

Blind Spot  
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Chapter 2  
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"A blind girl in Tokyo."

Some Japanese translations first, that many anime fans might know already:

Ittekimasu: I'm off, I'm leaving.

Itterasshai: In response to Ittekimasu, like "Have a good trip/day"

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"All right, how many fingers?"

Today was my eye examination day, which I have twice a year. I was sitting there in front of the doctor, my right eye hidden by his hand, while the other was trying to count the fingers on his other hand. I couldn't really gauge the distance, but it wasn't that far. I could see it fine.

"Four?" I replied.

"Almost. It was five. I cheated a bit and had my thumb near the edge of your field of vision to check if you could really see it or not."

"Ah, okay."

I was a bit confused, to say the least. The doctor who usually performed my check-ups retired recently, and this one took on his patient base. He was younger; I'd say probably around his mid-thirties, judging by his voice. His methods were definitely a bit different than his predecessor's.

"But you did see the other four. That's a good thing," he concluded.

He turned around to pass me a reading tablet with several different sizes of text on it. I was used to all of these tests by now. I'd been taking them ever since my parents discovered I was almost blind, shortly following my birth. I started to read a few words of each different size, to show him how small a size I could read.

"Okay, I've seen enough," he said to me, taking the tablet back. I was a bit surprised. That always took so long with the older doctor.

"Considering what your file says and what I just saw, I would recommend a few things. First, it's good that you finally bought a cane, but you'll probably need some other accessories."

Oh, great...

"What? I'm fine getting around outside--" I wanted to say more, but he interrupted me.

"Ah, I don't think so. You've been much too sensitive to the light in the room, and you misread a few letters on the chart on the screen."

I grumbled to myself.

"Doctor, are you sure?" my mother asked. She was sitting in front of his desk in the other corner of the room. She always accompanied me on these visits. "Takamura-sensei never seemed to think it was a serious problem."

"Perhaps I am simply approaching this from a different treatment methodology." He looked up at my mother, and flashed a smile at her, I think.

I stood up and went back to his desk, to sit down next to my mother.

"Suzumiya-san," he said, looking at me. "I think that you'll need to wear sunglasses for outside, and you should consider using a monocular to see traffic lights and help focus on other things in the middle distance."

"Wait, wait. Sunglasses? I'll look funny wearing these all day," I tried to argue.

"Hmmm," my mother interjected. "Well, Ayako, you do blink a lot, especially when it's bright outside."

Thank you, mother, I really needed that kind of support.

"What bugs me is that I'll be carrying all that stuff around!"

"Oh, no worries. You can put them around your neck while you don't use them," the doctor told me, in a sort of reassuring voice. He'd introduced himself when we all sat down, but his name had already slipped my mind.

I slumped back in the chair.

"Okay, okay. But that'll cost a lot, won't it?" I looked in mother's direction now, obviously for help.

"Well..." she said, seemingly thinking out loud. "I guess. We'll see about that, Ayako-chan. If it's for you, your father and I can make some small sacrifices, you know." She smiled. The finishing blow. As grateful as I am to them, ever since I learned about the value of money, making them spend so much on me like this kind of bugged me.

"I'll give you the address of a good optician. He'll certainly have what you're looking for. He's always been close to his customers, so you won't regret it." the doctor said, while writing everything on a piece of paper before giving it to my mother.

"Thanks," she replied softly as she took it.

"Now, please excuse me a second. I just need to append my notes for today's visit."

He turned on his chair to face his computer, took something in his hand, and began to speak. It took me a moment to realize that he was recording this onto his computer, to add it to my file, I guess.

"Wednesday, December 13th, 2006. I examined the patient Suzumiya Ayako, born May 23rd, 1990. Right eye below 1/10th, finger count reduced to 50 centimeters. Left eye at 1/20th with Parinaud's syndrome 14 at 35 centimeters, but down to 3 when at a reading distance of 5 centimeters..."

That was the first time I'd heard my condition laid out like that. Believe it or not, I hadn't even really known the medical terms until now. Since I was diagnosed as a baby, Takamura-sensei had never bothered to explain it to me, and he'd never made a summary at the end like this. At least, not in front of me. I'd suspected all along that my parents knew it was more than just poor eyesight, but they'd never told me. Not that I understood half of what he was saying, anyway.

"...visual field is attached to the file. End recording."

He then hit a button, and put down what looked like a digital voice recorder. I couldn't see it well, but in this case, it wasn't exactly hard to guess.

"Well, we'll see each other in about a year, then?"

"A year?" my mother asked, sounding surprised. "It's usually every six months."

"Yes, but, considering the stability of your daughter's eyesight, I don't think it's necessary for us to see each other that often," he explained.

"Oh, I see. If you say so, sensei, then..."

Both of us bowed in thanks, and took our leave from his office. Then we sat in the waiting room for a couple minutes before the receptionist called us to her desk and gave us the bill.

\* \* \*

Once outside, I was wondering if we were going home or if we would be going to that optician first.

