

Blind Spot
by Axel Terizaki <axel at teri-chan dot net>
MSN: axelterizaki@hotmail.com - ICQ: 81441376
Website: <http://blindspot.teri-chan.net>
Retooled by Dave Watson

Chapter 5: Ayako's Tears

* * *

"Here's the tea!" I entered my room with a tray holding three tea cups in hand.

Inside, Karen and Shizuka were both absorbed in their textbooks, studying for the upcoming exams. They were sitting with their legs tucked under the kotatsu I borrowed from Miyuki.

"Thanks, Ayako-chan," Shizuka said with a smile as I placed the tray on the table. It was rather cold outside, and some tea to go with the warmth of the heating table was more than welcome.

Karen let out a single mmm-mmm in response. I sat between the two, in front of my computer, and resumed my work.

It was difficult to tell which of us was the least interested in studying right now. Sure, the exams were coming, but for my part, I was still a little preoccupied with Miho and her friends. She hadn't made a move since last time, but it still worried me a bit. That and the awkward situation between me and Ogata-kun...

So here I was, trying to act normal during a study session, reading back my notes and doing some exercises on my laptop. Occasionally I could hear Karen yawning or Shizuka sipping on her tea, but so far, it was a pretty normal study session.

"How about a little break?" Karen suggested, looking up from her books.

"Again?" Shizuka argued jokingly, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, come on."

Shizuka looked my way.

"Ayako-chan?"

She was apparently waiting for my opinion about this matter. I smiled a bit in return.

"I guess a short time-out wouldn't be too bad. We've been at it for a few hours already."

"All right."

Shizuka stretched a little and then placed her elbows on the kotatsu.

"So, girls, how's it going at your school?" she asked, a little curious. It's true that now that we were in different schools, we had much less time to spend together, and many more things to talk about.

"Well, so-so. No news from Ura and her friends. What about you?" I asked back. Karen was sipping lightly on her tea.

"Ah...I've been fairly busy myself at school. I'm in the fashion club. It's pretty fun. We design clothes here, or at least try to. It's much more complicated than you'd imagine."

"Heh, at least that's a change from the usual sports, go or computer clubs every school has," Karen remarked.

"True, true. It doesn't take much time away from me, and I like what I'm doing there."

That's when Shizuka's cell phone let out a short ringtone. She must have received an E-mail. She took it from her pocket and looked at it.

"Boyfriend?" I asked with a little grin.

"Yep," she replied neutrally, and started texting back.

"Who is he this time?" Karen asked, apparently as interested as I was.

"Well, his name is Kensuke, he's captain of the school soccer team. All the girls are pretty jealous I got him, but he's the one who asked me out," she giggled.

"And? And?"

"Well, he's pretty nice and handsome, but I don't like his friends much. You know, everything in the muscles and nothing in the brain," she said, making a few gestures with her fingers, and pointing at her head at the 'brain' word.

"You're too difficult." Karen rolled her eyes, tapping her pencil on her textbook as she listened.

"Heh, look who's talking," Shizuka said back in an amused tone. Karen was also quite difficult when it came to boys.

"Why don't you ever introduce your boyfriends to us?" Karen asked. "Is it that we're not worth it?" she joked.

Shizuka laughed at that.

"Quite the contrary, my dear Karen. They're not worthy of my friends."

I smiled at her words, feeling all warm inside.

"Besides, it'd be quite awkward since I have a tendency to change boyfriends pretty often during the year. I mean, what if he was getting along well with you two? I'd have a lot more remorse when I dump him!"

That was...cruel, in a way. As if every boyfriend she ever had and will have in the future was destined to be dumped.

I listened idly, and was already absorbed in my laptop's screen again when she spoke to me this time.

"What about you, Ayako? Did anything develop between Ogata and you after your first date with him?"

That was when I heard something crack. Lifting my head, I saw Karen's blank stare and the pencil in her hand broken in two.

"Oh, my...you didn't tell Karen yet?" Shizuka asked me, worried now.

"Uh huh," I said simply, suddenly growing very nervous.

It was a known fact that Karen didn't like Ogata at all. We both looked at her, and she was still staring blankly at us. The shock must have been terrible for her, but it was my fault for not telling her sooner...

"H-Here's another pencil, Karen," Shizuka mildly offered in compensation.

Poor Karen-chan...

* * *

"Well, time to go!"

Shizuka was helping a still shocked Karen walk by pushing her around and waved a little at me as both were leaving my house. I guessed Shizuka was going to explain everything to her on the way home.

Karen and Shizuka were my friends, but they were also good friends with each other, despite their rather different personalities. At least, I hoped so. It was difficult to tell, actually. I mean, how could I be sure if they were really friends together, and not just together because they were friends with me?

Someone did interrupt me before I could get too lost in my thoughts.

"Ayaaaaako! My kotatsu!"

It was Miyuki calling me from upstairs. Looked like she wanted her heating table back.

* * *

Ah, end-of-year exams...

