

*By being greedy by being prideful, with a gift for nothing but destruction,
I am indeed the wolf.
Unmindful of what's behind me, undeterred by what's before me,
a needle to the heart that I pay no mind to, my condolences if you happen to be alone.
In some way soon,
to be vanquished by Little Red Riding Hood was decided, no?----*

Chapter 1

--

Not an Ordinary Person

--

That, was on a quiet morning.

The weather that she could see from her bed was gray such that it looked painted heavily with painting tools.

recording

The thermometer drummed out an unkind reading of over and under 6°C on a November season.

Breakfast time was over ages ago, so she opened her eyes to an aching hunger.

Only from sleeping in like this -- for her, today was a blessed day.

The clock already struck 8 long ago.

Hopeless timing on a weekday. Though it would have called for a last-minute decision no matter how much she staggered, today was her school's Foundation Day.

After a long time, spending her morning as she saw fit was doable.

Looking at it again, the outside of her window was a gloomily colored steel blue, making it more evening-like than morning-like.

This being a morning with a good feel to it, made no sense even as a compliment.

And for someone who was awake all of last night up to just three hours ago, the weather outside was a thing she could care less about.

Right now sleep, above all else, was important.

Since it would make her morning good if she were to doze off in her bed, the jury was out on anything to do with the outside---- that said, she tuned out the other side of that window.

She drew the curtains shut.

Closing her eyes once more, she made an effort to go quickly back to sleep.

'.....At least let me dream ordinary dreams until 2.'

With plenty of drowsiness remaining, she found bliss right away.
Her consciousness slipped as if it were sinking.

However,
her humble wish was cast aside without mercy.

"____"

A shrill yet small clanging that she recognized.
It was the unmistakable sound of a ringing telephone.

Business was done as a habit, afterall. Her eyes snapped back open -- the exact opposite of what she wanted to do on both counts.

'Come on, today of all days.....'

The telephone was situated in the first-floor lobby.

Starting from this room, she had a ten-meter-long corridor and a flight of stairs to cover ahead of her.

For her who needed sleep, that distance was as far as getting midway of the far beyond.

.....The telephone ringing was persistently sounding off.

Even if she ignored it until it somehow stopped, getting away with that would make her hard on herself.

".....Alice, get it please?"

Though she put her hopes on the liveliness of her obstinate housemate, she quickly gave that up.

situation

Seeing as her day off was only for her school, her housemate was a rich man's daughter who went to an academy on top of a hill. She had left for school already.

The tenacious force of the ringing telephone was not ordinary.

From that extreme perseverance, she could swear that the volume had been upgraded in being heard.

"Argh, my well-earned quiet sleep.....!"

Left without much of a choice, she got out of bed, and putting on a thin outer garment, she exited the room.

"Whoa, it's coooold!"

Putting her hands together, she warmed her numbing fingers.

This estate had poor heating facilities.

Therefore, the temperature during winter was a formidable adversary that they dreaded.

She knew that the coldness was equal to midwinter even without looking at the thermometer, all the more so if the morning was clouded up by overcast.

Being in the mountains sort of, the mansion was surrounded by a thick forest within its own capacity. Winter was coming much sooner here compared to the town.

The mechanical ringing echoed in the long corridor.

Even in a state of being repaired, the decor of the building gave away nothing suggesting that people lived inside the mansion.
Its isolatedness overwhelmed its splendor.
It was hard to not see it as a haunted house when coupled with the state of the dim morning.

".....Well, it *is* a haunted house.
There's just too much space in this house for two people who live in it."

The number of rings already went past the thirtieth.
The caller was either full of free time, or they were familiar with the conditions of this house.
Something told her it was the latter.

The window above her was bleakly colored.
She sped her pace so that she could snatch up the sound of the heedless telephone call.

Perhaps, in that precise moment, she was struck with a hunch that her happy morning was going to disappear inside a bubble.

As you have it, this was the tale that started the chain of events.

From its lack of a more adventurous spirit, we implore that you turn a blind eye to this.
Whether statistically speaking, or the generally spoken opinion,
the beginning of all things is, when things begin to quietly turn from a typical
ordinariness that was mostly ordinary----

魔法使いの夜

WITCH ON THE HOLY NIGHT

Upon reaching the main gate, the rain had slowed to a drizzle.
The rays of the sun blinked in and out of sight every now and then in the distant sky.
At this rate, the rain would stop in the afternoon.

".....Nothing will come out of that for me."

Unlike the weather, her luck was spent.
She was woken up the morning after a night of staying awake, and then the winter rain arrived.

Things were bad today -- even if she did what she was sent here to do.
Getting a headache at that thought, she left the main gate and went into the school building.

Not one student passed her on her way.
Students in the middle of club activities were also nowhere in sight.
The sign on the reception desk at the staff entrance read 'On a Break'.
The school had given all of its students the day off.
With her, of course, being the notable exception.
The realness of it made her all the more irritated.

Pushing open the door to the staff room, she saw a familiar teacher sitting at his desk.
He wore a plain but crisp dress shirt with his suit,
and thin-framed glasses that kept a sharp eye out for his unassuming self.
He was a mild-mannered man in his mid-twenties, blowing on a cigarette that was inappropriate to the way he actually looked.
From the looks of it, he was still oblivious to her presence.

"Yamashiro-sensei."

She forced the door shut.
Not even openly startled at the sound, the teacher addressed as Yamashiro raised his head.

"Aha! Good morning, Aozaki-kun. I assume you got our request."
"Yes. An hour ago from home. I wasn't prepped ahead of time."

Being a graduate from this highschool himself, there was not much of an age gap between Yamashiro and his students.
That ended in him being loved more by the students than the other teachers.

Soft-spoken on many topics.
He was a person said to be more of a reliable upperclassman than a teacher, and unfortunately, he was not her favorite.

A teacher should be unflappable.

For the students, love and hate blended into a solid wall. Posing as an older brother figure that smiled nicely from a rest spot even without meaning to.....should be avoided. So went her pet theory.

Since Yamashiro was the polar opposite of her ideal teacher, she had a natural inclination to stiffly address him in an unfriendly manner.

.....But then. Being friendly in a smile-provoking sort of way was never part of what she came equipped with.

"*sigh*. You're crabby today too, I see."

"You're imagining things, Sensei."

Concerning today only in specific, that is not true."

Even while answering firmly, she admitted as much with the awful look on her face. Combining her crabbiness at being woken up with her tiredness from being robbed of her sleep, she had a look that stared down a foe.

"I see. This won't be a problem, then. Don't be too hard on him. I'll be straight with you: we have no idea how to deal with him at the moment."

"Sensei. Concerning that -- I didn't get the full story yet."

Surprised, Yamashiro stubbed out his cigarette in answer to her piercing gaze and voice.

"Hm, weren't you told over the phone?"

"I only heard about the transfer student's introduction."

Not much was explained concerning reason and relevance."

Yamashiro's brows rose in admiration for her terse reply.

Her bad temper was not from being called here during the day off, but because the details she got from the call were missing the essentials.

'She sure is rigid, isn't she?' Yamashiro smiled strainedly.

"Sensei. If this is funny, may I go home now, please?"

"No, no, I'm sorry, my bad. This is a serious, non-joking matter. We want to borrow some of your assistance."

"Is this really about the transfer student's problem?"

"Yeah, it's what you'd call a 'special case', or a 'difficulty'."

He.....'Soujuurou-kun' I call him, he's a bit out of place in a lot of ways. We thought it would be more appropriate for someone in the same generation as him to be his guide."

""

Her face clouded over in suspicion.

While it was remiss to force a teacher's duty onto a student, was there more meaning to the transfer student being "out of place"?

It was easy to imagine that there were problems in his behavior and required careful handling. However, saying that he was out of place brought nothing to her mind.

"Being out of place is definitely not an expression to be used, though....."

Even as she gave it careful thought, she was quick to switch tactics.

There was no use in worrying at all.

She was somewhat uneasy by how out of place the conversation itself was, plus the information was a bit overwhelming. Besides -- she would be in bed at this time if she was going to turn the job down, so something smelled fishy.

"I have a question."

"Yes? Oh, he's a second-year student just like you. He's the relaxed type, the kind that listens well to people. On the flip side, you can't get any motivation out of him. But he'd be easy to get along with, no?

Aozaki-kun. He won't be in the same class as you, but please be on good terms wi--"

"I'll determine those things when I ask him myself.