"Mother?" I asked.

"Yes?"

"Are we going to see that optician today?"

"No, Ayako-chan, we'll head home now. It's late enough as it is."

I looked at my watch. Indeed, it was late already, and our house was not exactly nearby. I took my cane out of my school bag and unfolded it. Mother then took my right arm in hers while we walked towards the train station.

"Ayako-chan, you don't have to use that while you're with me, you know."

"That's okay. I'm getting used to it," I replied, maybe sounding a little tired.

Once at the train station, I waited for mother to check where we had to go.

"Can you see the train plan up there clearly?" she asked, pointing up at the map displayed right above the ticket vending machines. These are used to check how many yen you need to pay to get to your destination.

"Uh, no, it's too far, Mother."

"All right," she said, and gave me a few coins out of her handbag.

"Here, 130 yen. We'll be changing lines at Gotanda."

"Okay."

I took the coins in my hand, and went to one of the vending machines to buy my ticket. Luckily for me, this one had big, legible fonts on its touchscreen. I took my change and the ticket and turned around. Mother was there with her own ticket in hand, waiting.

"All right, here we go."

I was pretty used to the different stations by now. Once you got into a train car, a voice said very clearly where the train was going, but it wasn't so easy making sure I was on the right train in the first place. Needless to say, I could get lost easily in there. I hope it won't happen, as I can predict

everyone's reactions. Karen or my parents would faint. Shizuka, on the other hand, would probably just tease me relentlessly about it. We got into the crowded train that led us to the Gotanda station before we could get to Nakanobu, the district in which we lived.

\* \* \*

"Really? They're coming for Christmas? Yay!"

My cry of joy could be heard throughout the whole house. I was pretty happy about the idea of having my cousins, uncle and aunt over for Christmas Eve. We were sitting around the kitchen table and eating when father made the announcement. I see them once in a while, and they're the only family we have here in Tokyo. It's a long story, but my other relatives are scattered all over the country, which makes organizing family gatherings difficult.

"It's been a while since you saw Aoi-chan, right?" father asked me. He sounded quite happy himself. He and uncle got along well with each other, being brothers and all.

Aoi was my cousin. She was a mere five months older than me. When we were little, Shizuka, Aoi and I often played together. However, Aoi's parents had to move to another part of the city, so they could get closer to my uncle's new job in a bank in the area.

"Do you want to do some shopping tomorrow for a Christmas present for Aoi, Ayako-chan?" mother asked. I hadn't really thought about a Christmas present for my cousin, but the idea sounded nice. We haven't had a Christmas party for a while, after all.

"What? Can't I go with Shizuka instead?"

"Dear, I think Ayako-chan just wants to go with her friend," my father suggested. Thankfully, he can be sympathetic at times.

"Oh, I see."

My mother seemed to understand. Looks like she didn't realize I was big enough now to go get my own stuff with my friends. We were interrupted by the front door opening and closing.

"I'm home!" a slightly tired voice boomed from the entrance of the house.

It was Miyuki, coming back late from work. Or most probably from a little visit to the bar with her colleagues. Oh no, I'm not making things up at all. Asking her just confirms it.

"I'm not very hungry, so don't mind me," she said as she passed by us.

"Oh, okay." Mother was already about to stand up from her chair and fix something for Miyuki. At her words, she sat back down.

"I'm taking a bath," she announced before stepping upstairs.

"HEY! I was planning on taking one, too!" I protested. I was so looking forward to it today...!

"Well, you'll take one after me," she replied and went upstairs quickly, leaving me fuming.

"Now, now, Ayako-chan..." my father tried to calm me down now.

It's true that I could take a bath after her, but then again, I hate it when my plans are ruined, and even more by the whims of my sister. I mean, who doesn't like hot, steaming baths? Certainly not me! It's a great time for relaxation, and it's one of the only times when I can think to myself and...stuff. What can I say? I have no excuse. I'm a healthy girl after all!

\* \* \*

The alarm rings. Time to wake up. Compared to my sister and mother, I'm pretty easy to wake up. They say I'm a light sleeper, just like my father. To wake up fully, though, nothing beats giving yourself a good splash of cold water on your face! After I came back from the bathroom, I grabbed my uniform and put it on, adjusting it a little in front of the mirror in my room.

I didn't consider myself bad-looking. My hair was long and dark, like most Japanese girls, and went down to my back. I rarely wore it any other way actually, as I just felt like it was a hassle. Besides, taking care of your own appearance is pretty difficult when you don't see well.

That's why I had Shizuka and Karen! Shizuka just loved shopping with me and finding me cool clothes to wear. She sometimes invited me to her house to change my hairstyle for the day or just take care of me. It was like practice for her, and I didn't mind it at all, so... I guess she really enjoyed her passion, and that was something I really admire. Karen always gave her fullest when it came to track and field at school as well. I didn't really know if she wanted to start a career in sports or not, though. So far, she hadn't expressed anything towards that end.

