Square One by Mohamed Shafiek

Chapter 2 Expectation

 The only thing that kept us awake now was the palpable tension that stifled the apartment air. In just a few minutes, we would be told if our efforts over the last eight hours were successful or for naught. It was such a simple thing, yet it had festered, creating an almost fragile atmosphere. One word would break that fragility. Roman sat at his desk staring at the door intently while we all stared downward. What felt like an eternity finally came to an end as three rhythmic knocks reverberated around the apartment from the front door. We all tensed up as Roman opened the door to reveal someone who I thought I would never see again.

 “***MR. YUICHI?!***” I yelled in pure shock.

 “You know Mr. Yuichi, Ise?!” Kaede said turning to me instantly.

 I nodded my head. How could I have forgotten? Mr. Yuichi had been the editor that told me ‘Echo’ was trash. It was bitter memory I kept tucked in the back of my head. However, that same memory is one the reasons I want to show him that I can and will improve.

 “Akari? It’s been a while since I’ve last saw you! How’s it been?” He asked with a jolly expression.

 I didn’t say anything. It felt like being at that first meeting with him all over again. Every action and word coming from me would be observed and recorded in his mind.

 “It’s actually a surprising coincidence to run into you here. I hope Roman and the others are taking good care of you!”

 “Yeah.” I uttered, trying to get his attention off of me.

 He sat down with Roman at the coffee table while we looking on in silence. Roman handed him the stack of pages and, one by one, he swiped through the pages. It was at a much faster pace than his inspection of ‘Echo’ and he had finished just as he started. It didn’t surprise me since I marked it up to just being that Roman had already proven himself as a mangaka. However, I didn’t expect him to flip through the set of pages several times over.

 “He’s taking longer,” Midori said quietly, keeping her focus on Roman and Mr. Yuichi.

 I didn’t know what she meant, but it didn’t take her long to follow up.

 “Usually by his third cycle, he makes his decision.” She said turning to me.

 I clasped my hands together tighter. Did he find a mistake? Did something in the chapter not add up? Eventually, my mind was flooded with questions until the sound of the paper stack hitting the laminated table-top snapped me out of my crisis.

 “All right.” He finally said.

 He cleared his throat and took a look at all of us, except Mai who had been knocked out the whole time on the couch. He took in a deep breath and hung his head.

 “It’s good!” He exclaimed lifting his head back up to meet Roman’s gaze. Immediately Suzuko and Kaede’s faces lit up.

 “Mission completed!!” Kaede roared standing up from his seat.

 “Hold on there, soldier,” Yuichi said smiling at Kaede, holding up his hand wearily.

 Kaede took his seat again as if being told like a dog to sit.

 “It’s good, but, it’s not the regular quality.” He said as his demeanor changed to serious.

 “It’s rushed. Anybody can tell that at a glance. The last few pages are lackluster compared to the last chapter. Not to mention…”

 We all sat looking on as Yuichi continued his rant about the chapters flaws, to which Roman following up each comment with a “yes, sir.”

 “I thought it was pretty good,” I said under my breath.

 Suzuko must have heard me because she responded right after I finished.

 “I thought so too. In fact, I’ve never felt more proud about anything more than the work we did yesterday.”

 I expected Kaede to add on, however, he was now sitting in his chair with his eyes closed and breathing in and out. He had not been sleeping, but almost meditating. Once again, Mr. Yuichi broke the fragile atmosphere.

 “However, I do enjoy the new line work.”

 He then turned to me.

 “I’m quite happy to know that Akari’s talents have not faded in the slightest.”

 Roman flashed a smile at me.

 “Just what do you expect old man?! The kid has talent that would put the legends to shame!” Roman said jokingly as Yuichi packed the chapter into his bag.

 Mr. Yuichi took a few steps toward me and extended his hand.

 “I look forward to your efforts in the future, Akari. It seems that talent indeed runs in the family.”

 I reluctantly shook his hand with grimace.

 “Oh, one more thing, I promise. Roman and Midori, I want to speak to you both in private.” Mr. Yuichi said looking at Midori.

 She nodded her head and walked over to sit at the table, next to Roman.

 Roman glanced over to the three of us remaining awake.

 “You guys can go head home for today. You all must be tired!”

 We were anything but tired ever since Mr. Yuichi arrived, but we followed Romans advice and decided to leave.

 “Um, guys? What do we do with Mai…?” I asked, pointing at her body on the brink of falling off the couch.

 Mai had still been sleeping as if nothing was wrong.

 “I’ll take her.”

 Suzuko walked past me and picked up Mai from the couch in a piggyback.

 “I live closest to her so I’ll just carry her.” She said sighing.

 “Thank… you … Suzu…” Mai said, still drowsy.

 “If you’re awake, then you can walk yourself,” Suzuko said quietly at Mai, who had already fallen back to sleep.

 “Great job guys! I’ll see you all later!” Roman said as I pulled in the apartment door.

