

Chapter 4

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**Blues in her Name/It is in
Aoko Aozaki**

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So to come right out with it, I'm a magician.

I basically live inside a fairy tale, where miracles can come true with a point of the finger, and I live far away in a really remote forest somewhere.
It's not an accurate picture, but I think I'd take to it since I can sort of shoot at a mark.

The things I can't do? I can't use a broomstick to fly into the great beyond in the sky.
I can't change into an animal. I can't talk to birds.
It might seem right out of a dream, but I'm what you would call a modern-day magus.

Crazy as it is, it's a true-to-life thing.
You'd think with all this power, I wouldn't be so downsized.
Though I'm proud of myself for the odd things I've done here and there, my true calling isn't at school. I've got big plans for my life. Big, big plans.

There is just one snag: all of this has to be kept a secret.

'A magus does everything to hide his godly work.'

As the first of the ten conditions made by the Association, this is something I will never, ever, *ever* talk about to people who don't know these things.

I go along with the whole honor student front, so God please help me if it gets out to the entire school that I'm some kind of wizard.
It hurts my head to think which of these two is me.
That's why I keep dumb stuff like that in check.

To make things worse, I'm still nowhere close to filling the shoes of a respectable magician.
For all of my double life, I just want to feel happy for myself when I become a full-fledged magician lady.

Yeah. It's gonna be a real play on words owning up to my biggest, most important secret, by saying something like, "*It is I, Aoko Aozaki, magician extraordinaire!*"

It feels weird and funny to imagine how that scene'll turn out for everyone. Also, it doesn't matter what the Association wants for us -- as long as I don't have a death wish, this secret of mine has to be kept under lock and key.

When I mentioned this stuff to my grandfather, he just reached out and patted me on the head.

I don't know if he was giving me the thumbs-up or the thumbs-down, but I thought he was being nice to me about it.

The day I became a magu---- The day I was made to follow in the footsteps of my grandfather, was also the day I graduated junior highschool.
When I got back home, he just says,

"Your sister's gone on a trip. From now on, you'll succeed the family secrets."

and that was it.

I always knew the Aozakis passed down some ancient voodoo magecraft, and let's be real here -- I never thought it'd fall to *me* to take center stage.

In a family of magi, choosing the next kid to run the magic show defaults to one successor.

I had no place in the middle of all this hoopla about hundreds of magician seats relating to all kinds of practices -- that was my older sister's job. I had plans for my life, which was extremely normal before any of this happened.

Which is why when they joyfully told my sister to go find a life of her own and party like it's 2000 instead of me----

They waited for the send-off to literally explode in their faces.

Ever since, I've been deposited in a world that I only ever gave a sidelong glance up until now.

I never even wanted to enter highschool, yet here I am!

But, it's fine. This isn't a bad way to start my new life.

.....Which brings us to the present day.

As boggling as my job is, I actually got through two years of doing this.

So far, I haven't run into any serious trouble.....and for our honor's sake, I won't count that my housemate and I are killing each other for half a year.....even at my talent for being a magician, I still don't have a limit when it comes to being the best that I can, that's what I think.

When it comes to normal people, there's two or three that are headache-inducing. Still, as of now, I'm not worried about how my future's gonna go.

Life's good, and I believe things are gonna keep on being as good as they are right now.

What's too bad is, last night changing all of that.

"How did today go?"

The instant Aoko Aozaki arrived home at the Kuonji residence, Alice Kuonji was there to pin her with that question.

Whatever pressure or threat she was being affected by, her calm voice masked those feelings. The pupils behind those glassy black eyes alone stressed the gravity of the situation.

Aoko's unflattering coat went onto the hanger. She sat at one sofa, the other taken by her housemate, Alice.

"What about you?"

"Not so well. I sent seven of them to do some scouting. I didn't have time to get them all ready after I just used them."

Tearing her eyes from Aoko, Alice went back to staring at the box on the table.

"Weren't any of them watching the town that night?"

"These things're the best when it comes to surveillance, aren't they?"

"Only during the day. It's too risky to let them out after sundown."

'Then they're no use where it's needed the most.' Aoko sighed at that.

".....Let's hear your side. You seemed very sure of yourself this morning."

"Hm? Oh, it's going according to plan."

We'll probably be able to narrow it down by tomorrow. This morning, Tobimaru ran a check on all the students in our school -- concerning their houses and what they do all day.

It's pretty easy to tell that nobody there has a habit of being anywhere near the park during that time."

"Is it really that simple?"

"Of course. I don't just sit on my butt at the student council. That's how well-informed I am! My coverage goes as far as part-timers on a once-a-month basis and the time they get to work after hanging out at their best friend's house."

I didn't want to show anybody that list, but we can't waste time, can we? So, I'm having my vice chief do it for me."

On a little side note, Aoko's compilation of a secret file was from being the student council president.

Its sheer presence set off rumors at school, with her being the center of all the students' worst fears. The file was definitely made with an ulterior motive in mind.

".....Of course, it's just like you to be so thorough."

Alice shrugged off the tiny shock she felt towards the other girl.