Karen and I walked silently to our classroom and our seats. It would only last a few days, but those days always felt quite long and painful for many students here.

Thanks to our little study sessions, I was pretty confident in my knowledge and skills. I opened my laptop and started preparing a blank document in my favourite word processor while waiting for the teacher to hand out the exam papers. The last subject of the day, and of that whole exam marathon, was English, one of my favourites.

The class was silent as usual, and I tried not to be too noisy with my keyboard. When I was really writing something, and pouring my heart into it, I tend to type fast, which intimidated my classmates. They often told me so, actually, after the exams were over.

Even though I could be accused of reading the notes stored on the computer in class, I could never be accused of copying from my classmates' papers during the exam. Who'd be stupid enough to think I could read other people's stuff over their shoulders with my eyesight?

As I said, I was pretty confident about my abilities this time, and was determined to show my parents that having a part-time job was perfectly compatible with studies. The subject was an article from a magazine about security cameras being set up on England's city streets. The article itself was quite old, and our task, after some questions about the text, was to express what we thought of the idea if it were to be implemented in Japan as well. The inspiration came to me after ten long minutes, and I started writing.

Another advantage of working on a computer is that you can correct your errors on the fly. You don't need to write your work, with all your notes and corrections, all over again on a new sheet of paper. It saved me a lot of time, really.

I saved my document on my laptop and onto the USB key the teacher gave me, and waited patiently for the bell to ring so I could hand it back to her. In a sense, I was using modern methods for studies, exchanging documents with teachers without the use of papers. I hoped that, some day, more students would be able to do this without the excuse of being visually handicapped.

I might have said this before, but reading on white paper really tired me. I usually preferred reading white text on black or dark backgrounds by using different color schemes on the computer for my documents, something you can't really do on paper. That said, this didn't mean I hated reading on paper. It's just that it was a bit tiring on the long run for me. That actually just made books last longer in my hands.

Now I was left with nothing to do but think until the time was up. We couldn't leave early, which was a shame really, because it made the rest of the time pretty boring. I mean, I even had to close my laptop once I was finished so I couldn't give others answers through the screen. I mean, the point of cheating is to be sneaky, right? How sneaky would that have been, I ask you? Bah. If teachers were so worried about me cheating, they'd probably seat me close to them so they could monitor me.

I loved finishing early, mainly because my classmates knew very well I finished before when they didn't hear fingers typing on keys anymore. The earlier I finished my paper, the more they stressed out. Was I evil? Certainly not! I was just encouraging them to improve their writing skills, of course!

* * *

FREE! I'M FREE!

I grinned from ear to ear and watched Karen stretching her arms out as we walked away from the classroom and through the exit of our school building.

"Ah, it feels so much better once all those exams are over!"

"You said it," I replied while humming a little tune out of happiness. The sensation of freedom was even more overwhelming than last year's exams. That seemed odd, since those were more important than these ones, since they'd been the checkpoint between middle school and high school.

We walked through the main gate while chatting, happy to relieve the pressure of the exams now that they were over. Besides, we were supposed to meet with Shizuka in Shibuya for some shopping and then a good session of karaoke for the sake of it.

"So, what did you reply on question four?" Karen asked while taking my arm in hers as we left school grounds.

"Oh, please, you know I don't like talking about answers after an exam. It stresses me out."

"You're so lucky. I wish I could be just like you and not worry about exams," she said, dreamily.

"That's not true. You make it sound like I'm a genius or something. I just, I don't know, I don't stress very much before exams. Maybe I'm carefree

that way. However, you can be sure I'll be all stressed out and restless the day before the results are posted."

"I know, I know," she said.

"Ne, you didn't tell me about you and Ogata because you thought I'd be worried, right?" she suddenly asked. Talk about sudden subject changes. This took me a little by surprise, I must admit.

"Uh-huh. Nothing happened, you know. He didn't take me to a love hotel or anything of that sort," I replied. "And well, seeing your initial reaction, I thought you'd be well--"

"Sssh, it's okay. He might be a ladykiller, but I know he is not THAT bad."

I sighed in relief.

"You know, you almost sound like you were jealous of--"

"AM NOT!" She cut me short.

Usually that means 'I am', but I wasn't going to push this further...

"Ah, ah...okay."

We were arriving at the train station and paid for our tickets to Shibuya.

"Karen?"

"Yes?"

I was trying to pay my ticket, but didn't have enough change in my pocket.

"Could you...please let go of my arm so I can look for some money in my schoolbag?"

She sweatdropped.

"Ha ha, right."

* * *

"Aitakatta! Aitakatta! Aitakkata! YES!"

Shizuka's, Karen's and my voice were singing out loud in the karaoke box on the same song. It's pretty rare we do a song in trio, but when we do it, we put all of our hearts into it. The only songs to get such treatment were this one and some songs from Nami Tamaki.

As the song ended, we plopped back down on the couch. Karen took the song index from Shizuka's hands and started browsing quickly so she wouldn't waste time.

"So what are you going to sing next, Karen?" I asked.