 We all lived relatively close to the complex and in the same direction, so we ended up walking together. It was nice to walk in a group, despite everybody giving us strange looks as Suzuko trudged to carry Mai.

 “So what do you think of Mr. Yuichi, Akari?” Kaede said looking down at me.

 I felt compelled to answer him just because I wanted to vent about his overbearing presence around me.

 “I actually know Mr. Yuichi since he’s the one who submitted a request to put me in the assistant program. I guess it turned out for the better, but I’m still a little ticked about having to see him from here on out.” I said looking forward.

 “I see. I see. It is normal for a soldier to fear his superiors, however, they are the ones we depend on the most.” Kaede said holding his chin.

 “I think you missed my point,” I said condescendingly at him.

 “Well, I don’t like him. He scares the crap out of me every time he’s around. It’s like I could sense him.” Suzuko said scoffing.

 “Even the devil fears someone else?!” I thought to myself.

 “So, what did Mr. Yuichi mean when he said, ‘talent indeed runs in the family’ Akari?” Suzuko asked trying to impersonate Yuichi’s gruff voice.

 “Terrible impression,” I said under my breath.

 Her head snapped at me like a heat-seeking missile.

 “You’re lucky I’m holding Mai with both hands.” She said with piercing daggers in her eyes.

 “I am also curious! What is the talent that has been passed down the Ise line for generations?!” Kaede said, posing as a strong man.

 “Well… um…”

 I was reluctant to tell them. After all, I didn’t want them to think of me vicariously. Instead, I gave them a vague answer in hopes of that it would satisfy them enough.

 “My father is a mangaka, just like me. He even had his own long-running series that was later turned into an anime.”

 Their eyes widened in excitement. In the back of my mind, I thought to myself: “What part of that was vague?!”

 “Seriously?!” They both yelled out looking at each other.

 “What company did he work for?!” Suzuko asked with rapid fire.

 There was no turning back now.

 “BanBan Comics. Just like us…” I said, averting my gaze.

 Kaede immediately grabbed my shoulder and tightened his grip.

 “What was his name?! Come on Akari, tell us his name!!” he said.

 His childlike wonder became that of an interrogator.

 “I don’t want to say it…” I said looking up to him.

 “Come on! Tell us! Tell us!!” He said shaking me.

 I looked down and hoped he would just drop it. I had neglected Kaede’s strength, despite his strange personality. Each time he asked me to reveal my father’s real name, his grip tightened to the point where I thought that he might eventually crush my collar bone. I let out a small sputter of pain.

 “KAEDE STOP!!”

 Kaede turned around to see Suzuko gave him an angry look.

 “Let him go! He doesn’t want to talk about it!” Suzuko said in a vexed tone.

 I was thankful Suzuko put the situation to an end. Kaede was at a loss for words and looked disappointed in himself.

 “I’m sorry… I-I got a little carried away there.” Kaede said apologetically, releasing his grip from my shoulder.

 His hand shook as he retracted it. Even though my shoulder still hurt, I didn’t want any bad blood between all of us so I decided to look past the situation.

 “It’s all right,” I said trying to muster a forgiving smile at him.

 The rest of the walk home was devoid of conversation. Kaede was the first to split from us, following by Suzuko and Mai. As I entered the front door of my house, I was greeted with the same scenario as always. My father, sitting at his desk, was always silently working on his manga, not taking a second to look up at me. My younger brother sat drawing manga at his own table, trying to be like his older brother, whom he looked up to with undying admiration. I looked down at the “BanBan Comics” volume from the previous month sitting next to him. In bold words that engulfed the front cover…

 “Shibuya PI dominates the charts once again! Chapter 461 is here!”

 My father, known to the world as “Sho Yasuhiro,” had been publishing manga ever since he was in middle school. He had become a worldwide phenomenon and one of the cornerstones for BanBan Comics when they first started, as well as international manga. He became an idol for me and was the reason I pursued manga in the first place.

 Every day for as long as I could remember, I leaned over his shoulder to watch him draw. At one point, I was even proud to say that my father had made a living on what others would call a “joke career.” As the years went by, it astounded me that a 67-year-old man was still able to keep up with the demands of a chapter each week. However, what would happen if one day he would fall ill and die? The series would surely perish along with him. However, nothing is as black and white as that. We both understood well that he didn’t intend to end the series, even if he met **his** end first.

 I would be entrusted to continue Shibuya PI. I would be entrusted to continue what he had built up for so much of his life. I would be entrusted to do everything right, just as he did. I would be entrusted to guide my younger brother, who also aspires to become a famous mangaka. Most of all, I would be stripped of my identity as Akari Ise and entrusted with the persona of Sho Yasuhiro, for the rest of my life.