This is not about that. Why did you choose me?"

voice

Her prickly question consented to being the transfer student's guide at the same time.

In her vexation, she placed her own feelings first, seeing the role she was assigned to take on.

While having an extremely self-centered temperament, her pains for something akin to fairness was her strong point.

In its slight departure from the norm, a part of Yamashiro thought that inner strength of hers was dependable.

.....Well.

At times, said strength applied to things that sailed past what they expected, and that was that. Surrendering to the thought of a calamity, Yamashiro had learned to be the countermeasure towards her this past year.

"I'll only ask once more, Yamashiro-sensei.

Why did you choose me for this?"

A little prodded by her pushy demand for an explanation, Yamashiro answered her question.

"Yes, about that.

It's nothing, really. Aozaki-kun, we trust you on a breadth similar to the distance you keep from us teachers. And it's not because you're the iron student council president who disposes by way of beheading by lumping together teachers and students alike for the sake of the school."

".....If that's so, I don't think there's a reason for this house call."

Not trusting it, she fixed the student council advisor with one eye.

A force unbecoming of a seventeen-year old girl,
and a loveliness much like a seventeen-year old girl.

Her gaze held those two traits in an incredible balance. As if he were fascinated, Yamashiro took in the sight with a gentle smile.

"Well, I'd do it if I could out of pure obligation. This choice of personnel has nothing to do with our positions as 'teacher' and 'student council president'.

To put it, I thought only you would give our request a chance without considering profit-and-loss. You were right for the job, so I strongly recommended you."

The main point, 'You agree to just about anything' being said along those lines.

"---Yamashiro-sensei."

"Oh, dear God! Now, now. Don't glare, don't glare. I've told you, smile for him if not for me.

Now then, if you understand, let's be on our way. We've already made him wait for so long.

Also, thank you for coming here in this rain. I'll be sure to take you back in my car."

Yamashiro smartly got to his feet.

Dismissing his offer as her only reply, she left the staff room.

He continued waiting for one hour.

Sooner than expected, the weather had little rain left.

Faintly, he listened to the sound of the raindrops.

Only a rectangular desk was soberly placed inside the room.

Only one person was there. There was no one else in the room besides him.

Too much time had passed since he was lead into this room, and given the offer to wait while sitting down.

If he were an honest student, now was his time to speak for his discontent and anxiety.

Like a scarecrow in the middle of a field, the boy maintained the order to stay put.

The cold burrowed into his core.

With the end of November, the morning temperature started to let the winter in.

The room temperature was more or less a bit better than outside.

The room was cold -- either he missed the teacher's suggestion to turn the heater on, or he had never seen this type of heater before.

While aiming light breaths at his numbed fingers, he made an unsure observation of the area.

This dreary room was apparently the conference room.
An enrolled student would see the conference room in its exaggeration. He only saw a simple, spacious room.

In the absence of any scent of life, it casually reminded him of a dry cave of sorts.
With nothing for him to do, he saw to giving serious thought on what was talked about in a cold place such as this.

"....., hmm."

Not having a sure answer from his musings, his attention was back to the sound of the rain.

The rainy sky bore only a tiny similarity to the rainy sky in the mountains.

No, it scarcely held back the original.

Becoming solid in sound and smell made them truly the same.

Finding the same things from the mountain in the world below it---
those trivialities brought a quiet joy to him.

He liked the town drenched in rain.

While clear skies were normally a happy sight, said delight came with a different perspective. Thus, he was happy to see the rainy sky.

As the street clouded by the rain built up just a bit of the earth's smell, his reluctance made him yearn all the more for his hometown.

Only then, his uneasiness at coming to the city would be a bit affected by the sense that it was fading away.

"----"

.....And, he immediately lost heart in one breath.

Unbelievably pathetic. Even after his move two weeks ago, there was a lower dip to his shoulders whenever he became absorbed in his attachment for the memories of his hometown.

Convincing himself that it was not from the wrongness of his cherished new life here, he realigned his one eagerness and continued to politely wait.

Faintly enthusiastic, his mind was on the sound of the rain.

To him, it seemed painless to wait in vain for this length of time.

In one deep breath, his presence of mind swallowed down his hour-long neglect and the freezing cold.

Akin, perhaps, to spending three years on a rock, or the relentless Forty-Seven Ronin. Without being a question of advantage, he had frightful staying power.

Only at present, that was this boy's strong point.

Meanwhile, she was absolutely fuming.

While making their way to the conference room, she was given the profile of the person they were going to meet.

By some way, this person was born and raised deep in the mountains where they had no electricity.

Nowadays, electricity was rampant among more than half of civilized society.

"Talk about hopelessly cut off. We're not talking pre-war or somewhere near post-war. This is so Robinson Crusoe.....!"

She was not above the resentment.

In a way, that village deep in the mountains was a seemingly isolated, long-time settlement.

Its only means of communication was through the mail they received at least once a month from the village below it, to which modern Japan could not be associated.

Still, however. What with now, the highways, and the JR.....Japanese National Railway.....which was the artery running throughout the country, even said mountain village's nonexistence was not set in stone.

One thing was for certain: humans that survived in those conditions had lifestyles that were outside of imagination, as far as they were concerned.

"When you say 'no electricity'.....something like a payphone was there since it just didn't reach the village, right?"

"Absolutely none. Phones were what surprised him at first when he came to live here. 'Convenient, these phones.' He had a sort of serious expression when he said that. 'They are now that you say so,' I went and checked back with him."

Ahaha, her teacher laughed. She threw him a sideways glare.

Whatever made him happy, Yamashiro seemed to have hit things off with the simple-mannered countryboy.

".....Not even in their houses, huh?Since even my parents' home was deep in the mountains, I guess electricity can't be said to not run through there.

---Does he not know about school, **too**?"

"Nope. Even though he knows how it works, it seems today's his first day to actually be here. That made him nervous, he was extremely off the mark even when I talked him through it.

Hmmm, maybe he's one of those wild animal boys? A wolf-boy raised by wolves, maybe? Nah, that's an expedition story!"

"....."

"Wha--!? Hey, no! Aozaki-kun, you're scaring me! I'm kidding, just kidding! No glaring, please!

Don't worry. I got the sense that he's a good boy from talking to him!

How do I put it? It's like he's a small animal that doesn't get words."

"Yamashiro-sensei. That example is not for putting someone like me at ease."

Bluntly replying, she pretended to be going without electricity in her life, and still did it briskly cloud her usually sullen expression.

Afterall, that world was a mystery to her.

All of the teachers agreed, even as they surrendered with their hands up.

With the truth being that she, too, wanted to surrender and go back to her warm bed, her no-account self-worth was the final blow that pushed her back.

By being marked as capable, she took upon the previously mentioned by deciding herself to be just as capable. No matter what the background and the details were, simply tossing it aside did not come as an option to her.

With her back to the sound of the rainfall, she strode through the chilly hallway.

The conference room was already in sight.

Steadily growing a wrinkle in the middle of her forehead, she swung her long hair and made her way towards the yet-to-be-seen foreigner.

Keeping a graceful pace, it was equal to charging into a battlefield.

".....So, Aozaki-kun.

I have faith in you, but let me just double-check to be sure. How do I put it? Be nice, please. Won't you give him a smile if you could?"

"Forcing a smile is my weak point. I'll give it my best shot for now."

"Oh. I see, that's good.

.....Actually, that's really good to know. So even you have a weak point yourself, Aozaki-kun."

Just as Yamashiro shrugged his shoulders, they arrived at the previously mentioned conference room.

As he winked at her with an emphasis on 'being nice', he started to reach for the conference room door.

His gesture to her only caused her irritation to grow.

".....I know, I'm not a charming person. But I can't make myself give anything close to a smile.Besides, when it comes to dealing with people, Tobimaru's your best bet."

While she was resigned to her own lack of charm, giving it some thought herself -- being called to the school on its day off while she was running low on sleep was worth nothing, not even a smile.

On top of that, the culprit that began to change her when she was in elementary and not highschool -- was a person with good looks.

.....It was duplicity that said person was free of responsibility. That being said, there was neither justice nor responsibility done for her when it came to being forced to work for the school.

At least, according to her.

Given once, she wanted to gripe about the poor measures they took to have his arrival not fall on a weekday.

".....Nope. He's an enemy -- I'm calling it. He's an enemy -- a guilty party.