Once I felt I looked okay in the uniform, I went to my wardrobe to choose a pair of stockings. The weather isn't exactly warm and sunny in December, you see. I made sure to triple-check that they were the exact same color, though. Not seeing well is really troublesome when it comes to looks, believe me. And I won't talk about colors. By the time I was done, I was more than ready for breakfast.

"Morning, father!" I said cheerfully and gave him a hug from behind as he was finishing preparing breakfast for the three of us.

Yes, three. Miyuki was there and, as she always did in the morning, looking like she was still asleep.

"Good morning, Ayako-chan," he replied with a smile, bringing the rice and eggs to the table.

"'Mornin', 'yako..." Miyuki greeted me lazily.

I grinned. Time to strike for once.

"GOOD MOR-NING, MI-YU-KI-NEE!" I said loudly, next to her, while giving her a good slap on the back to see if she would crash on the table. Needless to say, she glared at me.

"HEY!"

"Ayako! Stop tormenting your sister!" Father raised his voice, but that was to be expected. Still, the sheer pleasure of taking advantage of my sister's weakness on mornings was absolutely priceless.

"That's just sweet revenge for all those years of teasing."

I pouted cutely. I knew I was being wrong by hitting first, but then again, I couldn't help it; it was just so tempting. My father let out a sigh,

and we ate breakfast as usual. Mother wasn't around, though. She wasn't a morning person, and father was almost always the one cooking breakfast for us. Once I finished eating, I went to the bathroom to brush my teeth.

"Where's my toothbrush?" I called out.

"Probably where you left it last time?" Miyuki replied, still a bit sleepily, it seems. I grumbled to myself.

I took a closer look around the bathroom. I have that bad habit of not putting things back where I originally got them.

"Ah, there it is."

I really should buy a new one. How am I supposed to see it clearly when it's almost the same colour as the sink it's on?! I quickly brushed my teeth and rushed downstairs to put on my shoes. My school bag was already waiting there. I was ready to go!

"Ittekimasu!" I announced my departure.

"Itterasshai!" my father replied from the kitchen.

\* \* \*

I was used to waving my white cane around by now, and, even if it felt quite awkward at first, it soon gave me a sense of security I didn't expect. Shizuka was waiting for me at the crossroads we usually met at when going to school together. Since her school was not the same as mine anymore, however, she parted from me when Karen joined me.

"So, what classes do you have today?" she asked me while we walked together.

"Ah, let's see...there's Japanese, English, history, and physical education in the afternoon."

"Oh. Is Karen still the best around when it comes to sports?"

"Don't ask. She's been asked to join a lot of sports clubs, but she decided to stay on the track and field one for a bit. I don't think she's really serious about it, though. She only practices to keep herself in good shape, not to break any records."

"Looks like she still has potential. Did you know that she started running only shortly after she transferred to our school, years ago?"

I was a bit surprised. I always thought Karen was born with running legs.

"Really? I'll ask her about it, I guess,"

Shizuka nodded.

"Do you mind if we go to Jinbocho after school?" I asked. "I'd like to pick up a few manga and books."

I always felt guilty about asking Shizuka and Karen to go shopping with me. I felt like I was dragging them around everywhere, and that they couldn't do whatever they'd wanted to do if I wasn't there.

"Hmmm. I'd like to, but I promised a guy at school that I would go on a date with him after classes ended."

"Heeh? Really?! You didn't tell me about this yesterday!" I exclaimed, all surprised. Shizuka, going on a date? That always got me excited.

"Weeeell...I'm just being cautious. I accepted his invitation out of politeness, but, so far, I don't really like him quite enough to be serious about him. Maybe he'll change my opinion by the end of the day," she said to me with a grin.

"Aaah. I see. I wish I was that popular with guys," I shrugged. As I said before, I hadn't really been approached by boys before. I guess it had something to do with my handicap, but wouldn't thinking that mean that I was losing faith in men? Couldn't they see beyond my problem? I considered myself a funny girl to be with, and I didn't have any real reason to be jealous of other girls. Oh, sure, there was Karen, but I couldn't compete with her; she simply had a perfect body, period. No, I'm not jealous!

"Well, you'd certainly have a better chance if you looked at people's faces when you talked with them. Believe me, it's part of the seduction process to look into the other person's eyes."

"You know I can't do that."

She nodded at this, and smiled kindly at me.

"I know, Ayako-chan, I know."

We kept on walking until we met with Karen, who was waiting for us at our usual rendezvous point.

"Ah, Karen, will you have time for Ayako later today? She wants to get some...manga and books, right?" Shizuka asked, visibly more concerned about me than I was myself.

"Huh? Well, sure. I was about to search for a part-time job after school, but I guess I can do that tomorrow."

"Are you sure about this?" I asked. Honestly, I was really looking forward going to the bookstore after classes.

"Yeah. Don't worry, Ayako!" she said, obviously trying to not make me feel guilty.