 I walked up to my room, ready to throw myself into bed and regain the sleep that the countless hours of non-stop hard work amounted to. Before drifting away, I quickly took one last glance at my phone. I unlocked it to find Roman had sent me a text not too long ago. He ended up sending all of us the same message at the same time, resulting in the text becoming a group chat.

 ‘Hey, guys! Just wanted know, are you guys free tonight? The new chapter came out very nicely and I wanted to take you all out to dinner to show my appreciation, my treat. It’s also a celebration for Akari joining us! If you can, we can meet up at around 7:30 at Rokkasen. How does that sound?’ – Roman **Seen**

 I smiled and thought to myself: “What a guy.” Below the original message, Mai and Suzuko had already replied.

 ‘Mai’s in!’ – Mai **Seen**

 ‘I might be too tired, but I’ll get back to you on that.’ – Suzuko **Seen**

 I typed my reply slowly, my fingers giving out.

 ‘How can I say no to free food?’ – Akari

 ‘I’ll see you there, and thanks for everything!’ – Akari

 It was now 10:34, which left me with roughly eight hours of sleep. I pressed send and slammed my phone onto the desk next to my bed, too tired to put it down gently. My body fell like a heavy rock onto my bed and my mind became stuffed with cotton.

 Mr. Yuichi stood looking above him at a towering glass building with the words “BanBan Comics” etched into a marble wall in front of the entrance. Being carried in his hand was a large yellow envelope labeled, “One Percent Chapter 23 [37 Pages].” Yuichi walked up to the automatic doors humming an old jazz tune. As the doors opened, he was met with a young girl who was playing with the doors detection system, happily skipping in and out through the entrance. Her face lit up when she read the yellow envelope Yuichi had been carrying.

 “Sir is that the new chapter for One Percent?!” She exclaimed with excitement whilst staring at the yellow envelope.

 “Yup! Latest chapter straight from Agito Karasu!” Yuichi said patting the envelope.

 The girl looked up at Yuichi with burning intent.

 “Can I read it?! Pretty pretty please!!” She said shaking her clasped hands together.

 Mr. Yuichi held up his hand and shook his head.

 “No can do!” He said smiling.

 “No fair… Why can’t I read it early?!” The girl said puffing up her cheeks in defeat, the cap on her head bobbing up and down with her whines.

 “Not even the other mangaka get early access to anyone else’s chapters. But, I think you can come with something even better than this, right?” Yuichi asked.

 He walked into the buildings rotating glass doors, leaving the young girl behind to stare into the lobby. Yuichi turned around to see the young girl waving and smiling as the door closed. As he turned back around, the girl looked on with a disappointed frown.

 “I don’t care about the other manga though…” She said under her breath, depressed.

 After some well-needed sleep and a series of trains, I finally arrived at the restaurant Roman told us about, Rokkasen. Although, due to my terrible directional skills, I got lost and ended arriving late. It was a barbecue restaurant here in Shinjuku that looked small from the outside. The interior was much bigger than the outside area led you to believe and the dining hall was packed. It didn’t take me a long time to find the table because upon entering the restaurant, all I had to do was follow the sounds of Mai and Suzuko’s arguing.

 “But Roman said it’s his treat, so Mai can eat all she can, right?!”

 “Haven’t you heard of modesty, Mai?”

 “Stop bullying Mai, Suzu…”

 As I turned the corner, Mai immediately met my gaze.

 “Hey, Akari, over here!” She yelled from across the dining hall, waving her arms.

 “Mai quiet down!” Suzuko yelled.

 Talk about an ironic response. As I approached the table, my jaw fell to the ground and into to the wine cellar. Our table was decorated with more food and drinks that it should have held. Even the barbecue grill was nearly covered up in the copious amounts of plates and dishes. As enticing as all food was, I was simultaneously writing a funeral speech in my head for Roman’s wallet.

 “How are you not bankrupt?!” I exclaimed.

 “This is just a small portion of what I have saved up.” He said as he took a swig of sake.

 If that had been true, I wondered why he didn’t have a bigger apartment or house for that matter. However, that train of thought quickly derailed as Kaede passed me one of the ramen bowls near Midori.

 “Our general has granted a banquet to us nonetheless, lieutenant! A full soldier is a strong soldier!” Kaede said as he held thumbs up with his other hand. Was that a sparkle in his eye?

 “Now that Akari is here, can you tell Suzu to stop bullying Mai?!” Mai pleaded.

 It didn’t take long for Suzuko to assert herself.

 “I’m not bullying her. I’m just trying to teach her that this food doesn’t come free or cheap!” Suzuko said snarling at me.

 “I mean, Mai isn’t wrong. Plus, she can’t eat that much, can she?” I said.

 “You would be surprised…” Suzuko said exhaling and shrugging her shoulders.

 “See? You’re bullying Mai again!” Mai said pointing to Suzuko as if she had found a culprit.

 Suzuko’s face showed defeat and Roman started laughing, followed by Kaede. Soon all of us were just enjoying ourselves. I really did enjoy moments like these. Mid-way through the night, Kaede handed me a shot of sake and gave me a confident smile.

