

Blind Spot
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Retool by Dave Watson

Chapter 4: Here comes a new challenger!

* * *

Christmas was over before I even knew it. The MP3 player I wished for never came, probably thanks to Miyuki's brilliant comments on how I wouldn't be able to hear things coming at me if I were to listen to music while walking down the streets. Who gave me such a stupid sister?! Sometimes I wondered if I really was from this family to begin with.

As for New Year's, well, it was pretty uneventful. Aoi was spending her holidays with us, making time flow faster than usual.

"Hey, Aya-chan, over here! To your right!"

Aoi waved at me as she spoke. Both of us were wandering around the New Years' festival in Nakanobu. Our district always held a festival like this every year so people could have fun and celebrate the New Year, and, for at least one time, not worry about all their little problems and those of the world around them. It was a time of peace, and of rest.

I must admit, I only followed from a distance as the world's events unfolded. Wars, the demise of the famous, natural cataclysms--they were all so far away from me. I had this carefree manner that made me insensitive to the rest of the world's misfortunes, and I couldn't even really feel guilty about it. I preferred leaving those matters to more competent people who actually believed they could make a difference, because I knew I couldn't.

I walked towards Aoi, who was clad in a distinctive blue kimono--dark blue, to be precise. It was one of the rare moments of the year when I actually wore traditional clothing, just to be like everyone else, I guess. Aoi was thinking a bit like I did, actually. Kimonos are quite hard to put on, after all. Mine was red, however; a color I enjoyed a lot because it was easy for me to recognize. Aoi was standing in front of what looked like a merchant booth.

"Do you ladies here want some of those plushies?"

"Aya-chan, they have some cute bear ones. Do you want one? I've gotta get one!"

Aoi was all excited. Her room was filled with teddy bears and plushies. She was collecting them, she once told me. Well, to me, they just took up too much space in her room, but I have to admit that they did they gave her room a nice, peaceful and childlike atmosphere. Aoi wasn't exactly childish, though. She had purple hair down to her shoulders, with two bangs on each side of her face, and was about as tall as I was. She wore small, round glasses, which gave her a cute and serious look. We were about the same age, with Aoi being only four months older than me.

"No, thanks. I don't need one." I waved her off in polite refusal.

"Oh, too bad."

"You know I'm not really into plushies." I shrugged my shoulders.

I brushed a hand through my hair while waiting for her. I started idly playing with the yellow ribbon that was holding my hair up. I wasn't used to wearing hair accessories--I guess it just wasn't my thing--but Miyuki and mother insisted that I look cute today. Oh, well.

"Let's go see how onii-chan and Miyuki-nee are doing."

"Sure," I replied with a smile. Aoi took my hand to securely lead me on, while holding the bag with her plushie inside in her other hand.

And off we went through the pathways, chatting and searching for my sister and Aoi's brother, Kenji. The two were always together during family meetings. I guess they shared some kind of intimacy only cousins can share. I almost wish I had such a relationship with Miyuki, but it just didn't go well between us. It was probably because of our age difference.

Aoi's topics of discussion with me were often about TV shows we both watched. She didn't like to read much, but enjoyed music, and liked listening to my singing. Actually, it may be her fault alone that I got into singing to begin with.

We soon caught our two siblings at a corner, holding what looked like rifles. They probably were at one of those shooting booths.

"Miyuki-nee! Ken-chan!" Aoi waved at them as we approached.

"Oh, it's you two. Having fun?" Kenji asked. He had spiky dark hair, and was pretty handsome. He was about the same age as Miyuki, which helped them grow up together more as time passed, I guess. They were quite close, and liked competition. When I thought about it, a shooting booth was a perfect place to find them at.

They were wearing kimonos, too. Miyuki had a very expensive one covered with butterfly patterns on. She got that from her boyfriend for her last birthday. Kenji's was simpler, like Aoi's and mine.

"We're going to try to win the music box. It's the big prize. If I win, I'll give it to you, Aoi-chan!" Miyuki grinned.

What about me?! I'm supposed to be your little sister!

Kenji apparently saw my anger coming.

"If I win it, I'll give it to Ayako-chan."

"Hey, you're spoiling her," Miyuki tried to argue.

I decided to protest.

"I'm not being spoiled. It's only fair that, if you want to give it to Aoi-chan, Kenji'd give it to me!"

"Oh, fine, fine..."

The two placed their rifles at shoulder level. I could faintly see things moving beyond the ends of their rifles. Their targets, I presumed. Some were moving from left to right, others were following a half-circle pattern, and more were going up and down. The winner would be whoever hit the most targets in the allotted time.

The booth owner announced the start, and both my cousin and sister started firing shots, emptying their rifles in something like ten seconds.

"540 points for the lady, and 610 for the young lad there."

Congratulations!"

I grinned from ear to ear as Kenji gave me the music box. Actually, I didn't really want it, and I didn't want to take it away from Aoi-chan, but knowing that Miyuki lost was enough to make my day.

"It's starting to get late. Let's go see the fireworks!" Kenji suggested, and the four of us started walking away from the various booths to find a nice place to watch the yearly fireworks of Nakanobu.

I liked fireworks. They were pretty, and the dark background of the sky allowed me to see them clearly. Ah, I wished I had a boyfriend to watch them with, and then we'd kiss under their light, and...

"Aya-chan? You're all red."

It was Aoi's voice.

"Ha, ha. It's nothing, I'm just feeling a bit hot..."

"In winter? Are you all right?"

I laughed nervously. That was the wrong excuse.

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The New Year celebrations were over before I knew it. I know, I said that about Christmas as well, but that's just the way it felt. When everything is all right with your world, time tends to fly. Time is such a capricious thing, not there when you need it the most, and cruelly reminding you how slow it is when you need it to go faster.

School was soon resuming its place in my daily routines, and with that, the dreadful impending arrival of end-of-year exams.

