”

 Before I could voice my interpretation of the quote, Roman slapped a 5000 yen bill on the table.

 “We should really hurry before the rain starts coming down!” Roman advised as we rushed out of the restaurant and sprinted back to the complex.

 We arrived back with everybody working except Suzuko and Mai, who seemed to be preparing for a screaming match.

 “Akari and Roman are back!” Mai yelled, happily beaming at us.

 “About time you two came back, what were you doing?” Suzuko asked with an annoyed look.

 “Just eating,” I replied nervously.

 I had to say something before Roman started telling my life story.

 “Eating doesn’t get work done!” Kaede said as he shot us a look of anger.

 “Yeah! You should have taken Mai with you! Suzu has been mean to Mai all day.” Mai complained holding up her fists.

 “Maybe next time!” Roman promised, passing Mai by and patting her on the head.

 “However, right now we have a very special announcement from our own Akari Ise,” Roman said pointing to me as I stood in front of the apartment door.

 All their eyes shifted to me. My heartbeat intensified. Roman knelt down next to Suzuko’ desk while keeping his eyes on me.

 “So what will it be Akari? What’s the decision you’ve come to?’ he interrogated.

 My heart is now in my throat. I swallowed, hoping to put it back in its original place.

 “I- I…”

 My decision was made and now, it was time to make it heard.

 “I’m leaving.”

 The eyes suddenly became darts, piercing me and causing my heart to beat even faster. I would have grabbed at my chest if my arm wasn’t frozen in place.

 “You’re… leaving?” Suzuko asked.

 I nodded my head.

 “But why?! Is it Mai’s fault?!” Mai asked, choking up.

 “No, it’s not Mai’s fault,” I said quietly.

 “You’re leaving us. We understand, lieutenant.” Kaede sympathized sadly.

 That was the first time I ever heard Kaede not shout or throw up a pose.

 “Yes, sir. I’m sorry.” I said to him specifically.

 The only two who didn’t seem surprised were Roman and Midori. Midori resumed her work and Roman just knelt there, making me feel like I owed them an explanation.

 “I know myself. If I stay here, I’ll never become a serious mangaka. This team is a mess and when it crashes, I don’t want to be caught in the flames. This week, we barely even got enough work done for the next chapter of the ‘One Percent’ in before the deadline. We all fooled around and if I become like you all, I’ll never make it to the top. After I leave today, I’m going to the publishing building and picking up an assistant transfer slip. Since I need to complete one mandatory week before transferring, tomorrow is my last day. I want to thank you all for giving me this experience. It was… nice while it lasted.”

 The room fell silent and the clock hit 5 PM. Everybody just grabbed their bags and walked past me except Midori who kept working. The room now lacked all the energy that was there. Roman just stood up and walked back to his desk to draw more, which only served to make me feel worse since he held no adversity toward me. I regretted what I said about them being a mess, but it was the truth. I walked out the apartment only after making sure the others were gone from sight. I felt like I couldn’t even face them, even though tomorrow, I would have to for a full day with nothing to do but wait until the hours stretched from 10:45 AM to 5:00 PM. Instead of my normal route home, I took a different turn into the city to reach the publishing building and everything after that was a blur because my mind couldn’t focus on anything else.

 The next day, the whole apartment was silent. No Mai and Suzuko fighting. No Kaede acting. Not even Midori crumpled up pages indicating failed attempts. I sat there on the couch just staring at them with the pink transfer slip sitting in my pocket. The sound of raindrops hitting the windows tore away at my psyche. After 5 PM, all I would have to do is hand in the slip to the publishing company and I would never see them again. Roman finally broke the silence.

 “Hey Akari, can you come over for a second? Pull up a chair.” He asked.

 I nodded to him, happy to break my monotonous waiting, and sauntered over to his desk. Nobody reacted to me as if I was a ghost. In my mind, I was thankful that he somewhat decreased the tension in the air. As I sat down, he showed me a page of the new chapter he had finished editing on his laptop.

 “What do you think?” He asked, leaning to the side of his laptop to give me a fair shot at examining the page.

 What I saw left me speechless. The page Suzuko had worked on Monday was now heavily detailed with the cityscape going far back as the space allowed and almost felt too realistic to be in a manga.

 “Oh! This one too. What do you think of this one?” He said as he flipped through more pages with a keystroke.