 “Take it. It’s an apology for this morning.” He said.

 I backed up and held my hands up in defense and shook my head.

 “I-it’s okay! I’m only 17 anyway, not old enough to drink…” I said nervously laughing.

 Not to mention, that it wasn’t really his apology since Roman bought it. He closed his eyes and put the shot back on the table.

 “But, whatever happened this morning is water under the bridge, right?” I said accepting his apology.

 I knew he meant good. I believed him because he was genuinely a nice person, the total opposite of what his apparel made him look like. There was no bad blood and I didn’t want there to be any because it was actually fun having him around.

 “You’re a good soldier, Ise!” He said nudging his elbow into my arm.

 His face was a bright red. I hoped it was like that because he was drunk. Shortly after, our attention clamored to Roman and judging by his dopey grin, I suspected that he might have been drinking one too many.

 “Okay, everybody I want to make a toast to you all! You guys are honestly the best friends I could ever ask for. We should cherish these moments to the fullest! Thank you all!” He shouted.

 We all stood up and clashed our glasses together over the table, causing some drips of our drink to fall on our food, but we had been too full to eat more anyway. It felt weird because Roman and Kaede’s shot glasses didn’t match the rest of ours because we were still underage.

 “And another shot to Akari joining the family!” He said as he poured out another shot of Sake.

 “You could have just included that in the first shot!” I scolded.

 “Yeah, you’re just trying to find reasons to drink now!” Suzuko added, crossing her arms with a stern glare.

 Roman wrapped his arm around Suzuko.

 “Come on, Suzuko! Lighten up!” Roman said.

 Suzuko’s face turned a burning shade of red.

 “Hey get off! Your breath reeks of alcohol!” She yelled.

 “Suzu is blushing! Suzu is blushing!” Mai yelled grabbing Suzuko’s arm and laughing.

 “Akari.”

 I jumped in my seat to find Midori had snuck her way next to me.

 “M-Midori? How did you get past Suzuko and Mai?!” I asked.

 “I went under the table.” She said.

 Immediately, the image of her crawling under the table, past our legs, found itself into my mind. It was a bit creepy.

 “Can you come with me?” Midori said grabbing my hand.

 “For what?” I questioned.

 She just looked at me and I answered as if I hadn’t responded with my question.

 “Sure…” I said hesitantly.

 Everybody had been distracted, even Kaede, who was now laughing on the sidelines as the chaos ensued on the other side of the table. I guess it was okay to follow her. We ended up sitting outside of Rokkasen on a bench placed below the long front window.

 “So… why did you bring me out here again?” I asked.

 “I want to talk about your father.” She said looking into my eyes with untraceable arrows.

 I froze.

 “My… father? I asked, trying to play naivety.

 She looked down. I couldn’t tell what was going through her mind. The only way for one person to know what the other is thinking is to rely on their physical changes. Their eye would twitch; they would smile, or maybe even raise their eyebrow. But, Midori never did any of that. She was a one-way steel wall.

 “He is a mangaka too, correct?” She said assuming her eyes on me again and tilting her head slightly.

 My eyes widened.

 “How did you find out?!” I said surprised.

 I trusted Suzuko to keep my father being a mangaka private. There was no other way Midori could have known unless she was psychic. Suzuko may be a little insane, but she wouldn’t betray my trust, would she? Or, what if Kaede was the one to tell her?

 “Suzuko told me. I was curious because you were distracted tonight. She said I was the right person to speak to you because you would open up to me easily.” Midori said.

 “Suzuko, you snake! You’re using Midori to make me reveal his identity, aren’t you?!” I thought to myself.

 She must be in the restaurant laughing about how brilliant her plan was right now. I was tempted to get up and run back to catch her in the act, but I stopped.

 “She wanted me to tell her who it is after you told me, Akari. But, I want to be friends with you so if I keep this secret, will you be my friend?” She asked, tightening her hands together.

 I found myself smiling. Had she thought that we were not friends? I considered her my friend, but we never exchanged many words so how could it be considered friendship in her eyes? I felt bad for her.

 “Even if you end up telling Suzuko, I’ll still be your friend,” I said trying to assure her.

 “I will not tell her that your father is Sho Yasuhiro,” Midori said looking up.

 *How the hell did she know*?! I was surprised at her calm disposition!

 “H-how did you know?!” I asked, shocked at her nonchalant delivery.

 “You and Yasuhiro have similar techniques when you line weight. Your art styles are also very similar. Lastly, your response just now confirmed what only was a mere hypothesis moments ago.”

 I leaned back and took a deep breath.

 “Does it bother you that your father is famous, Akari?” She asked.

 “It doesn’t bother me as much as it scares me,” I admitted.

 “Scares you?” She said, opening her eyes a little wider.

 I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees.