Sadly, that wasn't the only disaster waiting for me.

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I opened my shoe locker in order to take out my school shoes, only to find a letter on top of them.

A love letter! It had to be something like that!

Ah, finally, after all those years, I received a love letter upon entering high school. Believe it or not, but I'd never gotten one before. I'd taken a peek at some of the letters guys sent to Karen and Shizuka before, but to receive one myself...!

I looked a bit left and right. Everyone had already left for classes. In my excitement, I quickly opened it and read it. The handwriting was very nice; I guessed that a very sensitive and kind boy wrote it. Lucky me!

'Come to the roof after lunch. I'll be waiting.'

And that's all that was written on it, leaving me quite unsatisfied. Isn't there usually more than that on this sort of thing?

I hoped Karen didn't see this. I couldn't imagine the complications if she...

"Ayako! I've been looking for you! The bell's about to ring!"

...saw that.

I quickly folded the paper and put it back in my locker before closing it. I had more than enough time to read it all, anyway.

"Let's go!" she said and grabbed my hand, leading me through the hallways towards our classroom.

Phew.

Karen was always worried about me getting lost, and even more so since that time I took the wrong train. It's true I often felt embarrassed and uneasy whenever I got lost, but I always thought that she was doing too much. I mean, school. It's not like I'm not here every day.

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My mind was preoccupied all morning with that letter instead of concentrating on Kasuga-sensei, our English teacher. A love letter...I still couldn't believe it! What was he like? It couldn't be Ogata-kun, for starters. He would have signed it or something. Come to think of it, there was no name on it, so I guessed that the boy must have been a little shy. Teehee, I was intimidating someone now. That was certainly a heady thought.

Sadly, again, our teacher brought me down by reminding me of something of the utmost gravity.

"...and I will remind you that I'm expecting good grades from all of you on the exams next month."

Oh, right. It's already that time of the year.

The first two exams of my high school years were just above average. I wasn't exactly brilliant at studies, to be honest. I was always doing what I was told, and nothing more. Teachers often told me that what I wrote on my exams was too curt, almost to the point of bluntness. They wanted me to expand, develop, and write more about what I learned in their classes. I was never very talkative to begin with, so I never saw why I should be that way on paper.

As long as I passed, it was okay, I guess. Besides, those average grades were solid proof that I wasn't using my laptop to cheat, which I found comforting. I didn't want to attract more jealousy to me than I already had. I knew that some students in our school didn't like me very much.

The bell rang, signaling lunch. It suddenly reminded me of my love letter.

"Shall we go, Ayako?" I heard Karen's voice next to me, and looked up with a smile.

"Sure."

Trying to act natural, I headed with her towards the school cafeteria. Believe me, my excitement was difficult to contain.

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Right after lunch, the main problem was trying to find an excuse to get Karen off my trail for a while.

"I'm going to take a walk around school for a bit, okay?" I told her, trying to sound as natural as possible.

"In winter? Put your coat on, you could catch a cold, you know."

Thank you moth--I mean, Karen-chan.

She was finishing her lunch as I said this. I brought my tray to the cafeteria entrance so it could be washed and then headed back to the shoe lockers and our classroom to get the letter and my coat. I wasn't sure if I was going to return the feelings or not. I mean, this was all new to me. I wasn't even sure who it could be. I hoped so much that he would be cute, or handsome, or preferably both!

I slowly took the steps up to the roof of the school. I couldn't afford to arrive panting as if I just ran. That wouldn't have been very ladylike! Besides, I didn't need to be there first. It's always up to the man to wait for the woman to arrive for a date!

I put on my coat and my sunglasses, and opened the door to the roof.

The sun was up, and even if it was masked behind the clouds, it was still a pain for me to see well like this. Was I the first one here?

"You're late."

A girl's voice. Coming from my left.

Wait...a girl?!

I looked to my left, and I saw a silhouette, wearing our school uniform, with her back against the fence of the roof.

I approached her a little, but couldn't distinguish many of her features outside, from this distance.

"W-weh?"

I tried to overcome my shock. It was a girl! I was waiting for a boy here! Where did this go wrong? Could it be possible that someone else had told this girl to come to the roof in another letter? No, that wasn't possible. If that had been the case, she wouldn't have told me I was late.

"I was waiting for you, Suzumiya."

"Waiting for me...?"

I tried to compute what was going on here. A girl left me a love letter in my shoe locker earlier this morning and was waiting for me on the roof. Wait a second...

"I-I'm sorry, I'm not into girls, you see," I mumbled out with a blush. It was kind of embarrassing to say that, but I didn't want to give any false hopes to the poor girl.

"W-What?!" she exclaimed loudly. Oh, my, did I make her mad? Did I hurt her feelings? Aaah, how stupid can I be?!

"I'm so sorry! I'm really into guys!" I apologized again.

That's when she facefaulted.

"Are you brain-damaged or something?" she asked back. As I approached, the first thing I noticed was that girl's hair. It was a beautiful blonde color. Whether it was natural or not was yet to be proven. Chances were high that it was a nice blonde dye, though. Her hair was a bit wavy, and went down to her back from what I could see. She wore tiny dark blue ribbons in it as well.

"Excuse me. I received your letter, but I can't accept your feelings. Sorry." I handed her back the letter with both hands.

And then she laughed at me. That's when I knew something was definitely wrong.

"Suzumiya, you're so funny! How in hell could you think that was a love letter? You're truly hopeless!"

"Huh?"

"I sent you this because I wanted to tell you in private that I'm sick of you. I won't let you win this, you hear? You are my enemy now. Prepare yourself."

"My...enemy? Wait a minute, I'm not--"

She didn't let me finish my sentence.

"Yes, you are. Absolutely. And I'm not the only one fed up with how all the teachers are falling all over themselves to take care of your well-being, especially since you're playing games in class or even sleeping behind your computer screen!"