I regret to say that he is an enemy with a recent extenuation.....!

Things are going to shape badly for us both. Honestly! Of all the times he's picked, it's when we're busy----"

With a stinging headache that came from being sleepy, it added ten percent to her aggression.

However harmless the person on the other side of this door was, whoever so dared to disturb her sleep became her enemy.

Seeing her irritation time itself close to critical peak, Yamashiro pushed the conference room door open.

.....Her view slowly opened to the side.

She had not a care for whatever the mood was.

Maintaining that straight gaze, she charged into the conference room----

That, was her meeting with the outlandish enemy.

Turning the camera once more to meanwhile.

Rewinding time for just a short period.

Being told, "be free to do nothing",
was an irreplaceable luxury for certain people,
and an unbearable ordeal for certain people.

While being jealous on one hand, her active self put too much doubt on the high-end product she was unwilling to receive.

While being charitable on one hand.....he expected the bitter sting that would provoke his nostalgia. For the present, though, his passive self's stubbornness was admirable in the face of all this waiting, and his specific discontent for it went unseen.

Coming natural to him, he kept his posture straight as he looked at the gray sky. Even for a wait that lasted a full hour, why, with the city being on the other side, he was getting nothing for it. To put it in his own way, he could stay waiting for as much as it took him, as long as he had the sound of the rain.

*"But, isn't it close to passing 9 o'clock?
.....Hm, what now?"*

Not sure what to do, he kept his eye on the clock for now, and paid faint attention to the sound of the rain.

conversation

On its day off, the school building was free of clamor.
The rain pelted the window in droplets.
The.....discord of the quietly sinking atmosphere.
And,

powerful-sounding clicks that moved straight along.

".....Oh, good. I thought they were forgetting me."

He heard the heavy footsteps of an adult's along with another light set of footsteps. As he blew a sigh of relief, the conference room door slid open.

"Sorry, there. We had you waiting for a while, didn't we?"

The first thing he saw was a man, wearing glasses and a sheepish smile.
This was definitely Kazuki Yamashiro, the same teacher who guided him here.

"Oh. What? Did Satonaka-sensei leave?
.....That's just terrible! I told him to stay here and talk to you."

Yamashiro hung his head in further shame.
Following behind him,

her mouth tight with disapproval.
Entering with a gaze fixed straight ahead, was a girl with long, raven hair.

"----"

A gasp of astonishment.

world

The sound of the rain striking the window faded from his hearing.

.....In this time.

He was taught for once -- with its roots in illusion, losing all sense of time moving forward was quite real.

"....."

For only a moment, she blinked as if surprised.

The reason was unknown.

Just as she had been told, the boy was the very picture of the simple and honest countryside, yet it sat poorly with her intuition to agree with this.

"----"

For only a moment, his eyes opened as if surprised.

The reason was clear.

.....However, since words fit to properly describe that reason were out of his reach, in the end he left his own answer column blank.

In this moment.

The boy surely felt that he had been touched by something that felt like destiny.

"Let's introduce you two. This is our transfer student, Soujuurou Shizuki-kun.

Shizuki-kun, this girl is going to be your guide.

As our student council president, she volunteered to give you a tour as your new friend during our day off. Aoko Aozaki-kun."

---The voice and the sound of the rain were faintly far away.

Such were the feelings of their first encounter.

For better or for worse, like sparks crackling as they scattered, such was their nonchalant beginning.

According to popular theory among the students.

Aoko Aozaki was always bad-tempered.

What with this being roughly ninety percent bias, Aoko still had no time for herself to be continuously peevish day in and day out.

By just having a personality that was loathe to give an excuse for herself, often slight, at times glaring, she was still only ever seen nettled by something unseen. With the ninety percent therefore being bias, it was only one of the school's Seven Scares that made too much from sheer gossip.

The remaining ten percent, however, was true.
Probing the cause of the chronic headaches that she went through -- it was Aoko's knee-jerk reaction to be disgusted by the harmless and innocuous.

Today told a tale of that ten percent.
Occurring only at this point in time, her wrath was pure,
but still selfish and seemingly childish for her actual age.

The conference room was dark, dyed in the rain's tint.
In order to save on the electric bills, the school made a rule to have the lights disabled during the daytime.
In that darkness, stood the person in question.

At first glance, he had a solemnness suggestive of a wildflower.
With a habit of straightening his back, his overall strength was lacking. He was tame if nothing else.
Even "lanky" was a word that fell apart on its own -- he was "lanky" in terms of weak.

A leaner-than-average physique showed even from the top of his uniform.
With inky black hair that was given just enough trimming, his boyishness was lost on his eyes in particular, while still evidently there.
Well. To put a generous word for his commonplaceness, he obviously had to be called a youngish sort of man and not a boy.
In a way, the quiet air about him made him look like an adult.

.....The estimation probably set off Aoko's 'reasonless repulsion'.
In his extremely natural state, the boy comfortably blended into the setting of the conference room. Even though he was the foreign element in school, they were put in the position of otherworldly strangers.

"----

They were entirely unknown agitators, as if calling their deep-seated moral decency into question.
Aoko felt herself flicking her switch towards "CAUTION".

"----*I can't believe it.*

just

I'm not being pointlessly angry right now, am I.....?"

situation

It was annoying to not know things. All the more so if it involved personal feelings.
For someone that cut no corners like she did, as something that felt like a barb that made her worry despite how painless it was,

"Heeey, ha-ha-ha! Aozaki-kun, come on. Won't you say hello?"

including the voice that smoothed over Yamashiro's side of things, it was rather very irritating.

"---Say hello?"

After throwing a glare at Yamashiro with a sideward glance, Aoko squarely fixed the boy with her gaze.

Well, to a third party, she turned her scowl upon him.

At this moment.

Without meaning to, the force of her feelings skewered the boy she just met -- the boy who was completely void of any blame.

"Oh! We kept you waiting, Shizuki-kun."

The boy whose name was called, Soujuurou, pulled himself together.

Loosening his rapt focus,

he drew a breath as if swallowing the dizziness.

Perhaps seeing nervousness in his behavior, Yamashiro kindly smiled, and addressed the girl standing next to him.

"Let's introduce you two. This is our transfer student, Soujuurou Shizuki-kun.

Shizuki-kun, this girl is going to be your guide. As our student council president, she volunteered to give you a tour as your new friend during our day off. Aoko Aozaki-kun."

At Yamashiro's introduction, the girl took one step forward.

There was no pardon in her gaze.

Mostly reaching towards violence, her stare seemed to be giving him an appraisal.

Meanwhile, a surprised Soujuurou managed to steady himself after taking a direct stare to the face.

Though he was never met with this sort of greeting before, he unwisely thought it was nothing short of usual in the city.

Their exchange was sublime to the third party observing them.

A hooligan who had a different idea of connecting with the other person, and a bumpkin who earnestly looked on with a curiosity for the other person.

Aside from those involved, it bordered on torture for people nearby.

For example -- Yamashiro, who stood behind Aoko.

Even though he saw it fit to choose an honor student as the guide, the honor student was in a bad mood for some reason. Even now, she was causing the air to quiver with tension.

Yamashiro saw himself making a terrible mistake.

Based on what was happening here:

the female student who meticulously took care of everything, was conversely a tempest that rocked the school when she was mistaken in her approach.

Joker

Since the overarching pattern led to the devil who started it all, the teacher who was on the scene at the time was mostly the one taking the blame for misconduct.

"Well...OK. Good to see you two getting along!

.....OK, then! Guess I'm done here!"

With a damp quality to his voice as he laughed, Yamashiro backed slowly away and towards the door.

"I'll be at the staff room, so come check with me once you're done.

Aozaki-kun, please? Do your best, please?

Let's just say that under these circumstances, I want to be trusted with your generosity as our student council president!"

Yamashiro left the two of them staring at each other.....or better put, he left one glaring at the other one...

Now the only ones remaining were: the boy who seemed like innocence personified, and the girl who had her arms folded in disgruntlement.

A brief silence.

Like two shogi players anguishing over who should go first. Then Aoko found herself doing all the actual thinking here.

She put her annoyance to bed for now.

Since she forgot why he sickened her in the first place, Aoko sighed deeply, turning to Soujuurou.

"Oh, well. Yamashiro-sensei's a lamp in broad daylight since when. ----So, you. Name?"