 The cover page Mai had been working on was the same quality as I expected. But, knowing how easily Mai got sidetracked, it baffled me that she was able to keep her focus long enough to finish it. It carried an emotional impact behind it now. Roman flipped through more pages and showed me Kaede’s lettering. I recognized one of the balloons from the script that was condensed from two paragraphs into two sentences. Kaede had deviated from the original script so much, that the dialogue sounded better than what Roman wrote beforehand. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the mistake I made in lettering the other day was not fixed.

 “Th-they’re amazing…” I murmured, trying to form a better vocabulary word for what I was witnessing.

 “Damn! I forgot to edit one last page.” He exclaimed with concern.

 He pulled an unfinished page into editing software and simply rotated some of the tones that Midori misplaced slightly.

 “She may be a perfectionist, but I’m glad she knows when too many attempts are enough.” Roman laughed.

 He leaned back in his chair a let his body go limp.

 “We have our work cut out for us today because of all the bumps and bruises over the week. You were right; we really are an unorganized team. Other assistants came and left like going through a rotating door for the same reason you are. That’s why right now; we’re all are used to the feeling of being left behind.” He admitted, looking up at the ceiling tiles.

 He then sat up straight and looked out to Suzuko, Mai, Kaede, and Midori. None of them looked up at Roman and me talking. I don’t blame them. Even I felt that it would be out of line if I spoke.

 “But, then there were the ones who did stay.” He proudly admired.

 “Suzuko was the first. Sure she fought with me a lot and her background art didn’t seem like a lot to profit off of. But after a while, she became exceptionally good and all it took was a little pat on the back to let her know she was trying. Until she was able to get perspective under control, I would do my best to show her. I noticed you tried the same thing on Monday when you drew the building correctly.”

 “Yeah, although she didn’t take it well,” I said looking down.

 “It’s because she felt bad about herself. A new person suddenly showing up and doing something exceptionally better than you leaves a sour taste in your mouth. She doesn’t know how to deal with be rivaled and that’s why she reacts like that.” Roman said closing his eyes.

 “Mai and Kaede became the next assistants on the same day. They were both lively and full of spirit. Mai does have a short retention time…”

 He pointed to Mai who looked determined to finish whatever she was doing.

 “But, when she really wants to do something, she puts her entire heart into it and is only happy with it if she enjoyed making it. I taught her a little color theory even though I can’t color. Mai definitely has the visual skill to cover me on that end. Kaede is very serious with his work. Yeah, he can be overdramatic, but it’s one of the main reasons the scenes hype up or depress the reader the way they do. He knows people and what they’re really like. Not all those tropes and stuff like that.”

 He then looked at me and sighed.

 “To me, they all seemed like a couple of nutcases at first. But in the end, they enriched my life and are the real heart behind the pen name, Agito Karasu. They fulfilled my shortcomings through helping me in this serious time in my life. In turn for their efforts, I take them on as students of manga so that one day they can even surpass me with their own ‘One Percent.’”

 “I hope they become my rivals one day, just so I could see them again,” I whispered under my breath.

 Roman must have heard me since he let out a small hum.

 “I should get to work on the new pages from Kaede. Seems like tonight’s going to an all-nighter.” Roman said as he moved his unfinished manga pages in front of him.

 I sat next to Roman for the next hour. Every part of my body felt like it was being pricked by pins and needles. I would prefer if Suzuko stabbed me again with a G-Pen because I knew the pain would pale in comparison to what I was feeling right now.

 The clock hit 5 PM and it was time for us to take our leave for the day. However, nobody got up. Nobody packed their bags, nobody said anything. They all kept working.

 “Hey, guys? It’s 5 o’clock. We can leave now…” I explained, trying to get their attention.

 What I said was stupid. I knew exactly why they were working so hard, yet I still couldn’t accept it.

 “I guess… this is goodbye,” I resigned silently.

 I opened the door and looked outside. The heavy rain covered the entire city. All I could see for miles were red lights on the radio towers that decorated the horizon. As I stepped out, cold stray droplets pelted my face despite the awning over the balcony. I grabbed the handle to pull the door in.

 “Hold on, Akari!”

 I turned around to see them all lined up in front of the assistant desks. All of them had depressed looks on their faces, even Roman, who had just finished talking with me earlier about leaving so nonchalantly.

 “You have to yet to hear our final lesson. So please, listen closely.” He warned.

 It was not an obligation to listen to them. I wanted to listen.

 They all took one step forward simultaneously and bowed their heads. All at once, in perfect synchronization, they yelled.