"Hmmm...ah, I know!"

She quickly selected a song with the remote control.

"Oh, 'Be Together,' heh." Shizuka noted, telling me the song Karen chose, since I couldn't see it on the screen before it started.

"I prefer 'Our Days' from her, you know." I said, shrugging my shoulders.

Shizuka and I briefly argued about what was the best pre-2000 song by Ami Suzuki, but then 'Be Together' started and we decided to listen to Karen singing instead. It's kind of rude to talk in a karaoke room with someone else singing in the background.

Karen had been singing a lot more during our karaoke sessions lately, as if she had some extra steam to blow off, or something. Maybe it was due to the exams? I didn't know if Shizuka had noticed, but I certainly did. I wasn't sure of what was going on exactly, so I didn't really try to dig in further, even if it did scratch my curiosity now and again. For now, I just closed my eyes and listened to her singing.

"So how's your part-time job going, Ayako?" Shizuka asked when Karen finished her song. She came back to us.

"Haven't you chosen a song yet?" Karen asked her before I could reply to Shizuka.

"Uh, no, I don't feel like it right now. Why don't you pick another one?"

"Hey, that's no fair, I want to hear about Ayako's job too!"

I giggled a little at them.

"Karen, just pick a nice song for background music and we'll chat a bit then." I suggested. "My job? Well hmmm, I could say it's pretty okay so far. It's only been a few weeks, you know, but Takagi-san is pretty nice, and the customers are understanding of my problems too, so it's all right with me. My only concern is Karen..."

"Huh?" I heard her start to protest.

Well, I didn't want to tell her about it, but here we go...

"Ah, you know, you always come to pick me up, but every day it makes you take one more train trip before going home. I mean, I can't ask you to be my taxi driver or something like that. It's not very fair to you, is it?"

I think she was frowning, but I wasn't too sure. It's so difficult to gauge people's reactions when you can't see their face well across a table...

"She has to, or else you'd get lost again," Shizuka said, nudging my elbow.

"Mou!"

"Oh, Shizuka, please. And Ayako, too."

"I was just teasing!" Shizuka defended herself with a giggle.

"Ayako."

I blinked as Karen took my hand in hers on the table.

"Don't ever think like that again. You know, it doesn't bother me at all," she said reassuringly. It was hard to believe that I was making her spend an extra train ticket just for me, though. "We're friends, ne? And as friends, we help each other out, right?"

I nodded a little, but something actually struck me in what she said. Helping others, heh? What was I doing for Shizuka and Karen? Right, I wasn't

doing anything for them. I was just a friend they liked to go out with. I was really astonished by her words, as if it had made me realize something.

"...and I'll pick this," Shizuka said, punching numbers on the remote control for the karaoke machine.

"HEY! I was about to pick a song!" Karen protested.

"Too slow."

After they argued a little again, Shizuka started singing 'Please Smile Again' by Namie Amuro. The thing was, I didn't feel like smiling just now.

* * *

Time flew by incredibly fast.

I stopped worrying about the exams; they were a thing of the past. The results would come in April, right in time for the cherry blossoms. In the meanwhile, I enjoyed our few weeks of holidays with Shizuka. Karen, as she often did during school holidays, went abroad with her family.

I also kept on working for Takagi-san at his bookstore. I was getting more confident there.

"Thank you for your purchase!" I bowed as a customer left after paying for two books. Takagi-san was still reading something behind the counter. Since classes were over until early April, I didn't have anything to study while on break behind the counter while waiting for a customer. I sighed a bit and wondered what I could do. I couldn't play a game on my laptop; that wouldn't be very business-like, would it?

"Something on your mind, Ayako-kun?" Takagi-san asked. He probably noticed I seemed restless and a bit down.

"Ah, it's just..."

I wasn't sure if I could talk about it with Takagi-san. I thought he was a very nice person, but...

"You can trust me. I won't tell anyone, not even Miyuki-kun."

Telling Miyuki about it was the last thing I needed, really.

"There's this thing about what I'd like to do later in my life. Actually, there are a lot of things I worry about lately. Some girls bully me at school, and I feel like I'm being a burden on my friend Karen. My friend Shizuka being in another school makes school life a little less pleasant, too..."

"Hmmm, youth."

"Heh?"

"You've come to an age when you ask yourself a lot of questions about meaningless things."

I frowned.

"These are not meaningless! I mean, I've never really done anything for my friends. Shizuka helps me with my hair and stuff, Karen helps me with well, anything, really, and I feel like I'm not giving them anything back."

He didn't reply at first. I sighed at that, and tried to forget about what I just said. It's not like Takagi-san had anything to do with it. Yet, I just felt like I could tell him about it, just to get his point of view on the matter. Strangely enough, this is the kind of thing you can talk about with relative strangers.

"You'll surely see what you'll give them someday." he finally said after a few seconds of pause. "If your friends stay with you, it's because you're an interesting person to them. Someone they like to be with. You give them something they are in need of."