It felt like an arrow just pierced my chest. A thousand times.

"This is--"

"True. It's all true, and you know it, so don't try to deny it. You'd just make it worse."

Mou! She didn't have to say it like that! I've always tried to be extra careful to not be caught! Something started to feel heavy in my chest. At first, I wasn't too sure of how to react, and just looked down at her chest, her skirt, then away a little when I reached her feet.

"With that said, I won't let you have your way, Suzumiya Ayako. Your quiet days are over."

She passed by me. I didn't even turn to watch her.

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It took a while to register that she had actually left, and I quickly hurried back to the classroom to find that I was right on time for the ringing of the bell announcing the beginning of the afternoon classes.

I sat next to Karen, as usual.

"You took your time," she remarked. She sounded a bit bored, and was resting her chin in her palm, her elbows on her desk.

"Uh, yeah, well, I guess." I tried to find an excuse, but couldn't. Experience proved to me that, when you have nothing to say, you shouldn't say

anything.

Our teacher entered, and Ryukawa-san, our class representative, said the usual "Stand, Bow, Sit" ritual. Our Japanese teacher was nicknamed Baba-sensei. She wasn't what I'd call young. Let's be honest, Kasuga-sensei had many more fans among the male population of the school than she did. I didn't like her very much. She was quite old-fashioned and strict. One time, with the whole class watching me, I had to prove to her that I didn't have any spell-checkers or dictionaries on my laptop. Just thinking about it makes me shiver in embarrassment. That was quite a scene.

The class was getting boring, as usual, which allowed me to think for a while about what had happened just now. This girl just declared war on me, or something like that, and I realized that I didn't even know her name or which class she was in. Wait...if she knew I sometimes escaped boredom by sleeping behind my screen or playing games, then the only place where she could have been was in this class, right behind me!

I looked back a little, trying to be as discrete as possible, but I couldn't pinpoint her at all from what I could see, and there were a few rows behind Karen and me. The more I thought of it, the more I found myself in a bad position in the classroom, with so many people behind me who were able to see what I did. It never occurred to me that I would have to hide things from my classmates, or that I was being spied on so obviously.

The girl could well be in another class, too, or she could have heard about my habits in class from a friend...who was the traitor in our ranks? Then again, how could I find her? I had to tell her that this all was a mistake and I didn't mean any harm to her.

I looked to my left at Karen, who was busy taking notes from what the teacher was saying. I observed her concentration for a little bit. I knew I could count on her. My only option would be to ask her for help to find this person. Even though the girl was blonde with ribbons in her hair, and thus easily noticeable, I didn't have faith in my eyes, and it would take me some time to find her. If she were in another class, it would be even worse.

I hated that so much. Whenever I wanted to talk to someone I didn't know well, I had to ask Karen to lead me to him or her, and I couldn't always bother her with that, plus, sometimes I didn't want her to know. I stopped counting the number of boys I didn't ask for a date just because it would have been overly embarrassing to have Karen around. No hard feelings, Karen-chan, but these things are usually handled in private.

But this time, I had to ask Karen. I had no other choice, and I had to be quick about it. During recess time...

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"A blonde girl, you say? With ribbons? It's all you know about her?" she asked me as I told her about what happened at lunchtime. Well, not exactly all that happened, actually. She just had to know how the girl looked.

"Yes."

"Why do you need to see her?"

Ah, the dreadful question.

"Well, ummm, she dropped something and I want to give it back to her, you see."

She nodded.

"Well, sure, I could help, but, with so little information, it's going to be difficult. True, blonde girls aren't very common here, but do I have to remind you that our school is quite big? Finding her among all the students will be troublesome. Were you able to see her uniform's ribbon color?" she asked me.

"Yes. It was light blue just like ours."

"Are you absolutely positive of that?"

It was my turn to nod. Karen knew I had trouble with colors.

At our school, the ribbon on the girls' uniforms indicated which year they were in. I got a light blue ribbon when I arrived here. Purple was for second years and green was for third years. It was easier to identify a student this way. Unfortunately for me, boys only had a small insignia on the collar of their uniforms, which was difficult to check out at first glance with my poor eyesight.

"Still, this is going to be difficult. But I can go check out the other first year classes tomorrow if you'd like."

I knew I could count on you, Karen-chan. I'd have given you a hug if we hadn't been in class. You've always been so understanding of my problems!

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The rest of the day was pretty uneventful. I watched Karen run around the sports field of our school with her club mates. At first, I thought about sneaking out while she was busy and trying to search for this mysterious blonde girl, but then I thought about the details. How would I find her with my eyesight? Where could she be? Did she have any club activities? Or had she left already? Or was she some kind of ghost? Nah, no way, ghosts don't show up during daytime.

I kept watching Karen from afar with my monocular. I was pretty much left alone during her practice. She looked real good like that, and from what I could hear, she was quite skilled, ran fast, and had lots of endurance. It made me feel warm inside, simply because it was my friend they were praising, and I was proud of her.

I couldn't keep that blonde girl off of my mind, not even when I waited for Karen to shower and change after her club activities, and not even when we walked back home. I even told Shizuka what I told Karen: The strict minimum, plus a little extra. Sorry, Karen-chan! To my surprise, Shizuka didn't get too nosy about it.

"You know, that's pretty normal schoolgirl behavior. Even I have enemies at school."

"You, too?" I asked, a little surprised.

We were walking home together as usual, Karen having left us a few minutes ago to head home by herself.

"Of course! School can be like a battlefield for some girls. Like they think they have something to prove or gain from this. Boys sometimes fight and resort to being mindless brutes, but girls really aren't that different. In other schools, you sometimes find groups that are inclined towards violence and would do anything for, say, a cell phone or some smokes. Sometimes it's just

because you're different. You're cuter, liked by teachers, things like that."