 “LESSON #3: ONCE YOU ARE A PART OF OUR TEAM, NO MATTER WHERE LIFE TAKES YOU, YOU ARE FOREVER A PART OF US! WE WISH YOU THE BEST OF LUCK AKARI!!”

 The rain was now behind me and instead of cold droplets on my face, I felt hot tears. I finally accepted that I was in the wrong. I lost sight of the real reason I wanted to become a mangaka. I wanted my life to be enriched by people like them, yet I turned my nose up at that chance. My weakened body suddenly burst with explosive energy.

 “DAMMIT!!” I screamed at the top of my lungs.

 I grabbed the pink transfer slip in pocket and tossed it out over the balcony in a crumpled ball. I turned back to them all shocked. I took a deep breath and exhaled from my episode.

 “We have a lot of work to do if we’re going to get everything in by the chapter deadline so we have to get start-“

 Immediately, Mai started running toward me, arms first. I could see shimmering tears detach themselves from her face mid-sprint.

 “*Akari is staying! Mai was so sad to see you go*!!!” She yelled.

 “Mai, be careful!!” I exclaimed, trying to warn her.

 She slipped on the wet balcony floor and ended up tackling me down into the wall. After she fell, Suzuko and Kaede ran over and dog- piled on top of me.

 “Kaede you’re too heavy! Suzuko, who gave you another G-Pen?!” I complained as I was being suffocated by all of their hugs.

 “Shut up! Just let me have this!” Suzuko admitted as she wrapped her arm around my neck.

 “Welcome back soldier! Upon your re-entry, we are promoting you to Colonel! Then back to Lieutenant for making us worry!!” He said with an excited grin.

 I knew it made no sense, but…

 “Of course, sir! Lieutenant Ise reporting for duty!” I responded.

 I tried to salute, but my arm was held down by Suzuko and Mai. Mai kept nudging her cheek up to my face and tried to speak while tightening her grip on me.

 “Mai ish sho happy! Akawi ish a new part of ow family now! Ishin’t that right Shuzu?”

 “Mai don’t call me that!” Suzuko blushed.

 “I don’t know. I like Suzu a lot more than Suzuko. Suzu is less likely to be a psycho,” I tauntingly.

 “I’ll allow it just this once then! But, don’t you dare call me that again!” She said smiling.

 Midori stood next to Roman inside the apartment. They both looked down at Suzuko, Kaede, Mai, and their newest addition, Akari.

 “Now I have five students to look after. These days are going to divulge into insanity.” Roman observed, putting his hands on his hips.

 “But, I wouldn’t have it any other way. Our family is slowly growing Midori.”

 Midori kept staring at Akari and the others.

 “You should really tell Akari what you told me the other day,” Roman suggested patting Midori on the head.

 Midori sighed.

 “You’re an annoying older brother.” She said softly.

 Midori walked toward the balcony and stood in the doorway.

 “Midori?” Mai questioned, looking up surprised.

 Midori knelt down half-way and slightly smiled at Akari.

 “I wanted you to stay. I’m happy that wish came true.”

 Suzuko looked at me and took on a devilish smile.

 “Akari… your face it turning red!” She teased, using a singing voice.

 I scoffed at her.

 “Our lieutenant has truly crossed the threshold into manhood!!” Kaede shouted toward the sky, slamming his fist against his chest.

 “Not you too Kaede!” I pleaded.

 “Akari is in love! Akari is in love!!” Mai yelled.

 “You all can go to hell…” I said monotone.

 Once they all starting laughing, I knew nothing I said would stop their teasing.

 “Alright, guys! Let’s get you out of the rain before you all get sick. How is Akari supposed to become my new ink artist if he catches a cold?” Roman laughed.

 “Is that my new position, Roman?” I said sarcastically.

 Roman held out his graphite and ink-stained hands.

 “Maybe. I liked your line weighting in ‘Echo’ so it would be really useful. But, I don’t know if you **really** have the skills. There’s only one way to find out, right?”

 I grabbed his hand, accepting the obvious bait.

 We returned inside the apartment, where we began an all-nighter with no breaks. The finished chapter came true in our eleventh hour. Our dysfunctional, yet amazing team was able to pull out all the stops. The sun shined through the window of the apartment, alluding to the arrival of Sunday morning. The only person who had fallen asleep was Mai who was allowed to since she only had to color in the first five pages. Roman straightened and aligned all the paper in a stack as we waited patiently for the editor to arrive. All our eyes stared down the wooden front door of the apartment. With one hour left, it was time to see if our hard work had paid off.

**Chapter 1 Dysfunctional END**