Why do elderly people talk in such cryptic ways all the time!? I guess he was right, but I wasn't convinced. I doubted Shizuka and Karen were like that. However, we were soon interrupted by the door's bell ringing as someone pushed it open.

"Irrashaimasen!" I welcomed our customer with the best smile I could master at the moment. I let him search for what he came for, and he brought a few books to the counter.

"I'd like these, please."

I couldn't say much about the customer. Actually, I barely looked at him. I was often afraid to deal with people I didn't know and how they would perceive my handicap. I mean, I often tried different approaches when it came to contact and communication with people. Either I would tell them right away and apologize in advance for not seeing well, or I would simply not say a thing and let them wonder why I was looking more closely than usual at the books or why my eyes never seemed to fixate on anything in particular. What was the best thing to do? I did not know.

"This will cost you about 5 340 yen, sir."

He gave me some bills and coins. Another thing I didn't like much was having to take my time to properly check the money people handed me. When I bought stuff for myself, I almost never looked at the change given to me by the clerks. This was a different story; this wasn't my money, it was Takagi-san's, and I had to pay attention. I probably looked weird holding money so close to my face. It felt me feel really awkward.

There was too much, and I had to make change for them. It may seem stupid, but that was the part of the job I liked the least. When there was several people in the bookstore, I could at least pretend I was helping the other customers while directing this one to the counter so Takagi-san could handle the actual sale, but there was only one person here now.

I sighed. Shizuka would be here soon to pick me up, since Karen was out of the country now.

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The rest of the holidays were pretty uneventful, but I wasn't enjoying myself as I usually did, since I didn't have much to do at home. I was soon working more hours than usual at Tamashii Toshokan to keep myself occupied. At least it earned me a lot of money, and my parents were pretty happy that I had a steady job. They even openly fantasized about me working here full time once I graduated.

Needless to say, as easygoing as this job could be, dreams like that were far removed from my intentions. Sure, I guess my parents felt relieved that I had a nice and easy job I could do by myself, but, still...I didn't like how easy it sounded.

April soon came, and with the cherry blossoms, the new school year. Karen and I went to the opening ceremony. We weren't juniors any more, and some students would call us 'sempai' by now. This was a thought that I always liked.

Yet, the class list made me cringe.

"Ayako," I heard Karen say as she looked at the list displayed on the school's board outside. I couldn't see it, and trusted her to tell me all the juicy details about the composition of our class. Sure, I could have taken out my monocular and used it to read the list, but since Karen was there...

"What? What? Did they separate us?" I asked, a little intrigued by the worried tone in her voice. Not seeing anything could make you worry a lot, you know.

"No, worse. Wait."

I watched her intently as she read the paper from afar, trying to confirm it.

"Ryukawa. Hishimoto. Fumogi. You. Me...and that's all, I think."

"What? What?!" I grew impatient.

"Well, looks like we were moved over to class 2-A. They shuffled the classes a little. We're not in class B anymore."

"Uh? That's not a big problem as long as we're together, right? Ryukawa-san is there too! She was a good class president last year, wasn't she? I hope she gets elected this year, too."

Karen turned to face me this time, and placed her hands on my shoulders. What was with the serious stare now?!

"We're now in the same class as Ura. And Ogata too."

My face froze. I smiled nervously.

"You're kidding, right? Karen!"

* * *

She wasn't kidding.

It was even worse when we were once again randomly placed in the classroom, except me and Karen; we had to be kept together. I was now in the far right corner, next to the door in the back of the classroom, with Karen in front of me...

"We're going to have fun this year, Suzumiya."

...and Ura Miho at my left.

"Hahaha...suuuuure." I laughed nervously, but I frankly wondered exactly how bad this was going to be. Apparently her friends were randomly placed in the classroom, from what Karen told me. A tiny drop of pleasure in the ocean of suffering that this year was about to become.

I tried to ignore her during the first class with Kasuga-sensei, who was once again the homeroom teacher of my class. I actually had hopes she would stay calm since nothing had happened until our last period of class, namely

History. I was so very wrong.

I suddenly got a popup dialog appearing on my computer screen alerting me of the low level of the machine's batteries. A quick look at the status showed me the power wasn't plugged in. Since when? Hard to tell. As I looked around to where the power plug would have fallen, I heard a low giggle from my left.

Okay, it looks like she got a headstart on the war she decided to fight against me. How childish could she be? Unplugging my power adapter without me noticing wasn't very funny, to say the least.

I noticed the power cord to be on the floor next to my desk. I bent down to pick it up, taking my time to do it quietly so the teacher wouldn't notice, or, if he did notice, at least I wouldn't be disturbing the class in the process. When I sat back up again, I was facing a black screen. Another giggle confirmed to me that Miho was behind that, too. I sighed and turned my laptop back on; thankfully, she'd only put it to sleep.

And obviously, Karen, being in front of us, couldn't see any of this happening.

Give me a break! This is only the first day of school!

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Needless to say, Karen was astonished.

"She WHAT?"