Her harsh tone criticized the boy who never spoke for himself. The boy, too, was deaf to the sarcasm leaking through her voice.

Countering her venom with a look that had never seen it before,

"Yes, Soujuurou Shizuki. Aozaki-san, am I correct?"

he answered as if he had no reason to be uncheerful.

"Let's drop the 'san'. It won't stick.

How does 'Shizuki-kun' sound to you?"

"Sound'? What does?"

"What I'm going to call you. I'm asking if the 'kun' at the end of your name is OK."

"----"

".....What now? Did I say something funny?"

"Well, very."

Quickly answering as if it were usual, the boy then caught himself, thinking, 'Oh wait, was that even right?'

"No, nevermind. It's actually very common.

'Shizuki-kun' will do. How does 'Aozaki' sound to you?"

"Good. Pleasure."

Giving that offhand reply, Aoko turned on her heel.

Uncommitted that she was, her policy was to get the job done when she was put in charge.

"Sorry, but I'm not going to make this easy.

Time's of the essence, so we'll make this quick."

"That helps. Time sure is important."

sarcasm

Aoko's straight ball flew right past him without hitting its mark. Again.

"----"

However they responded, people were acutely aware of the other's ignorance.

nothing

Annoyed that her recent full-fledged attack hit air, Aoko struggled to make herself go out into the hallway in a professional manner.

The windowless hall was absent of people and sunlight streaming in from outside.

If the conference room was a natural cave, out here struck her with the image of a man-made prison.

'A hall that keeps me in and will never let me out.' Aoko gave one more sigh.

"Let me ask first: did you understand what you heard from Yamashiro-sensei?"

"Yes, I know how the school works now.

It's still sort of hard for me to imagine that every person in this building is my age."

".....Ah. OK, gotcha."

Aoko stopped herself from putting a finger to her forehead.

This boy, named Soujuurou, was blind to the first thing about school. He needed to have it concisely explained to him that it was a place where lots of people went to study.

Highschool teachers made use of a lot of field expertise and insight to teach organization and creativity to their students.

She never even dreamed of a day when school had to be described by its central idea.

A heavy emphasis on basics still went too much into basics.

.....Whereas Aoko doubted his ability to attend classes at highschool level, Yamashiro supported his impression that, "whatever will be, will be."

While not quite reaching, the boy did barely manage to get through his entrance exam.

".....*Hey, it's not like I should care, though.*"

Aoko secretly muttered to herself while striding through the hallway.

'I can do this, I only have to put up with Rip Van Winkle just for this day---- forget that, I *want* it to be just for this day,' she told herself.

"Aozaki?"

The boy quietly called on Aoko's attention.

"What?"

"I also have a question, if you don't mind."

"Tell me. What?"

"Even though I'm probably just imagining things, I keep seeing you scowling at something.

Don't tell me that this morning is being a bad one for you?"

He had a look that sincerely raised his worry, asking, 'Have you eaten?'

"----"

Conk! Another hammer strike to Aoko's head.

Aoko was definitely scowling at Soujuurou since before.

Then she really was scowling at him.

She was, in fact, scowling at everything.

It was a habit even for her housemate to tell her:

*"Aoko, the way you stare at things is intense for ordinary people.
At least try to be a little bit more permissive."*

She was plainly sending out the warning: 'put me through more pain and I'll go berserk'. This boy, who felt he was imagining that, could only be this slow to catch on.

".....*Making fun of me, are you?Maybe? Or not? Hard to tell from here.*"
"?"

She made herself think that while she was in no position to point fingers.

Suffice it to say, Aoko's gut instinct took over.

The duller-than-average transfer student obviously thought he was removed from the definition of an "exotic living creature". So.

".....OK. If you insist on me telling you what you can't understand by yourself---- I *am* scowling. Nope, I was *definitely* scowling.

You're not seeing things. I'm hinting at how I feel with how I stare. I do that because talking about it is a chore, and so is hearing it in my own voice."

The invader clapped his hands together at Aoko's words.

"Now I see. I don't understand why you want to do that, but that sure is a quick way to tell people what you want."

Soujuurou openly agreed.

But he was oblivious to the type of emotion Aoko sent out.

He could read the words, but the meaning refused to sink.

It felt like the line supporting his train of thought was cut up and strung in a series of blocks.

".....*I see it now. This...guy, is so out of place.....*"

At last, Aoko found herself agreeing with Yamashiro's words.

It seemed the boy's strangeness was not founded on his capacity to be thickheaded.

.....Still, though. This place, for him, was like a foreign country. And the degree of jet lag that she could let slide only went to people of the civilized persuasion.

"Well, let's go to your classroom first."

Aoko pulled herself together while saying so.

At that, Soujuurou came to a halt with his hand raised.

"Oh, one more thing."

Aoko willed the ever-composed Soujuurou to be quiet before then.

She held herself back with a finger to her forehead. She felt uneasy in a way that was indescribable.

"This is also a small question, but why are you angry? Does your family make a living out of something like being angry?"

"----"

A long silence.

She had come a long way at this point, but Aoko's regret for taking that phone call this morning stung like a hornet's sting.

No offense meant to the boy following her.

'This is a normal thing, just a normal thing.' Repeating that in her mind, Aoko caught herself from saying it out loud.

"It's not entirely your fault per se, nothing you should worry yourself over.

It's just, my head's being grabbed by the huge difference in advantage if I weigh the situation where I'm going to be wide awake until noon and this moment right here."

Skirting his question with her answer, this time Aoko went on her way.

She completely tore her view from the rude stranger that was Soujuurou Shizuki.

Whatever type of average that he was, his character was extremely average. A person who was decent down to his bones. His image color was bound to be white. Gender: Male. Appearance: Idling simpleton.

As Soujuurou saw it, the brisk, spirited behavior of the one named Aoko Aozaki was a benefit for him.

She made no unnecessary movements, was quick to move, and came to a clean, narrow stop.

The way she pointed to things,

the way she moved when going through the hallway and the classroom,

and the few times she looked back to make sure he was still following her.

Every move she made was genuinely impressive, making it hard for him to tear his eyes from her.

Aoko first led him to 2-C's classroom.

The scent of people was thicker here than in the conference room. Soujuurou really had no idea what this room was for.

After getting a clipped description from Aoko, they had a tour of perhaps several types of special purpose classrooms, the gym, the cafeteria, the changing rooms, and the nurse's office.

Maybe because Soujuurou asked for an explanation wherever they went---- by the time they made it to the second-floor auditorium, time itself had been frittered away by their tour.

".....This is bad."

A grave look on his face, Soujuurou brought his feet to a halt.

"Just twenty minutes more and it'll be 1 o'clock."

"Wha--? You're kidding, right? Our school building isn't that big."

The tour started before 10 this morning, so roughly three hours went by, making it 1 o'clock now.

But the tour went for much longer than it had to.....

".....I suppose. Asking nonstop about everything wherever we go would eat up time, you know. It's weird how we didn't make it till sundown."

Aoko fixed Soujuurou with a searching glance.

The sarcasm was a scolding flung his way, fully knowing that he was oblivious to the former.

".....*Huh?*"

Then. Whatever sort of change came over him, Soujuurou cast his eyes down in remorse.

"*Oh, wow---- he actually gets it.*"

Soujuurou seemed like a different person when he was upset.

It was, up to now, unlike the wooden responses she got no matter what she ever said, and it was causing a strange familiarity to well inside her.

Then, she had no idea why, but sure enough, Aoko became irritated for no reason.

"OK, what exactly is bad?

And don't say it's because you can't get your head wrapped around all the things you've learned today."

"Yes, that too. But school can wait. It's the time that I'm worrying about."

Soujuurou anxiously looked away.

Unlucky for him, he was standing in a hallway without any windows, as he tried to get a feel for what was going on outside.

".....Ahh. Minding the time means you have things to do.

Riiight, sure. You're telling me you'll mess up people's plans, and only you get to come and go as you please.

Wow. You're decent for someone who doesn't look like it."

"? Err, you don't have to praise me."

"I'm not praising anyone!"

Aoko burst out.

"So?"

"So?"

"So what? What exactly are you up to?"

Realizing what Aoko meant, Soujuurou nodded and, serenely,

"I want what I'm doing over there to stay a secret."

gave a joke of an answer in a non-joking way.

".....Even as I start to adjust, I'm sometimes close to fainting at the rate this kid goes....."