 “When he moves on… I’ll have to continue Shibuya PI. All that pressure on his shoulders is suddenly going to be moved onto me. It’s scary to think what would happen if I can’t keep up with it all.” I said looking up.

 “You feel trapped.” She mumbled with her voice cracking.

 “Do you want to know why I like you, Akari? It’s because I can talk to you… and not feel trapped myself.”

 I swallowed, hoping to get the lump in my throat to go down. She opened her mouth to talk more but was immediately interrupted by Suzuko looking out from the restaurant entrance.

 “I was wondering where you two ran off to! We’re about to leave so we need your help, Akari.” She said.

 “Help?!” I asked with panic.

 Midori and I tailed her back into Rokkasen. I heard Midori and Suzuko talking behind me before I ran up ahead further into the dining hall.

 “Did you find out who his father was?” Suzuko whispered.

 There was a small pause.

 “No. He was very stubborn and avoided all my questions.” She said.

 I smiled, relieved that my secret was safe with her. When we arrived back at the table, we were welcomed with the sound of painful crying. Roman and Kaede had fallen “asleep”, but Mai had her head face down on the table with her right hand on a half-empty Sake glass.

 “Mai… d-did you drink the Sake?!” I yelled.

 “M-hmmm…” She groaned, muffled by the table.

 I held my head and sighed.

 “Her parents are gonna kill us if they found their 15-year-old daughter coming home tipsy after hanging out with us!!” I screamed, throwing my head back.

 Mai let out another guttural groan and started sobbing more.

 “You have no one to blame but yourself Mai. You knew you were underage but you did it anyways!” Suzuko continued reprimanding.

 Mai lifted her head up to reveal her face, now flush red due to the alcohol.

 “Roman and Kaede said it was okay for Mai! They said Mai was old enough!”

 “And you believed them?! They’re not even sober enough to know where they are right now!” I yelled.

 “Akari is being a meany to Mai! Akari is a bully just like Suzu!! Mai was curious about what it was like to drink!!” She whined, hiccupping through her defense.

 “And how did that turn out?!” I asked rhetorically.

 Mai’s head fell on its side, back onto the table as she let out another groan.

 “Mai regrets her decisionnnnn…” She cried before trailing off into another series of tears.

 “Hey, Suzuko?” I asked.

 Suzuko turned her body to me.

 “Hm?”

 “***Why didn’t you take away the glass from her?!***” I interrogated loudly.

 I saw her make her hand into a fist and immediately regretted raising my voice. She punched me square in the shoulder with a force that she shouldn’t have been able to muster.

 “I tried to take it away from her, but she kept on insisting on drinking it saying, ‘Suzu is a bully! Suzu is being mean!’ So, I let her have her way to teach her a lesson!” She argued holding her fist up to my face.

 “She’s a child! **You’re** supposed to be the **mature** one and stop her from making dumb mistakes!” I retorted, mimicking her holding up a fist.

 I hung my head and accepted our fate while Mai let out another guttural whimper.

 “We’re screwed…” I said.

 Suzuko walked toward an intoxicated Mai and moved the glass away from her.

 “Calm down, Akari! I’ll let Mai stay over by me tonight and just tell her parents it was a sleep-over.” Suzuko said with a firm tone.

 “Would that actually work?” I said looking up at her.

 She nodded her head. Our night ended with us having to lug Roman and Kaede into the back-seat of a cab. Midori wanted to work on the manga so she was the one who guided Roman from the cab up to the apartment. Kaede sobered up quickly and was able to get home without a hitch. Suzuko had to piggy-back Mai, for the second time today, only this time, back to her house. I headed straight home, contemplating what transpired tonight and how we didn’t get kicked out or banned from Rokkasen.

 Monday morning came sooner than I wanted it to and I headed to the apartment. I entered to find everybody talking amongst themselves. I thought nothing of it but when I settled down and got my equipment into place, I noticed something was missing.

 “Hey, guys? Where are Roman and Midori…?” I asked curiously.

 Kaede turned in my direction, fully equipped with an answer.

 “Roman went to take young Midori to the medical unit.” He explained.

 Medical unit? Mai stood and looked at me.

 “Roman said he had to take Midori for a doctor appointment,” Mai translated.

 I raised my brow.

 “But, why did Roman take her…?” I asked.

 “Didn’t you know? Midori is Roman’s little sister.” Suzuko said tilting her head back to look at me with a smile.

 “Roman is her older brother?!” I shouted.

 There was no way. That would explain why Midori never went home. She had been living here with Roman this entire time. But, they didn’t even resemble each other, let alone act similarly.

 “Are you okay, soldier?” Kaede asked walking up to me.

 “Yeah… it’s just a lot to take in.” I said nodding my head.

 “Could it be because you and Midori are in lov-?!” Mai asked before being stopped short by Suzuko lightly flicking her finger into her forehead.

 “Ow!” Mai exclaimed, covering her forehead and pouting.