"I told you! She unplugged my power cable while I wasn't looking and when I leaned down to pick it up off the floor, she took advantage of it to put my laptop to sleep!" I told Karen, trying not to sound too much like a whiner.

I was explaining that to Karen as we walked home, my cane in hand and my arm in hers. Come to think of it, I suddenly wanted to use it as a weapon against Miho, but that wouldn't be very ladylike, would it?

"Really! I'm going to have a word with her first thing tomorrow morning!" Karen was really upset, but this was to be expected. I didn't want her to know at first, but the way Miho behaved all day was really annoying me, and it was no use hiding it from Karen, anyway.

"Don't! I mean...it's not like you can do anything to make her stop, and she has her fangirls, too." Yes, that's what I called the girls who were always hanging around her.

"And I can't see her coming. I'd need eyes in the back of my head."

I nodded a little and looked down at my cane waving idly in front of me. I didn't really need to look in front of me, when I was being led by Karen like that.

The school year didn't start very well, needless to say.

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Every day that passed saw Miho trying to make me go mad at school. This included filling my sneakers with some icky stuff, putting my laptop to sleep, forcing me to lock it everytime I went away from my desk, disturbing me during cleaning duty, or placing things on my chair before I sat down. Talk about

childish. But it seemed to amuse her and make her grin. She was apparently pretty sure no one knew but me and her. Karen occasionally gave a look back now and then, but every time she did, Miho would smile innocently and even wave her hand to her delicately in all her provocative glory.

Lunch was actually the only moment of the day when I didn't have her on my back. As I started eating, though, a familiar voice sat down next to me as I ate my lunch in silence.

"Osu."

I didn't even turn from my curry and rice. I heard Karen sigh in front of me. It was Ogata.

"You're eating with us almost everyday. Admit it, you don't have any friends," she said bitterly.

"Ha ha, very funny, Sakazaki. I just want to avoid Ura and her fangirls."

I would have laughed immediately if I didn't have a mouth full of rice. I quickly gulped it down in hurry to let out my laughter. It felt nice.

"So I'm not the only one calling them her fangirls!"

He chuckled. I looked at him and blushed a little. We were in the same class now.

"And why are you avoiding them?" Karen finally asked, more calmly now. She was trying to finish her lunch as well while Ogata only started his.

"Well uh, I'm not interested in them, that's all. It's not like I want her to follow me around everywhere. She even comes to watch me at the soccer club," he said, before starting on his takoyaki.

I was looking down at my plate to make sure I was putting my spoon where there was food while listening to their conversation. Miho was probably watching us with envy from afar, but I didn't care one little bit.

"Not interested in her, is that it? Why don't you tell her, then?" Karen suggested.

"Well, it's not something you can just say right to a girl's face, you know?"

I could feel the surprise in Karen's voice.

"Oh?"

He just went "hmm" in response. I listened while eating my lunch, since I wasn't in the mood to butt in. I guess Ogata's words made Karen think a little. He was right--you don't reject a girl just like that.

* * *

Days passed, and things weren't getting any better with Miho. She was--how to say it?--evil. Yes, that might be the best word to describe her at that moment. It was pretty depressing to have to deal with someone like her at such a time in my life. I was questioning myself about things like my place in my friendship with Karen and Shizuka, what kind of job I should aim for...

That was something I wanted to ponder clearly, but this or that always prevented me from just sitting there and meditating about the matter. My

parents pressuring me wasn't helping, either!

I was walking with Karen towards our classroom and opened the door first, heading directly for my seat so I could plug in my computer and start it up while the teacher wasn't there yet. Miho was there, chatting with some girls in a corner, and other students were doing pretty much the same in the classroom. No one really paid attention to me, I guess. Fine with me--I didn't really want to stick out in the first place.

"Dammit!"

I looked towards Karen, who hurriedly went to the front of the room. It was so rare to hear her swear.

She took the eraser and started scrubbing some writing off of the blackboard. I was too far away to see what it was, but I already knew what kind of writing it was, thanks to the giggles coming from the other corner of the classroom. The other students seemed to have noticed Karen, thanks to her outburst, and almost went silent because of it. I could just hear faint whispers, and decided to sit down quietly at my desk.

It's been a week or so already. 'Anonym-Miho-ous' writings all over the blackboard of our classroom every morning or on the first class of the afternoon.

Karen went back to her seat.

"Karen...?" I asked softly.

"Don't worry. It was nothing you should be aware of."

I looked away. That's not what I wanted to hear. I knew what was written on it. At least I had an idea. After all, Miho was often addressing me with not-so-nice words every time she talked to me during class. She liked whispering these to me. I tried to stay calm every time, but the truth was, it was really annoying me.

I wanted to hear you say it, Karen. Your overprotectiveness towards me was starting to make me feel really bad, as if I wasn't able to defend myself against Miho.