She was, of course, furious. Swallowing all of her feelings down, Aoko put on her best smile.

"Shizuki-kun?"

Aoko slid one foot forward.

"But it's a secret."

Somehow sensing that he was in huge trouble, Soujuurou slid one foot back.

Slide, slide.

Like a magnet, Aoko advanced no matter how far back she fell.

Smiling still, her temple somewhat twitched.

"This, is going to be my last question.

----Is it fun to tease me?"

He swore by all he stood for that it was not, but Aoko's forced smile would stay in place if he tried to prove his innocence.

".....I understand. I'll explain it."

His hands went up in surrender.

Aoko ceased pressing on, and the smile that was unbecoming of her also went away.

"The truth is, I have a part-time job that starts at 1.

But that's prohibited here, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is.....oh, you thought it had to be secret because it's banned? Silly, just go down and get it approved to solve the problem."

"I know. I had it approved on the day of the exam."

"Ohh."

'He had it all planned out in the end.' Aoko brightened her expression.

Then.

"But, I didn't get the other one approved."

"? The other one? You mean, you're working two jobs?"

".....I even had it cut down to two.

My living expenses are a problem all on their own, but I need to earn money for both that and my tuition. Still, don't you think it's too much for them to let us have only one place to work at?"

".....No, but I think it's too much what's coming from your end."

While he appalled her, Aoko also had her opinion of Soujuurou changed just a tad. She thought it was outstanding of him to willfully do whatever it took to cover his living expenses.

Aoko Aozaki was rather weak to a mature situation like that. Even her recent anger had completely faded.

.....It was a tune-changer for her. It never crossed her mind that she would hear words like "part-time job" come from this blissfully ignorant boy.

".....Then there's nothing we can do about that.

Alright. I'm letting you go, now that I know what you're going through."

"Aozaki, are you OK with this?"

Was she OK with what? While the question threw her, she knew that Soujuurou was only acting considerate.

.....That, too, took Aoko by surprise somewhat.

People's feelings were a bigger mystery for the boy than she thought.

"It's fine. I'm going home now, too."

As it happened, the option to stop by the staff room was nowhere close to being principled.

According to Yamashiro -- telling him she was done with the school's transference procedure would only leave the gratification salute.

'Sensei, tour's over!'

'Good work! Shizuki-kun, good work, too! So what did you think of our school building?'

'Thank you very much. What can I say? It's very school!'

'Ha-ha-ha, very good, very good. OK, I'll see you in class tomorrow!'

She was *not* going to be the participant to an otherwise empty closing of today's events.

"Never you mind Yamashiro-sensei.

He likes the staff room where he sits back and makes his students do all the hard work, so he'll be waiting forever.

Scratch that. He has to wait, right?"

"Alright. If you're OK with it, Aozaki, then it's OK."

"?"

So, what was OK?

Aoko was really thrown by what Soujuurou had to say.

"Then I'm off. Thanks for today."

"It's for today only, nothing else."

Aoko made a sweeping motion of her hands, urging him to hurry up and go.
As if he took a liking to her gestures, Soujuurou smiled like he was happy.

Maybe it was because he always looked vacant, but the gentleness of his face stood out in the eyes of those who saw him.

It had a soothing effect that would have them smiling back at him without thinking.

Of course,

his smile had no effect on Aoko Aozaki.

"OK, see you!"

"Huh?"

Leaving her with words he would say to an old friend, Soujuurou went.....
into the nearby classroom instead of continuing down the hallway.

"Wait a----"

His retreating back was heading straight for the window.

Slowly, he pulled it open.

Along with the chilly November wind, the sound of the misty rain swept right in.

And Aoko Aozaki realized with a jolt what was happening.....it was like lightning!

"Hey no-no-no-noooooooooooooo!!!"

Soujuurou had one foot on the windowsill, and he froze at the terror-stricken expression on her face.

"What in God's name are you trying to do!?"

"Do'? I'm just going to work."

"That window is not where people enter and leave the building!

Did you even think about the floor we're on right now!?"

At that, Soujuurou let out a small gasp.

".....That's fatal. I have to be extra careful coming down from the second floor."

"What's not careful is your brain....."

She was worn out. Lucky for her, Soujuurou missed hearing her brazen remark.

"FYI, this window here is not where people come and go."

I should have made that clear to you first."
"I'm aware of that. I was being pressured by the time.
Thanks, I'll be careful from now on."

Taking his foot off the windowsill, Soujuurou shut the window.
His clearly pristine uniform was soaked with rain now.

".....It's fine, but I don't care.
How you get yourself out of this building isn't my problem. Just, spare me from seeing
you do that, OK?
More importantly.....are you really coming to school starting tomorrow?"
"I am. I'm nervous, but you did show me around."

The boy said his farewell and ran into the hallway.
This time, he used the downstairs entrance like every normal person did.

".....**sigh**. Nothing bad'll happen, right?"

Appalled as she was, she had a flashback of him running off.
While she wanted nothing more to do with the countryboy that he was, the bizarre
moment stuck with her.
Maybe he worried her. Maybe he made her bristle. She was one notion short of an
answer.

In the first place, why did she just happen to feel angry with the transfer student when
he was a nobody?
Today was bizarre, the transfer student was bizarre, and her emotions were bizarre.
And in her puzzlement, she took a step back and thought, 'Maybe, I was actually
supposed to be having fun, instead of getting angry?'

"----Oh, well.
Today ends here, anyway."

The sound of the rain echoed in the silence.
The gray sky deadened the state of time.
Was it still mid-morning, or was it the evening? No way to tell.
She and Yamashiro were probably the only ones in the school building.
Being alone in the dark, unlit classroom was awfully eerie.

Aoko pulled up her left sleeve.
The time on her simple, small wristwatch was indeed approaching 1 o'clock.

".....There's still time."

Saying so, Aoko cast her eyes down at the ground through the window.
In the drizzle, the boy in his uniform ran without an umbrella. A sight that she was undoubtedly used to, made a powerful impression on her.

Just as she swore to do, she went in a circuit to avoid the staff room.
Aoko was torn by Yamashiro's offer to take her back in his car, since her "vengeful" plan to make his day off just as bad as hers was a hundred times more appealing.

She arrived at the entrance, quiet as a mouse, and she shook out her bright red umbrella.
Just as the morning's forecast said, the rain that continued past noon became a light drizzle.
At this rate, it was going to stop in an hour or so.
As Aoko readied herself for the trip back home, sunlight appeared in the distant sky.

"----Well, I guess even that's not a bad thing."

She shrugged in resignation.
Aoko was indifferent to rain, but she kind of enjoyed having her red umbrella out as she walked.

Placed at Misaki High and with a distaste for the colorful, all the teachers there could say that Aoko's red umbrella was a rarity.
There was a time when 'Aozaki's used-to-be-white umbrella' was a popular ghost story, and it apparently featured Aoko instead of ghosts.
Aoko took the suspicious umbrella with her to the station of Misaki Town.

The private highschool she attended was named after the town itself.
Although a huge portion of Misaki Town was made up of plowed fields and forests in the past, it went on to sharply modernize with the force of the high-growth period for ten years.

To those petitioning to spare the rurally wholesome Misaki Town, the mayor cried, "We won't spare what will stick around!", stamping out the minority. Long-term urban development started.

Pooling more than enough money for the project,
Misaki Town went from a reasonably normal town to a town that represented Misaki City in the span of ten years.

.....Even so, the modern aspect was first adapted by Yashirogi, the neighboring town.
Elegance
Sophistication was also granted to Misaki Hill in the next town over.

".....No surprise there. You can't change what was always a post-station town set in the mountains. It would be one thing to level them, though."

Since the process to urbanize settled for a flat station layout, the hills and the mountains remained untouched.

Those that were living in Misaki Town for a long time were apparently able to keep funds from being carelessly drained.

Thus, even with the arrival of people from the city, well, they say that the incredibly countrified scene was not all they were shocked by -- Misaki Town was really turning into a half-accomplished provincial city.

In that town, Misaki High was a private highschool that was built before that. As the second school building, the first school building was built further up in the mountains.

Far away, and on a rugged slope, the route leading towards school was now an animal trail. For a list of reasons, Misaki High was closed down twenty years ago. A new school building was founded in part due to the donations of a certain department store group who were based in Misaki City. With that, the school building in the forest was forgotten as an old school building, and Misaki High was opened once more.