I listened to her words with interest. What she said was true: I'd heard a lot of stories about high school violence and bullies lately.

"But it's not like she was that hateful. I mean, she didn't try to hit me or anything. Besides, our school is pretty safe compared to others, don't you think?" I argued.

"Beware of still waters."

"Huh?"

She lifted her finger, as if to make her point.

"What I mean is, this girl could still make your life hell. I don't know what kind of grudge she has against you, but...oh, well, I'll trust Karen to make her pay if anything happens to you."

I blinked. I suddenly pictured Karen fighting with other girls to protect me. It was definitely weird.

"Ano, Karen isn't exactly like that."

"I know, I know. But I also know she wouldn't let anyone harm you," Shizuka said reassuringly. She didn't want me to worry about it, obviously. I didn't realize until later that Shizuka truly trusted Karen a lot.

We soon arrived at the usual crossroads where we parted ways. I waved to her, and kept on walking towards my house, idly waving my cane left and right. The day hadn't been too good, and it wasn't over yet.

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I thought I'd choke on my glass of water.

"A PART-TIME JOB!? ME!?"

I looked back and forth between my mother and father. We were at the kitchen table for dinner. So this was my last ordeal for my busy day.

"Well, we think you should get to know how it feels to actually work. You know, it's not uncommon for high schoolers to work part-time. Plus, you need a real income to buy everything you want," my father explained to me.

"But...I can't...I mean..."

"Ayako-chan, you need to learn the value of money. You mentioned to us before that you felt sorry about us having to buy that monocular for you."

I was trying to fight for words. If that wasn't a surprise attack, I don't know what it was! I knew they were both right, but talking about this during dinner...oh, and Miyuki being so silent wasn't exactly helping, either. I mean, I wanted a part-time job, really. But so soon? I wasn't prepared. I wanted to earn money, to become less dependent on my family. That's pretty normal for a student, isn't it? But, then again, deep down, I didn't want that to happen. I was scared.

Yes, scared. About not being able to perform many tasks due to my handicap. Most of the girls in class were doing physical jobs.

"Your grades aren't exactly great, and it wouldn't be very wise to let you

get a part-time job, but we're putting our trust in you, Ayako-chan. You won't disappoint us, right?" my father asked me, leaving me a bit speechless.

"We thought about it for a while, and decided you should try this out before you get into your third year. It wouldn't be very wise to make you work a job during your graduation year," my mother added.

There was a long pause. It might have lasted a few seconds or a minute; I wasn't exactly counting.

"But what do you want her to do? What can she do?"

Miyuki eventually spoke up. However, I wasn't too sure if it was to help me or to push me down further with a shovel. Did she mean that I couldn't do anything and was useless? I never really thought about what I could do in the future, and my eyesight certainly closed many doors to me. She was going to bring up what I feared the most.

I didn't want to hear this!

Since the question was directed to my parents, I looked at them now, trying to read an expression on them, but it was pretty difficult. And Miyuki's reaction was quite confusing.

"That's what we wanted to discuss with her," my father replied. My mother continued.

"There are clearly some jobs you can't do, Ayako-chan. However, you still haven't thought about what you'd like to do in the future, and that worries us a bit, considering that you have a handicap. Do you understand?"

I nodded a bit and blinked.

"I don't know what I could do, I mean...Karen-chan isn't working, for example."

Bad example, Ayako. Bad example!

"The Sakazaki family is pretty wealthy, Ayako-chan. It's no surprise that they can afford anything their only daughter wishes. Not that I'm accusing Karen-chan of being a spoiled little girl, though." My mother giggled a bit, trying to brighten the mood.

"She did try to find a job, but there was nothing she really enjoyed doing, and since she could afford it, she preferred doing club activities instead," I replied, trying to take Karen's defense.

"But you're not doing any club activities yourself," father remarked, sinking me lower than earth level with the shovel from earlier. I KNEW I wasn't doing anything except studying and reading and singing karaoke. The more they brought this up, the more it depressed me.

"Clearly, Ayako can't do any waitress-like work," Miyuki noted. I started to picture myself in one of those cute waitress outfits, but then shrugged it off. Even though I still wondered which side of the conflict Miyuki was on, I had to admit she was right here. I could trip on stuff while holding the trays, or bring dishes to the wrong table. I had already thought about that. Ah, I wish I could wear one of those uniforms at least once.

People tend to think it's ridiculous, or that such dreams are worthless, but it meant a lot to me. A whole lot. Isn't it normal to dream about the things you normally can't do?

"Delivery jobs are out of the question, since she wouldn't know her way

around. I absolutely don't see her running around the city on a bike while carrying ramen, for example," she continued. We all sat in silence as Miyuki started to enumerate all the things I couldn't do. It wasn't very gratifying, to say the least. Didn't she care about how low it made me feel!? I didn't want to hear this, onee-san!

"What would you like to do, Ayako?" my mother finally asked, cutting Miyuki short when she started to talk about public work. Again, I was taken by surprise.

"Me? Well..."

I started to think, hard. Couldn't they give me a day or two to think about it? I still had no idea of what I'd like to do in the future!

"I could...sing?"

I liked singing, doing karaoke, but becoming a real singer, even an idol would do.

"Seriously, Ayako," my mother said.

I was serious here! Was she thinking I couldn't do it?

Wait, she was right. It was impossible for me. Completely impossible on so many levels.

"Oh, wait, I have an idea," Miyuki said, with a little smile.

"An idea?" Why was I beginning to fear what was going to happen next?

She stood from her seat and pulled her cell phone out of her pants pocket. I was a bit worried.

"I'll be right back," she said, and left the room for some privacy. Who could she possibly be calling? Her boyfriend? My thoughts were interrupted by my mother speaking again.

"Anyway, it's not that we want you to exhaust yourself with classes and a job, but we feel that you need to earn money and discover what an active life is like. That's what you wanted, right?"