The rumor machine had been launched a few weeks ago, shortly after classes started. According to it, I went out with a couple of boys, and even went as far as to go to a hotel with them. Wait, that's not all. Concerning school, I was suspected by those rumours of my grades being higher than they were supposed to be just because of my handicap. And the fact that I wasn't wearing any hair accessories, which were pretty popular at the time, was making me look like a fool. Comments like, "She can afford a computer but not hair clips, poor girl," flowed back to my ears occasionally. I guess it probably angered Karen, too...

* * *

"I'm sorry, Ayako, but could you go home without me? We're going somewhere else with the club for practice, and I fear you might feel a bit lost there."

I raised an eyebrow at Karen's words. That was new.

"Where?"

"We're going to that musical school a few blocks away. They have very good sports facilities there, and we got into a partnership with them. Please

understand, it'll only last a few weeks," she said, clapping her hands together and bowing her head in front of me. It's not often Karen is like that.

"Ah...well, if you say so..." I said, shrugging my shoulders.

I then left, alone, cane in hand. Going home was fairly easy because I knew my way around after walking it about every day of the week for over a year. Still, there was a touch of sadness to it, because Karen wasn't with me for this part of it as usual.

Scratch that--I'll be alone for the whole trip back home. Shizuka told me this morning she wouldn't be going home at her usual time because she had some other things to do this afternoon. Besides, I wasn't working these days because there were some carpenters at Tamashii Toshokan. Takagi-san told me the store needed some renovation badly.

I sighed and went on my way.

* * *

We were already nearing the end of May, but the weather outside wasn't anything between spring and summer. It was actually raining pretty heavily.

Not that I dislike that, mind you. It's actually pretty nice not to have to close my blinds since the usual daylight is quite uncomfortable for me, even indirectly when I'm indoors. Every time it rained outside, I was torn between liking it or not. It's quite contrary; I like sunny days but can't stand sunlight, and I don't like rain but I feel better on rainy days.

I was in my room, music playing softly in the background while I sat at my desk in front of my computer. Me, studying on a Sunday? No chance. I was trying to write something--anything. Ever since I started to convince myself that I couldn't do what I'd like the most in the future, which would be becoming a singer, I thought that, maybe, I could do something I liked a bit less but still enjoyed, like writing, for example.

The thing was, while I enjoyed it and the words flowed easily through my mind as I wrote, they were often too rushed and they didn't end up in a good story. I often ended up throwing my idea away and starting something new. I liked writing futuristic stories, but I wasn't exactly knowledgeable in physics, and I was too afraid that I'd make horrible mistakes about that that people would point at and laugh. I guess I needed more planning, and to learn about the methods involved in writing stories.

Yet, I tried again, and again, and again, deleting many files in the process, and creating many new ones. My current project was about a romance story where a tsundere* girl willingly hurts a sensitive guy's feelings. As a result, he gets into an accident where both of his legs are broken, forcing him to use a wheelchair. Of course, the tsundere girl has to take care of him and feels bad about his accident and gradually falls in love with him...

Pretty classic, isn't it? I wasn't happy with it, but I couldn't concentrate enough to come up with something better. This year hadn't started well at all, and it was seriously starting to piss me off. A song by Chihiro Onitsuka was softly playing in the background, trying to help me relax a bit, but I still wasn't at ease.

I was soon hearing footsteps climbing up the stairs of the house. They were kind of loud...

"Miyuki-nee! Stop making so much noise!" I called out while heading to my door to open it and speak directly to her.

However, something quite different from Miyuki showed up at my door.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!"

I took a step back, only to see Karen, Shizuka, and Aoi all together with bags in their hands.

"Heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeh!?"

I blinked twice.

"Heh? Heh!?"

"Sssh. I know we're inviting ourselves, but it's for a good cause!" Shizuka said to me with a grin. Karen was closing the lid of my laptop.

"Heh?"

"Don't worry, I'm just making some room." I saw her place a package on the table.

"Heh?"

Shizuka and Aoi unfolded futons on the floor next to my bed. Three of them.

"Heh?"

"You wanna tell her, Aoi-chan?" Shizuka asked my cousin.

"Oh, sure." Aoi got up and came up to me, taking my hands in hers. "We wanted to celebrate your birthday tonight. All of us, for once! I mean, have a party!"

I looked at her with a nod, not quite getting it.

"Heeeeh...?"

"A pajama party, that is! It's been so long since I've had one!" Shizuka said, as she walked up to me and gave me a big hug.

I was still quite bewildered...

* * *

I've forgotten to mention that Karen was actually a great cook. She often got into lengthy discussions with my mother about food and cooking. They were radically different from the discussions about food I normally had with Karen. The ones with my mother tended to revolve around what kind of ingredients one should use in a bento box instead of how to eat a korone-pan without making the chocolate drop anywhere, if you see what I mean.

That would explain why I wasn't that stunned when Karen arrived with enough food to weather a siege in my room. Mother even trusted her enough to lend her her beloved kitchen. Karen was making hamburgers. Not the thin kind you find in fast-food joints, but real, tasty hamburgers, with homemade buns, perfectly sliced onions, delicious fresh lettuce and perfectly-cooked patties formed from good-quality ground beef. Needless to say, we were all salivating in advance.