 I shook my head trying to get rid of the thoughts now rushing into my consciousness and pressed on with something else. The thought of associating that A-hole with her made me feel uneasy.

 “So what are we supposed to do today? We can’t work on the next chapter because Roman didn’t start sketching out anything yet last time I checked.” I asked, taking a nearby seat.

 “That is true, but he did leave this on his desk,” Suzuko said outstretching a small sticky note.

 The note read:

 “Hey everybody, I had to take Midori for a check-up that I forgot was today. I didn’t have time to quickly sketch anything before leaving. Hangover, remember? In any case, I’m leaving Akari in charge of sketching the first ten pages of the new chapter today. I left the script for chapter 24 in the 2nd drawer down on the left of my desk. I’ll be back at around 4. Good luck you guys!

 -Roman

PS. Akari, I want those 10 pages done by the time I come back!

 My face went pale.

 “Akari is the new Roman for today!” Mai said cheering.

 My body was numbed into place.

 “You better get to it Akari. We literally can’t do any work unless you do your part.” Suzuko evilly laughed, walking past me and patting my shoulder.

 I finally was able to move my legs and went to look in the drawer Roman indicated. To my horror, there it was. Chapter 24’s script looked at me like a devil worshipping book. Was I supposed to become the mangaka of One Percent for the day? Isn’t there a rule or something against that?! But, Roman wouldn’t take that chance… right? I picked up the script and sat down at the main desk where all his equipment was. My hand shook as I picked up a mechanical pencil and new sheet of Defeater manga paper from the plastic packaging.

 “Th-this… this isn’t happening, r-right guys?” I questioned, looking up desperately at everyone sitting quietly at their desks, waiting for me.

 “Mai knows you can do it!” Mai whispered loudly.

 “You’ve got this soldier! You are the general!” Kaede fruitlessly encouraged.

 Suzuko looked at me, pointing a G-pen threateningly. What else would I expect from a her?

 With nobody here to save me, I took a deep breath and started sketching the first color page. As I finished the first characters hair, I looked up at the others to find the room empty.

 “Where did everybody go…?” I asked myself.

 “So you still work with stick figures, Akari?”

 I jumped to find Mai looking over my shoulder giggling. Kaede and Suzuko also found their way next to me.

 “I like the way you draw the faces. Such a defined chin and cheek bones. Fan of General Araki, huh?” Kaede said holding his own chin with a sparkle in his eyes.

 “Although… it looks a little off…” He said leaning closer to the paper.

 I hung my head in disappointment.

 “I know… I tried to at least match Roman’s art style, but it doesn’t adapt well with mine!” I admitted with frustration.

 Suzuko leaning closer to me.

 “Why are you trying to copy his art style? Just work on your own, idiot.”

 “But, I can’t! This is his manga. It would be jarring if the reader suddenly turned the page and said, ‘hey, that doesn’t look like the other pages!’” I mocked, looking up to her.

 “Very well, carry on drawing,” Suzuko said leaning back.

 “What are you all doing behind me anyways?” I asked, resuming the drawing.

 Mai jumped up to sit on the desk and looked down at me.

 “Mai wanted to see how you draw!” She said kicking her feet back and forth.

 “Have you forgotten? We want to become manga artists too, so it would only be natural to study another at work.” Suzuko said.

 “That is true, however, I want to become a general with a good story and writing skills, even if the pictures are sub-par! A general must display his unique prowess on the battlefield to move the hearts of his countrymen!” Kaede said shooting his fist up triumphantly.

 That’s right. Although we were together now, eventually, we would become rivals. It comforted me to know that even if One Percent ended, we would still be on the “battlefield” alongside each other. For that reason, I wanted them to succeed with me. Without hesitation, I picked up the pace and started drawing the next page, and the page after that.

 “Here you go, Mai!” I was finally able to say, handing her the first set of color pages.

 “Mai will not fail you! Mai is a master colorer.” She assured.

 The word was a colorist, but I didn’t have the heart to correct her.

 Next up was Suzuko. I had automatically started drawing the background until Suzuko stabbed a G-Pen into the table, too close to my male authority.

 “Are you trying to take my job?” She asked with a sadistic grin.

 “N-no…” I said trembling.

 I handed her the page so that she could finish it up.

 “Thank you, *Roman*!” She said winking at me as she walked off.

 For the sake of my manhood, I didn’t make the same mistake again. As she sauntered away, Mai came to me with the finished coloring page.

 “Is this good?” She asked holding up the paper to me.

 My face dropped when I saw the colors she used. For such a happy scene, the colors she used turned it dreary and cold with purples and dark blues.

 “Mai, it-it’s good… but, maybe you could add more bright colors?” I said trying to let her down gently.

 “You don’t like Mai’s coloring…?’ She said lowering the page to reveal her looking at me with tears welling in her eyes.

 I waved my hands back and forth.