"Yes but...I mean, it's so sudden. And I'm scared. I'm scared I won't be able to do anything," I said, looking down at my hands on my lap. There, I said it.

It left my parents kind of speechless. Were they expecting this? I didn't know.

I decided to switch subjects a little.

"Does this mean you'll cut off my allowance?"

Sorry, I had to ask this. My parents looked at each other a bit. Maybe they hadn't thought about that, or maybe they had and were searching for the words to diplomatically announce it to me. Maybe they really hadn't after all, and I'd just given them a very bad idea.

"Of course not. Well, not until you find something, of course. We're not tyrants."

I raised an eyebrow jokingly.

"Oh, really?"

"You can stop giving her money now then, mother."

It was Miyuki's voice. I turned towards her, and heard her hum in triumph over something. Looks like her call was pretty quick. But the way she announced that, it just made me all the more worried.

"You like books, right?"

I nodded.

"Yeah, I mean, I like to read and write stuff..." I said, not very enthusiastically. I still didn't know what she had in mind. It was true that I liked to read books and manga. I also enjoyed writing E-mails to Karen when she was overseas.

"Perfect. Perfect. Just perfect."

Oh, my. The suspense was killing me. I guessed that my parents were equally curious.

"You'll see tomorrow. Right after your classes, I'll come pick you up at school," Miyuki announced.

"You? Picking me at school? But your work--?"

"I'll find a way, don't worry."

I started to think about the prospect of earning money for myself.

"At least, I'll be able to buy my own cell phone every two or three months, just like Miyuki," I said with a little smirk.

Miyuki was always changing her cell phone every once in a while for the latest model whenever some new feature or shiny gimmick caught her eye. She's been doing that ever since she started working in high school. I was so envious of her back then!

"Are you implying that I'm frivolous? It's my money. I'm free to use it as I see fit."

"Me? I'm not saying anything at all," I said innocently.

"Humph. Well, it's now time for a good bath."

I twitched, seeing her leave. "Hey! I said I wanted one first earlier!"

I fumed a little, and then felt someone's hand on my shoulder. As I turned around, I realized it was my father's.

"I trust Miyuki. I'm sure she has a good idea for her little sister. She must have found something that you will be able to do by yourself."

I raised an eyebrow at that.

"I'm not TOO sure. I remember that she changed part-time jobs quite often a few years back."

"Well, it gave her lots of experience, at least."

...Right.

* * *

I exited the bathroom after my bath and quietly walked to my room in those cute cat-shaped slippers Shizuka and Karen bought me for my last birthday. Even though it was still winter outside, the temperature was quite nice. Upon entering my room, I decided to turn on some soft music and dried my hair a little before putting on some clothes for the night.

"Now, what to read...?"

I took a look at the books on my desk. Reading would surely help me get over such a complicated day.

First there was that girl who left me that letter. Why did I think it was a love letter? How embarrassing. There wasn't even a little heart-shaped seal on it to begin with. I guess I just let excitement get to me. This troubled me a little, as it was the first time something like this ever happened to me in my entire school life.

And let's not forget about the upcoming exams. High school was certainly much harder than middle school, and I couldn't afford to get lazy about those exams, or I could risk not advancing through classes. Karen surely wouldn't wait one year for me to catch up to her.

Finally, there was this whole stupid idea my parents suddenly got about me getting a part-time job...well, it wasn't really a stupid idea, but I wasn't prepared for it.

"...atashi sakuranbo...!" I hummed to myself, half-listening to the song playing in my room.

I admit it wasn't such a bad idea that I learn how to work, but I wasn't even sure what I would have liked to do in the future, and what my abilities were. Come to think of it, I could become a singer, but there would be a lot of problems since I didn't see well. On the other hand, some blind people have turned out to be exceptional musicians or singers in the past, so why not me?

Thanks to magazines I'd read, I knew how tough this kind of business could be. It was probably impossible to become popular since all those idols were almost flawless. Some of them had been scouted at a very young age. It was almost scary! And let's not talk about all the downsides of it. Stalkers, obsessed fans, crazy journalists, and the like...heh, a horde of fans at my feet, worshipping me, wasn't such a bad idea, when I thought about it.

Oh well, let's pick something to read before going to sleep. I looked through the pile of books, and eventually picked Zero's Familiar. I was a bit surprised about that one at first. It started as a funny story, but it definitely contained some naughty bits absolutely not recommended for teenagers below sixteen.

But who cares? I was actually going to be seventeen soon, and I was a very healthy girl too, teehee.

* * *

The next day, Karen tried to search for that blonde girl during lunch break and between classes. I was a little nervous about what Karen would think of her. If that girl really was going to make my school life hell, how would Karen react? It was quite embarrassing, the more I thought about it.

Eventually though, after our first period of the afternoon...

"I think I found someone in class 1-A," she announced, coming up to me with a piece of paper and a pencil in her hands. She probably made a drawing of the girl with my description and asked around.

I stood up and followed her across the hallway. Various students were chatting here and there, and no one really paid attention to us.

We soon arrived at the 1-A classroom. Karen motioned towards a girl in a corner at the far end of the room. She was chatting excitedly with other girls, probably from her class. I couldn't see her very well from where I was, but her voice sounded familiar. I was almost sure, and yet, there was some doubt, even if Karen was there with me.

Then, I saw her approach us. She must have noticed our presence.

"So, Suzumiya, you're asking Sakazaki for help with stalking me?"

I could almost hear Karen blinking. But I decided to talk first.

"Of course not, I was just passing by and saw you, and..."

"...and you thought you'd come up and say hello? How nice," she grinned, interrupting me. "You hear that, girls?" she asked to her classmates, who all giggled rather unpleasantly. There were three of them. One had long dark blue hair tied in a single ponytail, the second had short red hair and the last one had long black hair arranged in a plait and was wearing rather big rectangular glasses. A bunch of sub-standard girls, if you asked me.