To be honest, however, a big number of Misaki High's students were out-of-towners. Simple folk who were raised to be decent in this country town preferred a public highschool to a private highschool.

Unabashedly, Aoko also fell into that category. She was content to graduate junior highschool as well as go to Tokyo, frequenting live houses on a daily basis while aiming to go to a national university. Thanks to the older sister who ruined her chances, that dream of hers was lost forever. And maybe as a token of bad luck, she was out for a stroll with her bright red umbrella on her school's Foundation Day of all days.

".....In retrospect.
My life is like a chapter of incidents....."

Trapped in the chill of pre-December, she muttered it to herself.

"But, nevermind. It's not always a routine that way."

She left the school on a subtly happier note.

Below the gentle slope she descended, was a town full of people who had many things falling into their favor.

Misaki Town's station was brand-new.

Once an obscure building that was thought to be an abandoned factory, was converted into a building complex that now housed a giant department store in the east and west.

At the height of this department store's appeal, Aoko cheered with her friends, saying, "Yay to the new society!" Of course, it would be just another building after how many years.

With nothing of note to shop for, she walked past the department store.

While she really wanted to have a minute to herself at the coffee shop, her housemate, who was not keen on having money spent on just one of them, would bite her lip to avoid getting badly upset----

"----

She did a double take, and blinked her eyes.

some such in a dress

For an instant. She thought she saw a suspicious character garbed in red from the corner of her eye.

"----, whew."

It was often a misunderstanding somehow.

While she had chills bordering on the sixth sense running up her spine, she brushed it off the way she always did.

Pretending like nothing was wrong, Aoko went on her way homeward.

The chills on her back were gone as quickly as they came. All that lingered was the bustle of the town in her ears.

".....*sigh*."

A huge breath.

Good grief.

Even if her eyes were playing tricks on her, it was not something that felt good.

".....Summer mosquitoes, still a bit more, like so."

'Restraint.....being the last thing on their minds,' she grumbled.

".....'The ups and downs', 'the rush of business', 'the nature of all things to die.' Right, right. No use griping with all of this happening."

It was depressing, but having mosquitoes during the summer was not unusual. 'Bugs going for sweet fruit is, well, doing what they're meant to.' agreed Aoko.

Soaked in oil and heat, the kitchen entered the 1 o'clock resting period.

Surviving the afternoon mayhem also made today a peaceful one.

Anyone who survived tonight's crowd would be putting their chef jackets away afterwards.

part-timer

In the kitchen that just met with a fierce crowd of hungry customers, the newcomer was left standing alone to himself.

"I--- should, put this on?"

The new member asked in a troubled voice.

"I know how you feel. I was skeptic myself, but boss's orders. I suggest putting a smile on that face and taking it out there. You're taking this to the shopping district tomorrow, too. I'm really sorry about this. At least the rain stopped, so how's about a headstart, eh? I'll pay for your dinner if you make it back in one piece."

His senior, dressed in a blinding orange uniform, placed his hands together in an 'I'm sorry' pose, and made him do something completely unreasonable.

Ten years ago, Misaki City was a town of plowed fields and forests.

With development still underway, buildings were being placed in a row in front of the station, two-storied constructions were also multiplying in the residential area, and the agrarian landscape from before faded away from the station's view.

And within it, the remnants of a long-ago country town could still be found in this portion of the urban area -- Shiroyuzuka, which was said to be the air pocket of Misaki City.

A long slope that was paved on a conspicuously tall hill.

Far away from the station that people built their whole lives on, was the residential area of long ago.

In the past, building houses on high land in Misaki was a faulty attempt. No human could live at such steep heights.

Shiroyuzuka, the hill that rose in the center of town, made its point for the case -- there were no private houses beyond this point.

While the asphalted slope stretched on for miles, it soon met the edge of the forest, and after that was a road similar to a mountain path that only went further up the hill.

The vending machine halfway up the slope stood alone, and served as the border marker between the town and the hill.

Even without extra plans to build a new playground for the children, people knew there was nothing beyond this point.

Why, yes. That was correct.
Beyond this point, people knew was only a spooky house.

Aoko Aozaki hiked up the long slope.
The entire town was spread out below her.
A townscape that had the symmetry of a toy town.
While it would have been picturesque for it to be by the sea, Misaki City would always be a mountain town.

It was cloudy now, but the view of the clear sky from here was a breathtaking sight.
The hard climb was a small price to pay for that view, but today, not even a glimpse of its beauty was in the sky.

".....**sigh**. My bike's no good on a rainy day, either. How about getting a bus that stops by here twice a day? C'mon."

Soon it would be two years that Aoko started going back and forth between this slope and her school, but the lucky things were a matter of luck.

"What, it's still locked?
.....Alice isn't home yet."

Aoko shrugged it off, and touched the worn iron railing.
The heavy iron gate quietly gave way as if showing the young girl in.

---Built at the top of the hill was a spooky house.

This was the old story that went around Misaki Town for a long time.
And with the town's development came a new set of hushed rumors relating to said spooky place.

Like lights coming on at night in a house that was abandoned and decrepit for who knew how many years now.

Like the disappearance of hundreds of gathering crows on the hill.

Like children who wandered in vanishing into thin air on days when the fog was thick.

Like somewhere deep in the night, there was an ungodly scream so loud that it was heard all the way in the residential area.An embarrassing rumor that Aoko was itching to fix.

Then there was the rare sighting of a luxury car driving up the slope.

The rumors got better and better with each passing day.
In that sense, the European-style building on the hill that people thought had fallen apart, was raised from the dead several years ago.
It was just somewhere that no one approached.
Ruins that were hidden by the dark forest during the day.
Straight out of a fairy tale, a remnant of magic that was lost forever as time went on.
This,

was the Kuonji residence.
Everyone in Misaki Town knew it -- a witch's house was built at the top of the hill.
Aoko Aozaki chose to stay at a certified haunted house.

Needless to say, "haunted house" was a popular label for it.
The Kuonji residence was a noble European-style building whose origins were carried over from Britain.

Using it as a dormitory was no stretch of the imagination. Using it as a house on the other hand was going a very long way with it.
Normally, a house would have a main building with about three entrances while completely surrounded by a garden.
A towering iron fence walled off the entire courtyard, thoughtfully coiling around the creepers of thorned plants.
And on an elevation that separated from the main building, thrown in as an extra was a sort of receptacle that was built complete with an annex of its own.

It came as no surprise how lavish the house was going to be.
To those living in town, a building as extravagantly built as this had an ominous feel to it just from being built at the top of the hill.
Aspersions, misunderstandings, and friction with the locals were prices of fame, in a way.
But since only two people lived there, they had no say in the fact that people treated them like they were vampires.

".....Well, other than myself, I can see Alice being capable of that."

She placed her hand on the main entrance upon reaching it.
The brass key that went with the double doors perfectly was, however, not for the shabby use of fitting into keyholes.
With one hand, Aoko pushed the door open, and went into what people would call a "haunted house".

.....By the way.
Other than the vampires, ghost-related things were never said to be absent when the situation called for it.

Like the weather outside, the lobby was clouded by gray.
The architect's plan for the entrance was probably to minimize the use of electric lighting.
The ceiling had a stairwell that led upstairs to the second floor.
Light from both day and night poured in from the skylight above.

On a rainy day, it was as dark as the hours before dawn.
Like the cold, dark stars in the sky, the moonless night made every single thing come to a standstill.

The way to the living room was directly east of the lobby, and it was where they would sit and relax. Preferring to be out of her uniform first, Aoko climbed the staircase. The staircase hugged the wall until it reached the landing on the second floor hall. Stairs leading to the third floor attic were undoubtedly found at the rear of the hall. Two years of staying in this house, and Aoko never had any use for it.

Broadly speaking, the Kuonji residence was divided into two halls placed in the east and west directions.
Though Aoko was given a place to stay only at the east part of the building, she managed with at least two rooms for her personal use.
Having some kind of door trapped inside a picture-book world once opened, she had no need for an attic that was being used as a storeroom for the last five years.

Aoko's room was at the end of the east hall corridor.
On her first day here, she chose a small-sized room. It was less about modesty, and more of sparing her the trouble of cleaning it.
In her room was a largish bed and her desk made out of mahogany, and her wardrobe and her outerwear stood in a row together with her nine-row bookshelf.