While she prepared them, Aoi-chan and I were battling in a game of Ouendan

2 while Shizuka was checking her E-mails on her cellphone.

"I don't like the final song as much as 'Ready Steady Go,' though," Aoi told me as we tried to choose a song to play on.

"You already beat the game? I'm only halfway through it, I think," I said, a little impressed.

When Karen came back with a tray full of burgers and condiments, we sat at my low table while she served us.

"You didn't have to do all this, Karen-chan..." I said, a little embarrassed.

Karen just smiled at me. "Don't you worry about it."

I started eating a bit shyly while the girls eagerly chatted around me.

"It's been so long, Shizuka-chan. I heard from Ayako-chan that you got into the school you wanted," said Aoi.

"Yeah! Classes are pretty interesting there, but there are a lot of things I already know. I have to go through that and get my graduation certificate here if I want to go further, y'see."

"I envy you! Already stepping towards your dream."

I frowned. Aoi-chan, don't you realize how bad I feel about this?

"So what do you think of my hamburgers?" Karen asked me as I bit into one.

"I...it's delicious," I replied softly. I was having this weird sensation that something was very wrong. Why were they here?

"Karen, Shizuka, Aoi-chan..."

I backed away from my plate a little and took a deep breath. I needed to say that now...

"There is something I need to know. Aoi-chan is my cousin, so this doesn't really apply to her, but...Karen, Shizuka...why do you stick with me?" I asked, fearing their reaction a little.

I wasn't doing anything for them, I wasn't of any use. I didn't have Karen's cooking and sports skills. I didn't have Shizuka's wonderful hands, which could do your hair like no one else could, or her competitive mind. I was nowhere near anything like them. I didn't have Karen's rich family and promising future as an athlete or Shizuka's goal in life.

I suddenly felt very miserable and sorry for myself, and, before I knew it, I was shedding tears on my hands, which were on my lap, clenching them slightly.

"S...sorry," I said softly, unable to stop the tears. I was feeling bad because of myself, but also because of the question I asked. Still, I couldn't help but ask it. I was a horrible person, wasn't I? You should never doubt your friends' loyalty, and Karen and Shizuka had never, ever let me down, so why was I reacting like that? On my birthday, of all days? Why was I crying because a friend of mine had cooked hamburgers for me?

Aside from the noise I was making, there was silence in the room. I wasn't sure what I was doing anymore, but I couldn't help crying right in front of them. I'd been feeling bad about a lot of things lately, at school, at home, in my mind...

And yet, I felt two pair of arms embrace me from both sides.

"Ayako-chan..." Shizuka whispered.

I kept on crying a little against them both, unsure of what to do. This was awkward. It was a first for me, to cry like this in front of them.

"I mean, I don't have...*sniff*...anything like you. I don't see well, I'm always a burden for Karen, I don't have any particular skill that's useful..."

"That's not true. You sing beautifully, and you write fun stuff," Karen said softly in my ear while stroking my hair soothingly. "And please, don't ever say that to me again, okay? The part about you being a burden. I'm doing this because you mean something to me," she added.

"But..."

"I hear what you're saying. You sometimes doubt your place here, right?" Shizuka began.

"We've all done the same thing. Sometimes we still do it! But deep inside, you have this light, you see? A light that drew us to you because we were able to see it," Karen added.

"A...light?"

"Yeah. I know, you don't like light much, but look at what you are. You are unique! You're Ayako Suzumiya, a second year high-schooler who has a significant disability, but who does her best to live a normal life with everybody else! Do you see a lot of people with white canes in schools? In dramas on TV?"

"Mou..."

"You should be proud of yourself for being able to go this far."

"And you'll keep going beyond our expectations, right, Ayako?" Shizuka said.

I was trembling all over at their words and gestures.

"I'm sure you'll have a happy life, Ayako-chan."

It was now Aoi's turn to talk to me. She was still sitting at the other hand of the table, facing me.

"I'm proud to be your cousin," she added. "I'm sure your parents are proud of you, too!"

"Thanks..."

I couldn't help it, and lifted my arms up to hug Shizuka and Karen back. Sadly, there wasn't any room for Aoi to slip in, and I hugged her afterwards. I was still sniffing a little.

"Sorry, really. I don't know what came over me. I can't be unhappy with friends like you," I said,

"It's okay to cry a bit sometimes. I still remember how much you cried when we watched Kokoro Library when we were little!" Shizuka giggled, teasing me again.

"It was emotion! e-mo-tion!" I argued back with a faint smile.

"Now that I think about it, the way she hugged her pillow and cried when we watched the last episode of Kaleido Star was cute, too."

"Karen, not you too! That's embarrassing."

Karen giggled a bit.

"I just feel bad about stuff...at school with that Miho Ura, and the fact that I still don't know what to do in the future really bugs me now. And there's schoolwork, too. It's a lot harder this year."