"W-Well, yeah, that's right. Now we'll go back to class. Right, Karen?"

Why was I losing my cool in front of them? That girl was surrounded by an aura of confidence; it forced admiration out of me.

"Karen?" I asked again, hearing no reply from her.

That's when I heard something snap in her hand. I took a step aside in reflex and looked at her.

"K...Karen!?"

"You misses will regret it dearly if I ever catch you harming Ayako."

It was not her normal tone of voice. This one was low and quite threatening. I saw the girls shift a little, as if bracing themselves. The girls accompanying the blonde one sounded a bit surprised, but she stayed calm and composed, as a good leader always should.

"Sakazaki, this is between Suzumiya and me." She then turned to me. "I have no interest in fighting your little maid here."

My...maid?

I looked over at Karen and briefly imagined her in one of those frilly French maid outfits, before shaking the thought out of my mind. This didn't amuse her.

"I'm her friend, and I..."

I decided to interrupt her before it got worse.

"Actually, we'd better go. The next period will start soon." I then turned to Karen. "It's okay, Karen, really."

"What's the matter here?" I heard a male voice behind me. I turned

around and blinked.

It was Ogata!

"Ogata-kun..."

"Heh, if it isn't Suzumiya, Sakazaki and Ura in the same class. I must be getting lucky."

"Ura...?" I heard Karen say softly, a little surprised, probably as much as I was by Ogata's appearance.

"Her name is Ura. Ura Miho. She's in my class," he revealed while motioning towards the blonde girl. I looked at Miho and her friends, who were equally speechless.

Ura Miho, heh. Something was telling me it was quite a fitting name.

"Ogata-san, you shouldn't bother yourself with those..." Miho said, in such a sweet voice it made my eyes roll.

Ogata-san? She called him Ogata-san? Karen humphed a bit and took my hand gently.

"Let's go, Ayako, or we'll be late!"

"A-Ah, sure."

I gave a last quick look towards Miho, who seemed all embarrassed. Was that a blush on her cheeks? I couldn't see well as Karen dragged me towards the door, but a grin slowly began to spread on my face.

My sixth sense kicked in. I was now pretty sure she had a crush on Ogata. Splendid.

* * *

I couldn't help but grin thinking about this Miho girl during the last period of the day. She looked so full of herself when she talked to me, and melted right away when Ogata arrived. I didn't need a Nobel Prize to guess what that meant.

I had to lend Karen a pen after she broke hers earlier. It was funny to see her asking for that from a girl who pretty much never writes with one. Luckily for her, I still had one, just in case.

I could tell she was pissed, but I couldn't exactly tell why. I guess it was something to do with Ogata...or was it because of Ura? Ura. What a weird name. I'll just call her Miho; that's simpler.

I excused myself to Karen by explaining to her that Miyuki was waiting for me at the school gate, so I couldn't accompany her to her club activities today. She nodded in understanding and gave me her usual reassuring smile.

* * *

"So, are you ready?" Miyuki asked me as she came towards me when she saw me arriving at the gate. She hadn't changed and was still in her classy (and classic) office uniform--a sleeveless jacket, a blouse and tie, and a matching skirt.

"Yeah, but are you going to finally tell me where we're headed?" I asked, unfolding my cane before her. She led the way, and I walked next to her. Miyuki never did act like Karen and hold my hand or arm when walking with me. Not that really I wanted her to, anyway.

"Might as well tell you, now that we're on our way," she said softly, her heels clicking a little on the pavement. "A friend of mine owns a small bookstore in the city. He's a bit old, and could definitely use a hand."

A bookstore?

"I trust that you'll get along well with him. If you can do the work, that is." I could sense a hint of defiance in her voice.

"What...kind of work is it exactly?"

"I didn't get into the details with him, but I guess you'll have to shelve some books, help people find them, welcome customers and such."

I was a little worried about what I would be doing here and if I would be able to do it. Remember, I didn't really want this job in the first place.

"Oh, and he said he'd pay you about 900 yen per hour."

Okay, now we're talking!

* * *

After a lengthy train trip interrupted by one transfer, we arrived at the Jinbocho station. I knew this place very well, since I often came here to buy manga and novels.

Miyuki was working for Shueisha, a big publishing company. She got a job at the bottom of the ladder a few years back, and was slowly climbing the rungs in the hierarchy. Miyuki never really liked talking about her job. All I knew was that she was the representative who went around visiting the bookstores. She met her current boyfriend, Seiji, at work. Things were going well between them, from what I heard, and all they needed was a promotion to take off, get their own apartment and start living comfortably.

We soon arrived at a rather old-looking building. It wasn't very big, and you couldn't see much of what was inside from outdoors. I looked up at the sign written in big letters above the shop.

"Tamashii Toshokan?"

"Yep, this is the bookstore."

Miyuki led the way and entered first, holding the heavy glass door open for me.

The place smelled intensely of new books. There were piles scattered here and there, probably ones I'll have to sort. I folded my cane and swiftly placed it in my schoolbag so not to accidentally knock it into something. I didn't need to have my first impression be buried under an avalanche of books.

"Heya, ojii-san!"

I saw an old man stand up from behind the counter. He was wearing a white apron on top of his clothes.

"Oh, Suzumiya-kun..." he said in his low voice. I stood next to my sister. The two seemed to know each other quite well.

"So you brought your sister here. Ayako-chan, right?" he asked me. I nodded a bit shyly.

Miyuki then spoke again.

"She'll do fine. She's my little sister, after all."

I blushed a bit. It was strange to be commented on like that by Miyuki-nee, when you think about all the teasing she gave me at home.

"Ayako, this is Takagi-san. He's going to be your boss here," she explained to me.

"What will I have to do, exactly?" I dared to ask.

The old man seemed to think for a bit before replying.