These were all that she carried out of her parents' house.
All the things that made up Aoko Aozaki's sixteen years came down to this display of her youth.
Finally, the room that was next to this one was the second room that she was borrowing for her personal use.

"---Oh, right. I'd better check on the watchtower Alice gave me. I bet it's broken by now."

She went to look at the result of her late night's work, which had lasted her till the morning.

Separated by a wall from her room, the study was so unlike anything that Aoko Aozaki had in her life just now. It was yet another thing that became part of her life for less than one year.

This part of her life was for something other than herself.

It was her proof from here on. For other people, it was a lonely world without entry, a lonely world that was meant to be without entry----

"Oh, man.....it's worse than broken, it's completely gone.....I guess it was too soon for me to try it on my own, huh?Oh, well. Laugh away, little robin."

robin

The inhabitant making itself at home spread its wings and flew away.

Her talent was ordinary, her effort was given freely, and her mistake was accepted without fear.

Mostly seen as optimism, it was just so Aoko to be happy-go-lucky.

She went back downstairs after changing out of her uniform and into her regular clothes.

Opening the east side door, she followed the dark, basement-like corridor.

The windowless corridor was pitch-black without electric lighting. Flipping the lights on, Aoko opened the nearest door.

"A life without electricity, huh?I don't want to imagine that."

The living room had undergone changes to its arrangement and was now more modern, which was just the way she wanted it.

Walls set with a rich pattern,

large and utterly dignified sofas,

and the finest Persian carpeting.

In the extra space of this stronghold, sat a 30-inch television set that did not go well with everything else in this room.

Like a king that was unashamed of how naked he was, the TV was placed between the two sofas as they did everything they could to look impressive regardless.

The owner of this European-style building detested its presence, but having this in the household provided commoners like Aoko a crucial sense of relief.

Her first day of staying at this house had her waging a war with her housemate over this one thing, but now it acted as an instrument of civilization for them both.

".....Oh, hah. Maybe I'm one to talk.

As it turns out, we're a household that's out-of-sync with the times, too."

Letting herself feel good about it, Aoko went to make tea.

Heating some water in the kitchen next door, she used a teapot and brewed her black tea to perfection.

She blew on her cup.

She sank further back into the sofa.

She took one sip of black tea, then one more.

'Ah, I wonder what I'll be doing today,' she idly thought on her third sip, her ears pricked at the clock needle's sound.

The feel of the soft sofa seized her with an impulse to sink herself down into it.

"___"

Fiercely blinking her eyes, Aoko stirred from the cushions.

It was no fantasy or dream.

Before she knew it, a girl was sitting before her.

Not all that surprised, Aoko touched a finger to her teacup.

The black tea that she just served was completely cold.

"Was I asleep?"

Aoko asked the girl sitting at the other end of the table.

"Yes."

Without lifting her gaze, she replied with less interest.

---Were she silent, she might have been mistaken for a beautiful doll.

The girl sat on the sofa, reading an old book.

She had slender arms and legs, and white skin that never knew the light of day.

Her somber refinement made her distinctly inhuman.

Her raven hair was a purer concentration of the color black than Aoko's.

Her dark pupils quietly pored over the page.

The black attire that was reminiscent of a nun's habit was the uniform of the all-girls school that she attended.

The gloom suited the girl so well -- it was apparently amiss for Aoko to mention that it suited her too much.

.....She blended with the landscape.

Born to appear the way she did, she seemed so unreal.

The girl had her eyes cast down. The whiteness of her neck was beautiful even to a girl like Aoko.

This girl was the other half of the two occupants of the haunted house.

Her name was Alice Kuonji, a housemate of the same age as Aoko.

"How long was I asleep for?"

"An hour and some.Sleeping here will make you sick with a cold, you know."

Alice replied to her question without much interest, but Aoko was used to it. She turned to the wall clock to see its hands pointing to 7 o'clock in the evening. She had slept for two hours. It *was* a terrible day, afterall. She earned herself some sleep after staying awake all night.

"You could've woken me up, though.
My black tea's cold now."
"It was already cold when I arrived."
"I guess. I just thought I'd say it."

Aoko swallowed the rest of her chilly black tea in one big gulp. Cold tea and the poor heating facilities of the Kuonji residence were enough to rouse a person from a half-sleepy state.

"Even Fortnum & Mason's not this great when you drink it cold.
Good to see you home, Alice. I wonder if me getting lazy without you around is also a rare treat.
Today was either a bad day or God's punishment to me. It's too soon to tell, but I might have to get down on my knees and pray for mercy, you know?"
Aoko shrugged her shoulders, mentally resigned to the thought that she had to pay in pounds instead of pennies.

"So, did something happen?"

Nearly two years of living together, and they were still taking notice of how the other was feeling.
Aoko being Aoko,
and Alice posing a question being Alice.
Aoko immediately launched into a report for her housemate, who was still not meeting her gaze.

"I'd better apologize to you first.
That thing that I completed last night didn't work out, afterall. I guess it broke from overboiling when I took my eyes off it for a second. It had to be it, even though I did the stitches and took out two, oh, three circulation cords."

'Aww, forget it.' Aoko spoke like it was someone else's problem.

".....Would you care to explain?"
"The school called me up this morning.
They needed help with a transfer student, and it took up the whole day to do it, too. So when I got back, there was nothing left of it.
Are you angry, Alice?"

".....It's fine. Aoko, getting angry everytime you destroy something is going to make us fight for the rest of our lives, isn't it?
I have a replacement, so just start over from the very beginning.
Other than that---- shouldn't you be the one who's angry?"

".....Hmph."

She was unusually shrewd today.
At times like these, Aoko just hid the fact that she was angry by playing it cool.
And besides.

"Right. This transfer student we had was unbelievably out of place.
Apparently they were situated really far into the mountains, so they don't get how we do things around here. You know, there are such things as a spirit world just beyond the temple gate, but that there's the *real deal*, Alice."

Alice perked up at the mention of her name.
Aoko thought she was just going to let her rant without really listening, so she told the rest of the story.

"This guy got on my nerves the minute we saw each other. He seemed close to passing out when he saw his classroom.
He must've thought that a classroom was where he'd have a one-on-one lesson with a teacher.....well, that was no biggie. I could deal with it, him kidding around with that idea."

"Then, after I told him exactly how his classroom was going to work, do you know what he said?
'So then, Aozaki. What are the rest of the classrooms for?'
That!
What *else* would classrooms be around for?"

"Man, it's like, his mind stays on what I tell him if I don't explain it well.
Maybe he doesn't think about what he's asking? Or I'd say he doesn't have an imagination, or that he's never used it before.
Well.....he totally gets what I say to him on the first go, so maybe he's not an idiot....."

"You certainly are going out of your way to criticize someone.
.....Does his hopelessness mean that much to you?"
"Absolutely not. But, there's no telling what he'll do tomorrow, and it kind of worries me is all."

Of course. The chances of him fouling up and making her clean up his mess were very high, and it was all that she worried about.

Maybe, she thought so.

If not, then she had no reason to fret over the transfer student who ruined her whole day today.

"He sure was a weird guy, though. You'd be surprised at how well you'd get along with him, Alice."

".....'A spirit world just beyond the temple gate' are fine words, I'm sure."

But, we can't get along if we can't meet each other first, can we? the girl said so with just a look.

'Don't you agree, Aoko?' she simply replied.

"So, Alice. What's the book you're reading?"

"A derivative work on the theory of spiritual evolution. It's a reproduction of the Spiritual Diary."

"Ah, Swedenborg. You can't help reading it now, can you?"

"It's tedious in print, but this is a forgery, afterall.

There's dramatic praise for his merits and shortcomings. A very well-written adventure novel, in its own way. The author had the presence of mind to give the name Kant to the secret organization standing in his way.

.....The handwriting is your grandfather's, though."

".....Wow, so this was one of his hobbies.

He was always kind of a jokester. I'm just so sorry he isn't around anymore."

Aoko seemed to mourn the passing of her grandfather.

"He wrote to you this summer, didn't he?"

"Hush! I'd like to think of him as being gone, thank you."

Sighing, Aoko leaned as far back as she could.

The wornness of the cushions gave way as Aoko sprawled herself out on the sofa.

".....Going back to what we were talking about."

Alice looked over at Aoko for a moment.

Swallowed by the cushions, Aoko's body stiffened.

Aoko's mental state lying down was a bit dried out.

herself

Alice blamed her for her silence.