Soon, it was going to be two years since they started living together.
Once Aoko Aozaki had made up her mind, she ran with it from start to finish. Alice knew this just as well as those close to her.

"Yeah, but I didn't think it would be handy for this situation. I guess this is what you'd call being well-prepared."

Nevertheless, the incident last night was a highly unusual one.
Their situation was far from anything that normally happened for them.

"Which reminds me. Have you figured out what happened yet? I need you to explain to me how you screwed up at closing the barrier."

Aoko's eyes burned with a cold fire.
Alice was supposed to put the finishing touches on the barrier.
If last night's incident was caused by said barrier being faulty, there was only one person to be blamed for that.

These two girls may be housemates and partners, but that was how far their interests with each other reached.
Even as far as their familial relations with each other went, these two had a better chance of being enemies than the allies they should be.
In the end, Aoko Aozaki and Alice Kuonji were just too different to get along with each other.

One would take points from the other if the latter committed a fault.
One would go in for the offense if the other slackened their guard.
---For every chance they had.
Provided the opportunity, they would simply vote to fight to the death without a hesitation.

Alice took Aoko's staring head-on.
The girl's glare was unsettling enough to make a grown man flinch, but Alice was unimpressed by the sub-zero treatment.

".....This is my excuse for now. Let's say that things went wrong because of the barrier I put up. That makes it a problem we get most of the time with it then, right?"

Aoko nodded her head in agreement. All it took for her to believe Alice was by putting her on the spot.

"Your barrier sure is flawless, isn't it?"
"I wouldn't really say that, to be honest."

There was no real feeling to Alice's voice when she replied.

By its very name, a barrier was a compact world in sealed space.

At any location, barriers established situations happening away from the rest of the world. These situations were created using whatever means necessary.

There were numerous types of barriers.

Physical ones created sections with actual walls.

Visual ones hid what went on inside the enclosure, be it with a forest, clouds of mist, or a mirror effect.

Yet still, in order to keep the rest shut "inside", barriers brought peculiarities in "the outside world" to light.

Even as off-limits as the magus could make the location, barriers generally had no power to keep its actual conditions from being walked into.

At some point, those drawn to the 'closed-off area' by their curiosity would compromise the hidden location.

It was therefore illogical.

A true barrier was an oddity built on two functions: to go unnoticed by the rest of the world, and to forbid anything from getting past its wards.

On the previous night, Alice Kuonji's was the sort that made for the 'ideal' barrier.

".....No matter how busy people are today, they don't go anywhere near any place when they think now's a bad time to be there.

A barrier that brainwashes people into staying out of it for a while.....is no big deal, but getting it to do that for over an hour is more than your standard barrier.

It was a topnotch piece of work that didn't fall apart halfway through while it was using your mirror. In all seriousness, the only thing that came through that barrier of yours was the puppet we were after.

If that isn't perfection then what do you think is, Alice?"

".....I wouldn't really know myself. The forest I set up was perfectly normal.

It was a barrier that I took care of for a day or two, so it still would have lasted up to now. Still, if there's an exception to my case, I might not have found the real problem just yet."

Alice was just as puzzled by the incident.

".....Doesn't matter. The important thing right now is the witness probably being our puppet user, which isn't hard to imagine. If it's a magus we're dealing with, getting through the barrier you put up's not hard for them to do.

What I don't get is.....how they shook off feeling sick when they got inside."

It would hardly come as a surprise that a master of magecraft would go after these two girls.

A magus who could slip past Alice Kuonji's barrier was more than a match for her.

---By no means was Aoko Aozaki a threat to someone that good.

".....Hardly seems to be it.

He's nobody in particular. Aside from the starlings, Robin himself couldn't find our witness. No trace of any magical energy whatsoever. I doubt he's a victim controlled by someone's magecraft."

So much for that possibility.

Now Aoko was out of ideas.

All she could do was give up hoping on luck, and deal with the fact that last night really did happen.

".....Caught as a magus out in the open, and going after the witness we lost to boot.....these are so not the woes of an ordinary highschool student....."

She plopped back on the sofa.

Staring at the brown ceiling above her head, she felt sorry for herself.

The blandness of this house's ceiling was making Aoko bluer and bluer by the minute.

"Aoko. Give me an answer."

Her housemate spoke with a detached voice.

Aoko kept staring at the ceiling. But, she was barely registering the wood panel view.

".....Or else. I'll have it done whether you're in or not."

By saying these words, she meant them to be as cruel as she was going to act.

Ever so slowly, Aoko came to terms with that, doing as much of it as she was allowing herself to.

She could never digest it. It was like eating molten lead.

".....Of course. Didn't I make up my mind about this already?"

She was fooling herself with that thought.

This would never be like last time.

Even if she was doing the exact same thing, *who* she was after now was the difference.

When she gave her answer, she gave it as a magus.

All enemies were to be vanquished.

All challenges were to be met.

Magi could brush off discourtesies. If they agreed to fight with murder on the table, there were going to be no hard feelings on either party.
They made their choices based on whether to kill, or be killed.
There were no right or wrong decisions for her and for these magi to make from the very start.