"Well, I have a few new books that need to be sorted and placed on the appropriate shelves."

I was already starting to fear that idea a little. I looked over at the shelves behind us. Some were pretty high for me. Surely he had a stepladder for the higher books, but still...searching through the books here would be hell for my eyesight and me.

"You can find out where the books are supposed to be located on the computer, and input new ones. It's not that hard. You'll have to direct customers to the books they seek, too."

I nodded, listening to his instructions. That sounded fairly easy, so far.

"Okay, I guess I can do that."

"But first, you need to change clothes," Miyuki noted. I had forgotten that I was still dressed in my school uniform. I only noticed now that Miyuki was carrying a bag with her.

"Ah, that's right. You can use the back room. There should be an apron there which belongs to my granddaughter," he said softly.

"I'll show her the way," Miyuki offered, and led me by the shoulder to that room. How did she know her way around here?

* * *

The back room of the bookstore was a little dark, and there were a lot of books in there, too. It was tempting to look through them, but I knew why I was there, and promptly started to take off my uniform and place it inside one of the lockers there. There were only two of them in here.

The place was apparently not heated very well, and standing there in my undies wasn't making it any better. I decided to hurry and put on the clothes that Miyuki brought with her.

"Next time you rummage through my clothes, you could ask me first." I sighed a bit at the thought of Miyuki going through my stuff in my room. She was my sister, but still...

"Oh, stop complaining, will you? I forgot," I heard from outside. Miyuki was waiting patiently for me in the hallway connecting the back room to the store, right by the door.

I put the black skirt and orange blouse on. There was a white apron like the one Takagi-san was wearing inside the locker, which I guessed was the one he told me about. Miyuki spoke up again.

"So, what do you think?"

"Well, I guess I can do that. It doesn't sound too difficult for me..." I said, not very enthusiastic about the whole thing. I wanted to ask her a few things about this job, but she spoke again.

"Are you ready yet?"

"Almost!"

I finished putting the apron on. I wasn't used to that.

After taking my monocular out and putting it around my neck, I put my uniform and schoolbag in the locker and then exited the back room to find Miyuki in the hallway, as expected.

"How is it?" I asked her.

"Hmmm. Your collar."

She approached me and, without any further word, arranged my skirt and then the collar of my blouse a bit. It didn't look all right, apparently. I'm used to my relatives and close friends like Shizuka and Karen taking care of things that I couldn't notice about my appearance.

"Better. Let's get going. You need to look good for the customers, you see."

And with that, we returned to the store.

* * *

The old man looked at me. He didn't have much hair left on his head, which made it difficult for me to see exactly where his face was turned.

"Looks like Maya's apron fits you well."

I guessed that Maya was his granddaughter's name.

"Fine. I'll leave you here, then, Ayako," said Miyuki. "I'll come back to pick you up in one hour."

I nodded.

"Well, later then, Miyuki-nee."

I watched her leave the bookstore, and looked over at Takagi-san again.

"I'm depending on you now. I hope you will treat me well, Takagi-san." I bowed respectfully to my first boss with this polite formula. I'd always wanted to say that!

"Likewise. Are you ready? I'll show you your first task."

He took out a piece of paper with what looked like a map of the place, and motioned for me to come closer to the computer.

"Can you see the screen and the map well?" he asked me, sounding quite concerned.

"Not really. May I have the map so I can look at it closer?"

"Sure," he replied gently. "How close do you need to be to see well and read?"

"A-About five centimeters."

"Alright." He nodded, and allowed me time to get used to the map. There were about a dozen shelves, labeled from 'ka' to 'tsu'.

"You see, each set of shelves has a name and each shelf has a number, from one to five. You're probably not tall enough to reach the fifth one, so feel free to use the stepladder. The names of the shelves follow my own display method. For example, 'ka' and 'ki' are for the romance novels."

I listened to his explanations very closely. I then held my face close to the computer screen as he showed me how to search for a particular book in case a customer requested it.

After all was said and done, he gave me my first task.

"We got a new shipment in today. We get those in every Tuesday. I want you to stock them on the right shelves." He then gave me a little pat on the back.

I took the list in my hand and examined it closely. There were two piles containing about ten different titles each in front of me. I looked at the covers on the top of each of them.

"How am I supposed to know which genre everything is?" I asked.

"Well, it should be written on the list you got with the shipment."

I looked at it closer, and, indeed, there was a column indicating which category the book belonged in. I didn't notice it at first glance.

I started placing the books accordingly, guessing that I was being watched closely. It was my first job, after all. I frequently had to go back to the counter to check the map and the computer to see where exactly to place each book, so I wouldn't make any mistakes.

"Suzumiya-kun told me about your eyesight problem, so don't worry too much about it, okay? I'm getting old, so I don't see everything well all the time myself."

"O-Okay," I replied with a blush. It was the first time I had been treated so kindly by someone who didn't know me. It helped me feel a lot more comfortable around the place. I was finally relaxing a little.

I finished after about ten minutes. It wasn't that hard, even though I guess it could get tiring in the long run.

"Are you finished?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so," I replied softly. He didn't seem to want to check if I did it right or not. Did he trust me so easily?

"Good. When you have nothing to do, you can take a book and read it

behind the counter if you'd like," he said kindly. "Of course, when a customer comes in, you have to welcome him and help him out."

I nodded. That sounded pretty good to me. Getting paid to read books? That was along my lines. However, I wasn't sure what to read here. There were just so many books. Maybe I should think about bringing a book from home next time.

"Thank you, sir." I bowed, and went with him behind the counter.

I was expecting to see a customer come in sooner or later, but nothing happened and, after about ten minutes of waiting like this, the silence was getting to be a little too much for me and I was getting bored. Apparently, Takagi-san was reading a book himself.

I wondered how I could possibly start a conversation. He wasn't from my own generation, so topics were going to be difficult to find. But a question quickly came to my curious mind.