I don't like asking people for help, but when I do and they accept, I make sure to repay them to the best of my abilities. They give, I give back.

\* \* \*

"And you can use your computer during exams, too? You can cheat with that, right?"

Ah, how many times did I hear this question? Of course I ca--could, I mean, if I wanted. Right, if I wanted. Of course, it would be much harder when the text on my screen will be of a size and type easily visible to everyone around me, and it's quite easy for a teacher to approach me without me noticing. It's interesting that some people expected me to be the mistress of exam shenanigans, though.

It was recess time, just between English and History. I was talking with the guy in front of me in class, Toga-kun--at least, I think that was his name. He was wearing glasses, and had this geeky kind of look to him, even if he didn't seem to act like it. I mean, he doesn't have all those other attributes like shyness and awkwardness; in fact, he was the one who started talking to me. There's no way those kind of guys would talk normally to girls, right?

"I don't cheat, if that's what you're asking. I don't see why I should. Plus, it'd be quite obvious if I cheated. Do I have high grades? No."

I admit I sounded a bit defensive, but, then again, who would like being accused of cheating?

"Hey, calm down, Suzumiya. I was just wondering, that's all. I come from Kyoto, so I never heard about you before. I mean, it's quite uncommon..."

"Yeah, I know," I interrupted him. "But I've really had a pretty normal scholarship so far, and I've been fine with it."

"Yeah, that's great," he said. He wanted to continue, but we suddenly heard the voice of Kimiko Ryukawa, our class representative this year.

"Stand! Bow! Sit!" she said with her gentle yet commanding voice. From what I saw of her before, mainly at lunch, she had wavy red hair, and was always wearing thin round glasses. I had to admit that she was pretty cute, and was quite smart. I'd heard she had a boyfriend, but honestly, it wasn't really like me to delve into other peoples' love stories. In other words, I didn't care.

\* \* \*

People from other classes were starting to get used to having me around. They were either making room for me, or helping me out, just like when I was in middle school. What I didn't expect, however, was to have a guy sit next to me during lunch.

"May I sit here?"

I looked up to notice a guy apparently talking to me. He actually didn't look bad, from what I could see. He seemed muscular and strong. His personality, however, was yet to be judged. Before I could even respond, he placed his tray next to mine on the table. Karen was sitting across from me. She frowned a bit at this sudden intrusion.

"Hey, I don't remember anyone saying you could sit down with us," Karen said immediately after swallowing her noodles. Did I sense a bitter tone?

"Suzumiya, right? I'm Ogata Shou from class 1-A, right next to yours," he said to me, with quite a charming voice.

"Ah, hmm, well, nice to meet you, Ogata-kun."

Karen pulled on my uniform's sleeve.

"Ayako, don't stay near him," she warned me, loud enough for him to hear as well.

"Heeh? But he's just sitting here with us and eating!" I replied, while looking at him a bit longer. Now that he was seated, it was easier for me to notice his short, auburn hair. He had a pretty warm smile and a serious, focused look on his face.

"Sakazaki, you don't have to be so cold to me like that."

I was still watching him, curious about why he had decided to sit right next to me, and why Karen was so suspicious of him.

"Do you know him, Karen?" I eventually asked.

Before Karen could respond, Ogata spoke first.

"Well, I asked Sakazaki on a date once and she accepted--"

"Out of pity," she immediately corrected.

"Actually we went out--"

"For only one day," she interrupted again.

"But it turned out we weren't exactly made for each other."

"That, I have to agree with."

I was feeling a little like I didn't belong in this discussion and just kept eating my lunch silently while listening to the two of them quarrel. It was funny, though, that Karen had never mentioned this to me or Shizuka. When did this happen? Why didn't she tell us? Maybe she was too embarrassed? I'll have to ask her later. I knew that Karen was popular with guys, but to actually go out with one...

"Anyways, would you like to go out with me on Saturday, Suzumiya?"

When I heard chopsticks fall on the table, I first thought that they were mine, but it seems that I wasn't the only one who was shocked by this.

"I WON'T ALLOW THIS!"

Karen's words really startled me, and a lot of people were probably looking at us now. It didn't take long for everyone else to return to their trays, though, and I soon heard everyone start chattering to each other again.

"Hey, calm down, Sakazaki. Why are you so upset?" Ogata asked after eating another bite of his meat. I kept eating my own meat, looking down at my plate without saying a word.

"I simply won't let Ayako go out with a...a lady killer like you!"

Ah, so that's how it was. I smiled a little, but let the two keep going at it for now.

"Are you her mother or something, Sakazaki? I'm asking Suzumiya here."

"Ayako, say something!"

Ah, the dreadful moment where I had to finally talk about this. At least I was expecting it, so it didn't take long to answer.

"I'll think about it."

This instantly shut Karen up, and Ogata seemed a bit taken aback himself. No reaction in the first five seconds? Goal reached.