Shizuka nodded.

"About that girl, I had a word with Karen about it, and we think that you should stand up to her. Karen really wanted to punch her out, but I told her that you had to take care of this yourself." she explained.

"Karen wanted to...?"

I looked over at Karen, who looked away in embarrassment.

"Shizuka, you weren't supposed to tell her!"

"Bah, she's old enough now."

Are they treating me like a child?

"I think they're right, Ayako-chan. You should show that girl what's in store when you try to pick a fight with a Suzumiya!" Aoi said to me with a grin. "Just show her that her little attacks and pranks don't have any effect on you, without going as low as she is."

I nodded at that wise advice.

"Yeah, I guess that's what I'm going to do. I'll try, at least."

"And now let's eat before it gets cold!" Karen suggested, obviously wanting us to devour her hamburgers.

* * *

We kept on chatting a little more happily as we ate Karen's home cooking. The cake was also awesome, with lots of strawberries and custard in it.

"And now, it's present time!"

"Heh...?" I looked a little surprised, I didn't expect them to buy me presents. Not like this. We usually celebrate birthdays at a karaoke box.

"Yep!"

Aoi got up and went to a bag I hadn't really noticed in the corner of my room. I guess they'd put it down there when they arrived, and I didn't notice because of how sudden it all was.

"Sooo, we got also in touch with Miyuki-nee..."

"Heh!?"

Aoi produced two packages from the bag. Both were relatively small, and

as I touched them, one of them definitely had the feel of a book. Present number 1: Spotted.

"Can I open it now?" I asked them

"Sure."

"That one is from us," Shizuka said with a little grin.

Then who was behind the other package? I opened the one in my hands, and discovered a book inside, as I'd suspected. It looked like a very colorful light novel I never really noticed before in bookstores.

"'The Melancholy of Haruhi Kawasumi?'" I looked up.

"Yeah, it was really popular last year, which makes me wonder why you never tried it," Shizuka said.

The picture on the cover was of a very energetic schoolgirl.

"I'll read and keep it with care, thank you girls...!" I went to them for another hug, one at a time. They remembered my birthday, planned a party without me noticing to cheer me up...any present would have been great on top of all that.

"And the other one is from your family," Karen said with a little smile.

I picked it up carefully. It wasn't too heavy. It was quite small, which intrigued me. I carefully opened it, and then a gasp came to my lips as the box under it started appearing.

An MP3 player.

Oh my god.

...

"YES!"

I was so overjoyed, that it was hard to believe I'd just been cying a few minutes ago.

"I'll be able to listen to my music anywhere! Sweet!"

The girls giggled a little.

"Don't forget to go thank your big sister and parents downstairs," Aoi reminded me.

"Y...Yeah of course! You can't believe how much I wanted this! I'll be able to listen to music while I read stuff anywhere. I need to load it with my favorite songs now, and..."

I found a small piece of paper inside, wrapped around the player's box with a string, unfolded it and started reading it aloud.

"'If I ever catch you listening to this while walking on the streets, I'll kill you and confiscate this immediately.--Your dear sister Miyuki!'"

I frowned.

"Ha ha, come on, Ayako-chan, they probably thought you earned it by passing your exams in February, don't you think?" Aoi was trying to reassure me.

There was also a small drawing of my sister's head on the note near the signature, frowning at me as though she was right in front of me now. It made me giggle a little, though, and I held it close to my chest. I'll go thank them later, yes...

"And now, since this is supposed to be a pajama party, let's get into our nightwear!" Shizuka giggled, going first by undressing.

"Alright!" I said, cheerfully while doing the same.

Thank you, life. Even if you gave me a bad eyesight at birth, you gave me such precious friends as well. I will do my best to keep them at my side.

* * *

To be continued.

Next time...!

Shizuka: "Is Ayako going to be all right?"

Karen: "Alone in the dark?"

Shizuka: "This isn't a horror story! Or maybe it is? A high-school girl, alone at home...!"

Karen: "It's a shame both of us are gonna be away on that weekend. I don't want Ayako to be all lonely!"

Shizuka: "She's seventeen now, she's a big girl!"

Karen: "She's smaller than me, y'know."

Shizuka: "Next time in Blind Spot, chapter 18..."

Karen: "Chigau! Six!"

Shizuka: "'Someday Under the Sun.'"

Karen: "Fortunately, she won't need to go fetch a heater."

Author's notes:

A kotatsu is a low table with a heater on the underside you often see in manga and anime. Yes, that one with the big blanket. The retooler used one in Japan, and yes, they're really comfy on cold days.

Tsundere is a Japanese word to define a character who's quite aggressive at first, but gradually gets mellower as time passes, or certain events happen. Typical tsundere characters would be Naru Narusegawa or Motoko from Love Hina, Akane from Ranma 1/2, and so on.

Also, in case you're wondering, "mou" is like a whine in Japanese. You can translate it to "Jeez" easily.

Please don't sue me for Ayako's story idea, I beg you. :P