Even today's curious incident was a thing of the past for them.

.....If she ignored the stab of Alice's silence, their talk would end here.

The two of them would leave it as it is, then try again to readdress the elephant in the room the next day.

However, Aoko Aozaki never shied away from anything.

"Sure thing. What is it?"

Without getting up, Aoko turned to Alice with that question.

"It sort of hurts that you weren't able to accomplish it today."

"That's why I'm thinking really hard on it.

School priorities are part of growing up, aren't they?"

"That's fine, I suppose."

Alice's mechanical-sounding voice made Aoko grit her teeth in frustration.

She knew what Alice was trying to say.

All by herself, Aoko perfectly understood how bad things looked for her.

The arrangement she made with her school life acting as her front, and the way she was carrying on with her life right now.

Even when she said she could live as a recluse in today's times, Alice told her it was an inadequate way to hide herself.

In other words, her silence was telling Aoko----

".....You want me to make up my mind, don't you?"

Today's bad performance was a very minor slight on Aoko's part.

She weighed her time at school and her life at this European-style building. Failing to do something right by putting her education first all of a sudden was a minor incident.

But it *did* reflect on the way Aoko was making her choices at the moment -- she simply acted on her over-optimism.

".....It's not Alice's choice.

This, is something that I need to decide for myself....."

The basics were completed within a year and a half.

But she felt it ever since she could remember.

'Once chosen, someday that day, for certain, will come.'

Then her decency and her sense of right and wrong would be put to an end for good.

Aoko raised herself from the sofa with all her might.

Her sights landed on Alice. Reposed and slender, the girl looked on in silence.

"OK, Alice. We'll get this done sometime next week.

Is that good enough for you?"

"Yes, Aoko. If you're fine with it."

Aoko shook her head at the thought that she heard the same words several hours before. Of all the things today, why did the countryboy keep crossing her mind?

"Then I'll let you do the rest. I still can't do it by myself."

"So the park it is, then?"

"It's fine by me. Oh, wait. Don't we have something else to do?"

How about we take care of that first?"

"It depends on whether or not there'll be a change in the forest. I'll let you know when there is."

Thus ended their short exchange. Alice dropped her gaze back onto the book sitting on her knees.

The most important conversation they had to have had together was over.

Then they went back to how they usually were with each other -- housemates that got along regardless of what just happened.

Sitting back, Aoko snatched up the remote and turned the TV on. Alice, who was reading, looked up to maybe watch what was being shown on the picture tube when,

"Uh."

suddenly, she made a noise that came as quickly as it went.

She pressed a hand to her mouth.

Almost having said something, she stopped herself before she could share what was on her mind.

Sometimes, she had no control over it; it was rare to see it happen.

Looking back, Aoko used to hear at least one syllable escape her mouth. She looked over at her adorable housemate.

"Hm, what is it?"

Aoko lowered the TV's volume. Her willful eyes lit up with the mischief of a cat's.

".....It's probably nothing, but..."

"But, what?"

Trapped with the question of whether or not she should share, Alice turned her face away in embarrassment.

The expression she was making had a certain glow to it that was delighted in a displeased sort of way.

Even her father would think that he had given her an appropriately precious name if he could see her now.

".....Today, I saw something strange on my way home, I just thought maybe I should tell someone about it....."

Aoko nodded, urging her to keep going.

"It was nothing special. It had no meaning to it whatsoever.
But, I couldn't understand how it worked no matter how hard I thought about it.
.....Aoko, why does a big, human-like cat wobble about delivering food to people's houses?"

For a moment, Aoko thought Alice was making another one of her "jokes".
Actually, she was prone to thinking that.
But Alice was sincerely bothered by it.
And while Aoko was not a fan of Alice's idea of being funny, the girl was telling her about something fascinating that she saw with her own two eyes.

"Hmmm.....there are two things that I find hard to believe in your story but, let's refute them one at a time, shall we?"
"It's alright. It also occurred to me that it was a puppet-sort of thing.
But going to all that trouble to wear an elaborate stuffed cat, and getting sent out onto the streets to deliver take-out? I wonder if it's that simple?"

"Before I ask why they're doing something so hard, I'd ask what kind of normal they think we live in for them to do that."

To that, Alice nodded a little in agreement.

"Anyway. You get a lot of things in this world. If types like you and me exist, then there's room for a lot of other different things, like a guy who's never seen the world outside of the mountains that he's always lived in.
I would've asked what they had that cat look going for, though, if I were you."

To that, Alice just looked away for a bit.

".....Hmm.....a cat making his deliveries in the residential area at sundown.....I guess it would look like a daydream scenario with the sunset glowing in the background.
.....So, what are we doing for dinner tonight?
Since we're on the subject, why don't we get take-out too, huh?"

Aoko gleefully suggested they get food delivered to their place.
Dinner in this house ran without a turn system of any kind. What they actually had was a rough system of having food ready for two people.
Even when there were times they had to survive without dinner for a week when they got careless, the two girls preferred this arrangement above everything else.

Either they were too lazy to cook, or they just liked food deliveries. Tonight's decision was a common occurrence. Therefore, this house was given cautious treatment by the restaurants of Misaki Town. Usually late at night.....after 8 o'clock and things had quieted down.....the unhappy restauranteurs would get a call to go to the very top of that godforsaken slope.

"It's still before 8, we should make it. Let's go for Kongetsu. We haven't called them in a really long time. I'm getting soba with egg!"

Lining up her poker-card display of the menu listings, the student council president was ecstatic over what food they should order for. Without looking at Aoko's happy face, Alice spoke without hesitation.

"Sorry, I already ate dinner."

Aoko froze upon hearing those words. Food deliveries were made with a minimum of two orders. So without someone else to order with, there would be no food deliveries made to this house tonight. The world was so unfair to the princess who wanted someone to fetch her just one order of soba.

On a separate note, a devilish condition that went,

"Starting next year, all food deliveries will be made with no less than three orders,"

was being approved as a move against the twosome living at the top of the slope -- something that they still had no idea was happening.

"Y...You backstabber!

Grrrr, no wonder you're back late!

You don't have club activities, and it only takes you twenty minutes to get from here to school by bus. I didn't even think to ask why you finally got here past 5!"

But how sad. Aoko was too half-sleepy to also note that she had fallen asleep.

"Aaagh, how could you do this to me!? We had a silent pact that we'd bring back food for each other when one of us goes out!

I went out last time and I got you your share, didn't I?!"

Who knew up to what point she was serious? Either way, Aoko was not a happy camper.

Other than the black tea that she just had, she started out this morning hungry, then proceeded straight to the phone call and the rest followed without her eating anything. Her stomach's quiet from all this was borderline miraculous.

But, seeing as this was her fault, and since it had nothing to do with the current issue, Aoko's nonstop revenge against her housemate's tyranny,

".....By *this*, you mean?

When you went downtown, had sushi for your dinner, then brought back my portion in a plastic bag from a *convenience store*, of all things?"
instantly came flying back to herself.

"W, wait a sec! I didn't come back empty-handed!"

"The truth should, at times, be concealed."

Alice stared back at her coldly.

Actually, standing next to Alice and telling her about rotating sushi while the girl wordlessly ate the convenience store stuff, really *was* a mistake.

But given Aoko's attraction to new things, she was seized with the urge to go see the new "conveyor belt sushi restaurant" that just recently opened at the time.

There was hell to pay for both liar and truth-teller.

".....I understand. I completely understand. If that's so, you got me back for last time. Can we just call it even?"

Showing no sign of saying no, Alice's eyes were trained on the book again.
Showing no sign of saying yes, either, just made it a bit alarming.

"Doesn't matter, today's a bad day for me.

I'll just be going to the kitchen now to brush up on cooking."

Aoko stood up without actually talking to anyone.

"Oh, I forgot to ask. Alice, where did you get dinner?"

Abruptly, the hand that turned the book's pages stopped.

Keeping Aoko company while she was reading, she decided she had quite enough, and closed her book.

Alice rose to her feet, book in hand, and crossed the living room at a brisk pace.
She turned back to face Aoko the moment she reached the door.

"Are you ready to hear this?"

"Uh, I might as well be....."

Left without much choice, Aoko gave her a dubious nod.

Then Alice, as if it were nothing,

"The cat I met today, gave me a spare menu."

gave a short answer, and left the living room.

--End of Chapter--