I wasn't really thinking about it, actually. I was sort of putting the issue aside to think about later. I only wanted to enjoy my lunch right now. I wasn't thinking about Ogata's looks, or how it could become my very first date. Ah, a date...

"Ayako, you won't cut that with your knife that way," Karen noted

"Oops. I didn't see that," I replied softly, as I finally noticed that I was indeed trying to cut my meat with the cutting edge pointing upwards. I wasn't distracted by the thought of a date! Not at all! I concentrated on my food for now, not wanting to look at either of them, probably in fear of looking

like I was siding with one of them.

"You're not used to a knife and a fork, Suzumiya? I can show you how to use them, if you'd like."

I blushed at that. I hoped no one noticed.

"Ha ha ha! No, no, I was just distracted," I let out as an excuse.

"Thinking about me, huh?" I heard Ogata say on my left.

I smiled a bit, both in embarrassment and because I thought such a remark was predictable, yet funny.

"I'll have all the time to think about you when I'm relaxing at home," I replied with a grin.

"A-Ayako!" I could hear the shock in Karen's voice, while I looked at Ogata. I had deliberately chosen those words to make it sound like I was an 'easy' kind of girl. The purpose was to surprise Karen, because I loved to tease her just like Shizuka liked to tease me. I have to admit that I also wanted to see how Ogata would react as well. The two of them went silent, and I was able to finish my lunch without any further disturbance. Really, is it too much to ask to be able to eat in peace?

\* \* \*

The afternoon, as I said earlier, was for physical education. It was definitely not my cup of tea. I couldn't do sports involving balls, regardless of their size, or anything that had objects moving quickly around. Combative sports were also out of the question: My doctors had always been concerned that a misplaced blow to my head would strip me of my vision completely.

"Ayako, think about it. You can't go out with a guy like that."

Karen was still trying to talk me out of going out with Ogata while we were in the locker room, changing into our P.E. outfits. Like in most schools, they were red bloomers and a white T-shirt. Some girls were quite against that kind of outfit, and petitioned for the bloomers to be replaced by shorts. The motion was unanimously rejected. Don't ask me why; I found school politics far from interesting in any way.

"Well, I realize he's just trying to seduce me and he isn't really serious about it. But how is this wrong, exactly? I mean, we're both certainly old enough to date, aren't we?"

My reasoning actually made Karen think twice about what she was going to say.

"You're right, but...I know him. He'll just try to lure you somewhere, or take advantage of you when you least expect it!"

"I think I'm big enough to defend myself. Besides, I'm sure we'd have heard about it by now if he really was that dangerous."

We finished changing and started to head outside with the other girls in our class while continuing our conversation.

"Don't underestimate him. He's an enemy to women."

"Oh, really?"

"Really," she nodded.

"How about I just give him a chance for only one day, like you did?" I suggested, also wanting to know more about how they knew each other. "Or," I said in an insinuating voice, "is he just too much for even that short a time?"

That actually made Karen blush, as I expected.

"It was about a year ago, before we graduated from middle school. He asked me out, I was innocent, and I accepted. We went out. It wasn't too bad, if you don't take into account that I happened to get a look into his cell phone's address book. It was filled with girls' names, and, of course, they were calling him every day!"

I was stunned.

"Karen, that's invasion of privacy!"

"So what? He was obviously seeing a lot of girls at once, or at least keeping in touch with them. If I want a boyfriend, I want him dedicated to me!"

So Karen is the jealous type. Interesting. Of course, I had to tease her again

"So I guess it's driving you nuts that he wants to go out with me now, right?"

It made her blush again, just like I expected. Teehee.

"A-Ayako, it isn't like that at all!"

"Riiiiight..."

Karen then gave me a soft poke with her elbow. The teacher was approaching the class gathered on the field. He got started by shouting out students' names, to check attendance.

"Alright, we're starting with fifteen minutes of endurance running. I want you all running NOW! Suzumiya, you'll be running with...hmmm..."

He looked down at his list. Running was about the only thing I could do in sports, and all that the gym teachers ever expected from me. That's the main reason that I didn't enjoy it.

"...Asugawa!"

A girl replied to his call.

"Yes?"

"You'll be partnered with Suzumiya for the duration of the run."

"All right, sensei," the girl replied, and then she approached me. Her hair was slightly dyed, and fell down to her lower back; a feature I could easily identify. I couldn't tell exactly what the color was, though.

"Well, let's go," she said and motioned to me to follow, and we were soon both running at about the same pace as the rest of the class.

In every P.E. class I'd taken, the teacher would always designate one of my classmates to stay at my side and make sure that I wasn't drifting off the track, or on a collision course with any obstacles. Whoever was assigned to me, they were usually very nice, and I certainly enjoyed the personal attention, but I also felt more than a bit awkward, like I was some sort of burden that was

passed between the students. It was difficult to talk during these runs, so I usually just kept quiet and made sure that I was going in the right direction. I already had trouble seeing well outside, but resolving what was in front of me while running was even more difficult.