 “No no no no no no no no! What I’m trying to say is that you could use some more bright colors. More “Mai” colors! Try some oversaturated technicolor.” I suggested.

 She seemed to understand that much since the tears vanished from her face, replaced with her usual happy demeanor.

 “Okay! Thank you, Akari!” She said skipping back to her desk.

 I kept working hard. It was now 2:36 and I had finished the 6th page. I leaned back to see everybody working hard. Suzuko and Mai had not been fighting the entire time except for one scuffle where Mai started singing something called the “bright colors” song, where she recited memorized color hexadecimal, which ultimately annoyed Suzuko. I was actually doing a decent job at managing everything but time was not on my side. The only person who looked bored was Kaede.

 “Kaede, are you okay?” I interrogated.

 “Yeah, but I’ve got nothing to do sir…” he said.

 “Nothing to do?”

 “Yeah, this soldier is on the sidelines because he needs you to continue.” He said.

 Of course. Kaede needed **me** to put in the speech bubbles before he could write the text in. Suddenly, I realized Midori was gone too, so we would have to manage the screen toning by ourselves. It was frightening to find that if even one of us were gone, let alone two of us, it became an intense uphill battle to finish our quota for the day.

 “Hey Kaede, can I ask you to take care of the inking today? I don’t have a lot of time to do it myself.” I requested.

 He looked up at me appalled.

 “But, sir, I can’t take your place!” He said.

 I put on a serious face.

 “Soldier, this mission relies on you! I believe you can do it!” I asked confidently.

 “Yes, sir! I will not disappoint you or endanger the mission!” He said with an unwavering look in his eyes.

 With Kaede now onboard, I estimated that our chances had increased, but only slightly. I needed to finish the last four pages in two hours. With the team now in working order, it was time to go into intense work mode. The graphite of the pencil hit the paper and time fast-forwarded.

 All momentum in the apartment stopped when the doorknob started rattling. We all looked up to find Roman and Midori standing in the doorway, looking back at us as surprised as we were.

 “Roman’s back!” Mai squealed as she ran over to him.

 “You all must have been working hard today!” He said scuffing up Mai’s hair and smiling.

 “Only because we had someone else to hold down the fort.” Suzuko hummed.

 “You’re gonna make me cry, Suzuko!” Roman joked.

 “Welcome back Lieutenant Kohaku!” Kaede greeted, lightly tapping his fist against his Roman’s.

 “Lieutenant for the day. Has a nice ring to it actually!” he responded.

 Midori looked at me and gave a singular wave in my direction. I gave them a quick smile.

 “So Akari? Did you finish the ten pages I told you to?” He asked, walking slowly toward my desk.

 “Well… you see… uh…”

 I stuttered trying to find an excuse. I had only made it through the first half of the eighth page when he came in. No matter how much I worked, I found the hours go by faster than I could draw. Roman picked up the pages I drew and looked through them.

 “Where’s the rest?” He asked cynically.

 I pointed to Mai, Suzuko, and Kaede.

 “They were working on them as hard as they could. As for me, I didn’t get past page nine.” I reluctantly explained.

 Roman turned around and crossed his arms.

 “I see.”

 “But, I tried really hard! **We** tried really hard to hit our goal!” I corrected myself.

 “Is that so?” Midori asked to the others.

 Mai ran up to the desk and sat on the edge.

 “That’s right! Akari even helped Mai with the coloring!” She said tilting her head to look at me.

 “As much as it pains me to say it, Akari, being the new guy, was able to keep us pretty organized and on task. I’m sure Kaede agrees with me.” She said rubbing the back of her neck.

 Kaede nodded his head toward Roman.

 “Being promoted from soldier to general, even if it was just for one day, has shown us the great potential Ise has as a leader!”

 Roman took a seat at an assistant desk.

 “Well… it seems like everything worked out how I wanted.” He said leaning forward.

 “It did?” I asked.

 Was all of those mini-reviews that Suzuko, Mai, and Kaede gave his true intentions? It didn’t make sense.

 “I expect nothing less from the son of Sho Yasuhiro.” He said looking at me.

 My mouth dried up. I tried to form a sentence but all that came out were more gasps for air. Now everybody knew. “I expect nothing less from the son of Sho Yasuhiro.” That sentence would haunt me for the rest of my manga career. No, it was not mine anymore. It was Sho Yasuhiro’s manga career. I turned my head to Midori. Like she always does, she anticipated my question before I could even voice it.

 “I told you I would not tell Suzuko. However, I told my brother.” She said.

 “Sho Yasuhiro’s son… huh.” Kaede said.

 “His art style definitely borders his fathers,” Suzuko said.

 I dropped to my knees. My eyes dilated. My body stung. Everything hurt. Mai ran toward me and dropped to my side.

 “Akari?! Are you okay?!” Mai yelled into my ear.