"Takagi-san, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure. But you already did. So, does that mean you want another one?"

It took me a few seconds to catch the joke. Then it made me laugh.

"Ha ha ha...ne, how do you know Miyuki-nee?"

Well, this was probably a dumb question. After all, Miyuki was in charge of relations between bookstores and her company, so it was to be expected that she'd know at least some owners personally. Takagi-san slowly lowered his book and looked at me.

"Your sister worked here when she was about your age, right after my granddaughter left to live in Osaka. She wanted a part-time job, too."

"Oh?"

I'd never heard about that before. To be frank, I was never really interested in Miyuki's past before.

"She had the energy and will to work to earn her money, and I liked that. I was in need of an extra pair of hands to help me with all the books we have here. This place isn't visited often by customers, so it's pretty easygoing, but it can be lonely sometimes, too."

So I was some sort of company, too? Weird. Then again, old people sure can get lonely at times. I could understand that.

"I see. So Miyuki-nee started here before getting in at Shueisha somehow."

"Yes. I'm a customer of hers now," he chuckled.

I was a little surprised that I'd discovered a little about Miyuki's past here. I was already imagining her running around and welcoming customers here. And I was wearing the apron she wore, too...

I eventually went back to the back room to fetch my laptop from my schoolbag so I could re-read some of the notes I took in classes today. This job was a real opportunity; I got paid for pretty easy work, and I could study and read books!

"I think I'm going to like it here," I admitted to Takagi-san. He was very kind to me, and the place was calm and comfy.

"I'm glad, Suzumiya-kun." he replied. "You know how to use computers, too?"

I guessed that topic would come sooner or later as I opened up my laptop.

"Well, a bit, yes. I'm not an expert, though," I said. It might have sounded modest, but it was the truth.

It was my turn to explain something to him--how I worked at school with this. He seemed pretty interested and asked a lot of questions about my handicap. Strangely, I replied quite calmly and kindly to his questions, as if I was proud of being able to go to school almost normally. When people my age asked me those questions, I tended to stay on the defensive because it felt like their curiosity wasn't genuine. It was much different here, somehow.

An hour had passed before I even realized it, and Miyuki returned with her boyfriend, both dressed in their casual clothes, to pick me up. I had seen Seiji before, of course. He had come to dinner at our home a few times. Seiji was quite good-looking, with short dark hair and glasses. Very serious, but at the same time, you could feel that he was the partying type; he made quite a nice match with Miyuki, if you asked me.

I went to the back room to fetch my uniform and put it in the bag Miyuki had brought my clothes in earlier. I took the apron off and hung it up inside the locker for next time. It was part of my work outfit now, after all.

"Good bye, Takagi-san. See you tomorrow," I said with a polite bow, and then turned to leave with Miyuki and Seiji.

"Wait a second, young lady. You're forgetting something."

"Huh?"

I turned around to face him again, surprised. I looked up, and he handed me a small envelope.

"Your salary."

"A...ah! But it's not the end of the month yet!"

I blushed a bit and took it in my hands.

"Thank you!"

"If you can't come in some day for whatever reason, you can give me a call here. The number is on a piece of paper in the envelope. I'm only giving you this to give you some incentive to come back. Obviously, I'll normally pay you at the end of the month," he explained.

"All right! I'll remember that! Thank you for your kind words! I look forward to being in your care again."

My excitement was obvious. Money. My money. It might not seem much to some teenagers, but it had a special meaning to me. It was something I'd earned by myself, despite having a handicap.

I then left the store with Miyuki and Seiji.

"So, how was it, Ayako?" Miyuki asked as we walked to the subway station.

"It was okay, I guess, and I was able to study a bit, too. And Takagi-san is pretty nice."

"I told you!" No, you didn't, onee-san.

"I'll leave you two here," Seiji said as we arrived at the station. That surprised me a little.

"All right. See you tomorrow?" Miyuki said, going up to him for a quick kiss on the lips. I looked away, a little embarrassed, before feeling a strong hand on my head, ruffling my hair a bit. "See you later, Ayako-chan."

It was Seiji, but before I could look back, he was walking away already.

"All right, Ayako, let's go home."

"Yeah..."

The day had been kind of busy for me, and I was a little tired. I guessed that a relaxing hot bath would be best once I got home.

This job was a chance for me. I could study a little when there were no customers and no work to do, and I really needed that. I mean, the exams were in a few weeks. I had to be prepared. The only downside was that I couldn't spend as much time as I wanted with Karen and Shizuka anymore.

At that time, I didn't think any more about Miho and her friends, but I was soon to discover that I wasn't finished with her just yet. This was only the beginning of a very tumultuous relationship.

* * *

To be continued.

Next time...!

Shizuka: "It's been a while since we had a study session between girls, hasn't it?"

Karen: "So true! But that Miho Ura, I hope she won't cause too much trouble for Ayako. She really doesn't need any more of that."

Shizuka: "You make a very good guardian angel, Karen-chan!"

Karen: "Oh, please."

Shizuka: "And Ayako's birthday is coming up!"

Karen: "You're telling our readers too much!"

Shizuka: "Next time in Blind Spot, chapter 42..."

Karen: "No! 5!"

Shizuka: "...'Ayako's Tears.'"

Karen: "Shizuka, you're taking up too much room here!"

Author's notes:

This chapter comes at about the same time as Chapter 3 for English readers.

French readers will have to wait a bit, for once (usually, the French version is published first). We all had to wait for the retooled English version. I wish Dave would hurry up more.

Again, the website isn't ready yet, but I can show you what Miho looks like, as she has been drawn by Alice and pictured by a friend of hers, Mystical:
<http://blindspot.teri-chan.net/fr/images/miho.jpeg>

As usual, don't hesitate to send me comments and other goodies via e-mail. I always reply to my readers. :)

Axel Terizaki