Oh, well. It was just killing time--wasting it, really--between running and doing physical exercises while everyone else played sports. I hoped that, one day, the teacher would understand how pointless it was for me to be in these classes and let me opt out. Alas, neither the world nor my teachers were much inclined to pay attention to my rants.

\* \* \*

After the school day ended, Karen excused herself to the members of her club, saying that she had to accompany me to the city today. The people at the track and field club were pretty nice, and knew me a little, since I hung out with Karen a lot when she had her club activities. I guess I was considered a sort of member there, even if I didn't participate in anything, and just watched Karen run and exercise from time to time.

My target today was Jinbocho, the book district. The train trip was usually uneventful, but today was noticeably different. It was funny how people let me sit down more often now that I had my white cane with me. I mean, it wasn't like people suddenly became all nice to me, but I realized that some of them actually cared.

Once we left the station, we walked towards one of the various bookstores that sold manga.

"Let's see..."

I went through the different shelves, searching for the few specific series I follow, going by familiar shades and color patterns on the spines more than their titles.

"Tell me if you can't find anything you're looking for, okay?" Karen asked, while I bent down a bit to check out a manga cover I never saw before. Probably a new series. Or possibly a redesign for a series I knew. I really hate it when they do that.

"Sure, sure," I replied idly while examining the cover closely. "Let me know if you see any new volumes of the Zero's Familiar novel series. It's about time for one."

"Okay, I'll look for it."

I decided to try this new series, which was called Bloody Bride. Contrary to what the name implied, it didn't look horrific at all, but like a romantic comedy story. The cover featured a handsome-looking young vampire holding a faceless bride in his arms. The font used for the title on the cover made it seem like it would be lighter than you'd expect from a «Bloody» title.

"Here, Ayako."

Before I could realize it, Karen had already returned with the book I asked her to fetch.

"Looks like I was right about the new volume. I'll take it," I replied. "Thanks, Karen."

"Hey, no worries," she said, with her usual smile.

Together, we searched for another novel I wanted, and went to the counter to pay. I had just the right amount of money for the three books and the subway fare home, so it was good that I stopped with those. Once outside, we set out for the station, to get back home. As usual, Karen was gently holding my arm as we walked.

"Hmm...you know, Karen, you don't have to hold onto my arm anymore with my cane here," I said with a smile, not wanting to sound rude at all.

"Does it make you feel uncomfortable?" she asked.

"Well, no...not really, I was just saying that for your benefit."

She smiled at that.

"Don't worry about me, Ayako. I don't mind at all. Plus, I worry that, if I wasn't holding onto you, you might lose me in the crowd. We're in the city now, not Nakanobu."

It's true that Tokyo is one crowded city, like most capital cities, I guess. Even though it's the city I was born in and lived in most of my life, I'm still overwhelmed sometimes by the sheer scale of size and press of people. Being submerged in that is even less enjoyable when you can't see well enough to easily pull yourself out.

"All right, if that's okay with you."

Some might feel uneasy about getting so much of that sort of attention from a friend, but honestly, I was pleased with it. As I said before, one of the advantages of having a handicap is that people tend to be more careful and nicer to you. We soon arrived at the station, and I heard Karen's cellphone ring from her skirt pocket.

"Ah, wait."

She let go of my arm and took her phone out.

"It's Shizuka."

She then took the call. I watched her the whole time, patiently.

"Shizuka? Hmmhmm...yes, she's right here with me. Oh, I see. Hey, weren't you supposed to be on a date? Ah. Ha ha, okay, okay...well, it's pretty late already."

They chatted for a few more seconds, and Karen then said goodbye and hung up.

"Your cellphone is unreachable or off, Ayako."

"Huh?"

I took it out my skirt pocket and looked closely at it.

"Ah, it needs a recharge."

"I see. Well, her date wasn't that good. She sneaked out on the guy and wanted to see if we were up for anything."

"Ah, okay, so you told her we were heading home anyway."

"Right. It's late already, and we have a bit of homework, don't we?"

I grimaced a bit.

"Don't remind me about the math test tomorrow, please."

This actually made her let out a giggle. There were a lot of people in the station, and it was difficult to get to the ticket vending machines.

"Stay close to me, Ayako," Karen said to me, as we got in line.

When our turns came, we both went to a different vending machine to save some time. I looked through my purse and took out the last few yen I had left for today. I placed my finger on Y190 on the screen, and got my ticket. Now, time to get back to Karen, who had probably gotten her own ticket by now.

Karen's silhouette was easy to spot. Her height and habitual hair ribbons made her distinctive. The crowd was dense, but I managed to follow her and get on the train with her. I guess she must have been aware I was following her and was trying to clear a path among the crowd.

"Excuse me, excuse me..." I repeated softly as I tried to make my way to her inside the train, through the crowd.

I approached Karen, and looked her up and down. Twice. This Karen was wearing jeans and a red sweater under a heavy coat...that wasn't my Karen at all! I then heard the train starting up and announcing its destination.