 I believe this was what a nervous breakdown. Is this what it felt like? Everything was fuzzy, even my sense touch that perceived Kaede and Roman carrying me to a nearby sofa. My body became light. I could feel the blood running through each and every artery and vein. The words I tried to convey came out in slurs and dismembered sounds.

 “Are you okay?” Midori asked.

 Midori’s face hung right over mine. She sat back down to the left of me. I sat up slowly trying to make sense of my surroundings and found everybody sitting around me in a circle.

 “Thank god you’re okay!” Suzuko said with a sad look on her face.

 She had been sitting to the right of me. I looked over to Mai crying.

 “Is Akari o-okay?” She asked, hiccupping.

 “Where am I? What happened to me?” I asked holding my head.

 “You’re in Roman’s apartment still. You blacked out and stayed that way for almost an hour now.” Kaede said softly, trying not overwhelm me with loud shouts.

 My eyes scanned the room, trying to find the clock. It now read 5:26. Almost an hour had passed in what felt like the blink of an eye.

 “I had a nervous breakdown… didn’t I?” I asked.

 Midori shook her head.

 “It wasn’t a nervous breakdown, trust me. I’ve had many in the past, but this was different.” Roman said trying to comfort me.

 “Then… what did happen?” I questioned.

 “You overworked yourself today. Your body was so weak and stressed, you passed out.” Suzuko said putting her arm on me.

 “I did not want that to happen. I just wanted to help.” Midori said sadly.

 “Even though Midori and I had to go to the hospital for her, she set this whole day up for you. She found out about your father and knew it bothered you, so she wanted help.” Roman said closing his eyes.

 “The goal was for you to not be able to finish the ten pages. Sho Yasuhiro could have finished those ten pages in five hours, no questions asked.”

 Roman was right. My father had never stopped drawing, so his ability to finish chapters must have been at an incredible rate. Midori started to explain herself.

 “However, you were still proud of what you did. I wanted to show you that you and Yasuhiro have different expectations, so there is no reason to feel like you will lose yourself. If I could prove that to you, I thought I could fix your problems. But… you passed out and I-I…”

 Her speech trailed off and she hung her head. She had tried so hard to make me forget my problems and move on. Even though it didn’t work out the way she planned it too, I felt at ease. I put my hand on her shoulder and she looked up.

 “Thank you, Midori. Although, you didn’t keep my secret… I guess it was for the better that you didn’t.” I said as she looked up.

 Suzuko crossed her legs.

 “If I’m totally honest, I wouldn’t want Sho Yasuhiro clones in here. That would just be weird.” She said smiling, trying to lighten the mood.

 “Suzu is right! Akari is Akari! Just like Mai is Mai!” Mai said wiping her tears.

 Suzuko snarled at her for calling her “Suzu” again.

 “So, do you think Midori’s training worked, Akari?” Kaede asked.

 I looked down.

 “I think it did work. Slaving away on those hellish pages made me realize that I have my own limits, unlike my fathers. Even passing out is attest to that limit.” I said.

 “Correct answer Akari!” Roman sighed.

 “Maybe you’ll break through those limits one day, Akari. But, if you do end up taking on Shibuya PI, it will be as Akari Ise and Akari Ise only. Would be fun to one day say ‘I’m competing with someone who used to be a crappy ink artist for me!’” He said laughing.

 I nodded my head.

 “And I would have fun saying that I’m competing with the smartass mangaka of One Percent.” I retorted.

 “Ouch! Smartass?!” He said dumbstruck.

 Suzuko and Mai started laughing at him.

 “I think it’s time for us to resign for the day.” Kaede interrupted.

 “Yeah, we don’t want anyone else to pass out like Akari. You all can go home for the day.” Roman announced.

 However, there was one more thing on my mind.

 “Before we go, aren’t people going to notice the change in art style for the next ten pages, Roman?” I asked grabbing my bag, still a bit impaired from passing out

 He pointed one finger up.

 “I got that covered. I actually had sketched the ten pages out ahead of time.” He explained.

 I gritted my teeth but decided to drop it. There was another lesson to be learned today: Roman is actually a dick.

 Finally arriving home that night, I decided to look at my father as he continued to draw Shibuya PI. This time I didn’t feel intimidated. As he drew, he didn’t look up at me, but he knew I was there. As I watched on, I found more and more ways my style had split from his. I could see the differences and it made me glad that I couldn’t draw as well as him. I could only draw as well as I could.

 “Akari! Akari!”

 I turned around to find my little brother, Ida, holding up a drawing of his own.

 “Do you think it looks good? I couldn’t draw like you and dad, but I tried really hard!” He said looking up at me.

 His eyes had determination in them, the same as mine. I patted him on the head lightly and gave him my honest word.

 “I think it came out great! I know, one day, you’ll become a great mangaka just like dad and me.” I said.

 Yeah. One day, you’ll show the world who you really are, in your own way.

**Chapter 2 Expectation END**