"Thank you for boarding this train. This train is on the Toei Shinjuku line, and will stop at Akebonobashi, Shinjuku Sanchohome and Shinjuku. Next stop is Akebonobashi."

Ayako, don't panic, please. Okay, let's stay calm. I will get off at the next station, and I'll call Karen. Wait...my cell's dead. Ah, mou!

I looked around myself and suddenly found myself quite lost. I'm not exactly used to being alone in the middle of so many people. Instinctively, I held onto my white cane tightly, trying to figure out a plan of action. What really bothered me was that Karen was probably freaking out right now at the idea of me being lost in the station or in another train. Let's see, if I were her, what would I do? Ah, I'm panicking! Stay calm, Ayako.

First, I need to get off this train at Akebonobashi, then I'll go buy another ticket to go back home...wait! I probably don't have enough money to buy another ticket! No, this shouldn't be a problem if I get a ticket exchange. But then, how do I get back?

Stay calm, Ayako...

\* \* \*

I decided to get off at the next station, which was much less crowded than Jinbocho earlier. I validated my ticket at the exit, and went to the counter where an employee was present.

"Excuse me. Could I get my change on this ticket?"

Fortunately, when you buy a ticket and don't use it to its fullest, you can get a refund for the difference. I didn't know how to use the machine for that, so I had to ask an employee.

So far, so good. My money's here, now I had to figure out a way to go back home. There's no point in going back to Jinbocho; Karen probably wasn't there anymore...or was she? I was in a station I didn't know at all, and there were a lot of exits. I tried to find my way to the ticket vending machines.

But, from there, how could I read that plan up there? That's impossible! Ah, Karen must be searching for me right now. I sighed and decided it would be better to ask someone. I noticed a woman nearby.

"Excuse me." I announced my presence first. "I don't see very well." I then showed my cane, as if it was really proof of anything. "I'd like to get to Nakanobu..." I said shyly

The woman looked at me a little, then at the plan. I blushed a bit. I mean, I'm not used to asking people for directions. Sometimes I feel like I'm a bother to everyone.

"Well, if you go back to Jinbocho, you'll be able to take the Toei Mita Line to Mita. Nakanobu is on the Asakusa line, isn't it?"

I nodded and realized how stupid I was being. Of course, all I had to do was go back to Jinbocho, after all. But to go there by myself? No one would possibly accompany me to that point. The problem I often face is not asking for directions, but being able to follow them! As if that wasn't bad enough, I absolutely hate asking people for help. I have my pride, you know.

\* \* \*

I had asked the lady, a complete stranger, to accompany me to the entrance of the line. From there, I waited for the train to arrive so I could board it. I was so unsure of myself at this point. How could I be sure the woman wasn't lying to me? Was I really going to get on the right train? I took a deep breath and tried to wait patiently. Karen was surely dead worried now, and had probably called my mother and Shizuka in panic already. I was going to miss my favorite drama on TV, too. However, my train of thought got interrupted by a hand on my shoulder. I jumped a bit and turned around. A guy was there, and his uniform matched my school's.

"Hey, Suzumiya, what are you doing here? Isn't Guardian Angel Sakazaki with you?" he joked.

It was Ogata. If I were the heroine of a romantic comedy drama, this would have been anything but a coincidence.

"O-Ogata, what are you doing here?" I asked, frankly surprised. My mouth and mind was working at about the same speed.

"I'm finished with my part-time job for the day, so I was heading home. What about you, Suzumiya?"

"Ah hmm, well, that's a bit..." My hands tightened around the handle of my schoolbag and my cane.

"Well?"

I took a deep breath. I was embarrassed, but relaxed that I found someone I at least knew a little.

"I got separated from Karen after following someone else and I'm about to head home now." I admitted.

Now he must have thought I was stupid beyond hope of recovery.

"By yourself?"

"By myself, yes."

"Isn't that a bit dangerous? I mean, you don't see well, do you?"

I frowned; there was the same song again.

"I appreciate your concern, but I can see a little."

"Oh? Still, you got lost and separated from your friend, didn't you?"

That was mean! Pointing out the obvious like that!

"So, where are you going exactly?" he asked me. The train wasn't here yet, so I figured I might as well chat a little.

"Nakanobu. Asakusa line."

"I see. There are a few changes, if I'm right. I guess I'll accompany you home, then. What do you think?"

Uh? When did he get such ideas? What would my parents say if I suddenly brought a guy back home!?

"I think that it's a pretty lame way to get to know where I live." I smirked a bit, trying to keep my guard up. This actually made him chuckle.

"Well, I'm just suggesting that because, if Sakazaki heard that I met you here and then left you all alone to fend for yourself, she'd probably beat me to a pulp."

I blinked at this, and couldn't help but let out a giggle. What could I say? He was absolutely right. I could see Karen giving him a good beating for that.

"All right, all right, I'll accept your company on my journey home, Ogata," I replied, shrugging my shoulders.

The train arrived at that moment, and we boarded it.

"It's my pleasure, Princess Suzumiya."

P-Princess!?

"Don't call me that, it's embarrassing!" I snarled back at him, trying to hide my blush by looking away.

"All right, all right."

I heard him chuckle, and the doors of the train closed behind us.

\* \* \*

I tried to convince him that, once I was at Nakanobu Station, I was safe, but he insisted on leading me home. The sun had set already, and the only illumination came from the streetlights.

"By the way, why don't you use glasses, Suzumiya?" He started engaging me in conversation once more as he walked me home.

"Glasses aren't enough to fix my eyesight," I replied with a little sigh. How many times did I hear that question in the past?

"Ah. That's a shame, although glasses would interfere a lot with the beauty of your eyes."

I actually rolled my eyes at that comment.

"Riiiiight."

Well, at least he wasn't one of those glasses-obsessed guys. As we kept on walking, someone approached us. I couldn't see well in the dark, but as they passed under a streetlight, I immediately recognized that headband.

"Shizuka-chan!"

"Ayako-chan!"

In any drama on TV, we would have ran to each other and hugged while violins played in the background. I would have let my cane drop to the ground without caring about it. But none of that happened, mainly because Ogata was there, and I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of him any further.

"Where were you? Everyone is waiting at your place. Karen is completely horrified about what might have happened to you. I couldn't stop teasing her," she giggled. I could imagine all the terrible things she might have suggested to poor Karen...

Then, I noticed she was looking over at Ogata.

"And you are?" she asked. "Ah, don't tell me! Ayako-chan, you could have told me earlier about your boyfriend!"

I blushed deep red.

"S-Shizuka-chan!"

Ogata chuckled and replied in my place.

"I'm Ogata Shou, one of her schoolmates." he said, very simply. Given what Karen had told me about him, I thought he was going to hit on Shizuka. Not that she'd have minded, I bet.

"Ah, hmmm, I'm Makihara Shizuka. Nice to meet you." She bowed to Ogata. "And thank you for watching over Ayako-chan."

"It was a pleasure. Do you mind if I escort you two back to Suzumiya's place?"

"I guess not. What do you think, Ayako-chan?"

What could I have said? Refusing would have been most impolite after what he did for me.

\* \* \*

As we arrived at my house shortly after meeting near the station, I saw our front door open even before I could take a step inside our garden. It was Karen.

"Ayako-chan, I was so worried! Where have you b--"

I swear that time must have stopped for her at that instant, as she suddenly froze when she spotted Ogata next to me and Shizuka.

"Yo." He then simply waved his hand.

She probably wanted to say something, but my parents appeared right behind her, and came to me for a hug.

"Ayako! Where have you been? We were worried!" my father started. To cut things short and avoid any unnecessary repetition of questions, I decided to explain everything.

"Well, after I bought my train ticket, I followed someone I thought was Karen. Really! She had the same hairstyle and all, but it wasn't her, and I found myself on the Shinjuku line, and from there I decided to go back to where we came from and I met Ogata there, who decided to accompany me back home," I said in one go, taking a deep breath at the end. "Now, can we carry on as if nothing happened, please?"

Nobody listened to my last question, obviously. Karen was strangely silent and eyeing Ogata the whole time, as if to make sure he wasn't doing anything wrong.

"I found them kissing hotly under a streetlight near the station," Shizuka added.

"Geh! Shizuka-chan!" I shouted at her, barely able to contain my embarrassment. She just waved at me with a giggle.

"Just kidding, just kidding."

I wasn't the only one who was embarrassed. Karen seemed to be, too...or was that anger? I couldn't really tell. My parents just laughed.

"Can we invite you in for a cup of tea?" Mother asked Ogata.

"Oh, no thanks. I really should be leaving now. I'm already late as it is, and I don't want to intrude." Good, he refused politely.

He waved goodbye to us before departing, and we went inside, where I could finally rest after such an adventure. I couldn't hide that I was a bit scared by what happened. I'm really not used to being all alone in a big place such as the city and its labyrinth-like train stations.

Inside, a nice dinner was waiting for me. Karen and Shizuka were obviously invited to join us, and they accepted. Miyuki was probably having a few drinks with colleagues again, making dinner uneventful. I still had to explain myself for what happened today, though, and I had a hard time keeping Karen from blaming herself for everything.

"It's decided. Tomorrow I'll change my hairstyle to make it more original! You'll spot me more easily then, Ayako!"

I sweatdropped a little. I didn't want to imagine what kind of strange things she could do with that long hair of hers.

"You don't have to, Karen, really. I should have recharged my phone, too.»

"Hey, Karen, why don't we buy you a leash for Ayako so you don't lose her next time?"

Shizuka-chan!

"Shizuka, that's mean!" Karen argued. "Ayako isn't a pet!"

"Aw, come on, you know I'm only joking."

Sometimes I wonder.

\* \* \*

To be continued!