But, this time was different.

The person she was going to face was neither enemy nor magus. Even if she were out for his blood, he was completely oblivious to it.

.....Therefore in this case, her choice weighed on a moral principle.

Would she be able to carry through on the burden of taking an innocent's life?

Could she, as a magus, treat this as an ordinary venture?

'As if.' she snorted.

Aoko's excuse as a magus can never go down well in human society, and it never will.

When she was unsure,

and when she had no idea, Aoko hated acting rash on anything.

She only took off running once she decided she was going to do it.

"I'm in. I mean, it's gotta be done, right?"

Aoko sat up and spoke frankly. There was only so much of their ceiling that she wanted to see.

And being her usual self, she dared not make any mention of Alice in that.

"Alright, here you go."

Aoko's reward for her answer: a little bottle from Alice.

It was small enough to fit in the palm of her hand.

It was the most cylindrical, most ordinary-looking bottle she had ever seen pinched between her housemate's fingers.

The glass was clouded over. There was nothing inside it.

There were still traces of a torn-off label sticking to the glass.

".....What is this?"

She had an awful feeling about this little bottle. Aoko frowned at how dubious it looked.

"A bottle for keeping things in. This is just the one I can spare you."

"Scuse me?"

"I forget the name, but it's like how that Chinese legend used to go."

Aoko instantly knew what Alice was talking about with such a short description.

"You mean the one about the two brothers who guarded the Lotus Cave? So you're saying that this is basically the Red Gourd?"

OK, but uhhhh...is ripping the label off your idea of making people think it's just a bottle?"

Alice eyeballed it. It was nowhere near tasteful, she had to admit.

Whether she approved of its looks or not, though, she was giving said tasteless bottle to Aoko for *her* use. Alice simply placed it on the table in front of them.

"No, not the Red Gourd. It's based on the Suet Jade Flask."

"That's not the issue here! This doesn't have the feel of being a magus for me, is what I'm saying!"

"You worry about the little things. Why don't you consider yourself lucky that this isn't a big bottle of Seirogan?"

"----Hmph."

She could give a very persuasive argument when Aoko asked for it.

"Just open the lid, and ask for the name of our target.

Be careful, though -- if he squirms, the bottle will break."

Aoko raised a brow at Alice's detached explanation.

"Hold up. So by him squirming around being a problem, that means he's gotta be asleep then, right?"

".....I've never tried that before.

Do you know anyone who answers in their sleep?"

".....It's a thing that happens sometimes.

But then again, our guy *is* a weirdo."

Therefore getting him inside the bottle, would be after quite possibly beating him within an inch of his life until he was knocked out.

"Oh, before I forget. Don't put anything, pills or magecraft, inside the bottle or you'll break it. There's only room for one thing in there, afterall."

"I'm not using this thing!

It's just a useless piece of crap then, isn't it?"

"That depends on you."

Alice averted her gaze, saying so.

She was clearly done with this conversation.

".....*sigh*. Alice, I know you like to make props like these, but.....this is part of what you do with your spare time?"

As she asked that question, Aoko thought of enabling her housemate's little hobby, and hated it.

"Maybe.

So, what's it going to be? Are you taking it, yes or no?"

Without answering, Aoko briefly hesitated before reaching over and pocketing Alice's magic little bottle.

It could at least come in handy at some point.

Two hours later brought the time to 9 o'clock at night.

Taking their discussion to the sunroom, there unfolded an unheard-of spectacle in this European-style building.

"You know, honestly? I didn't mean to put Tobimaru up to this."

On the table was a pot blowing warm steam.

As she tapped it with a pair of chopsticks, Aoko just grumbled to herself, not caring if anyone was listening.

Tonight's dinner was Japanese cuisine -- an unusual choice for this household.

Aoko was usually the one in charge of this, which included food served in a pot.

Sitting across from her was Alice, who was also quietly dipping her fork into it.

"Yamashiro just has to go and bring up Shizuki-kun's not being in any of the clubs. Why can't this teacher be useful for once, and get a better look at the things we all have to do for our school?"

She picked up a snowy white piece of egg and dropped it back into the pot to let it cook some more.

The shirataki noodles were done already, so she went for them.

"I mean, the dummy is swamped with all these part-time jobs he's taking on.

So I had to go bother the club heads nice enough to give him a chance, even though they relax for as much as they can up till the start of spring. At least a thanks would be good enough, but did I get that? Nope!

Alice, are you listening?"

The girl just nodded with food in her mouth.

As uninterested as she was in this conversation, Alice did seem to be lending an ear in spite of herself.

That was good enough for Aoko, who chewed on some pounded fish cake.

"As for me, I don't trust it when somebody's thought to be a nice person. I can't believe Tobimaru of all people would say such a thing!
That's not being nice, that's just being simple-minded.
.....Besides, he's crazy if he's also not the type to get his buttons pushed in any way."

Aoko thought back to what happened at the student council room.
Soujuurou let the whole thing slide with her without much protest on his behalf.
She swallowed the rest of the pounded fish cake whole, just recalling that nonchalant face of his.

".....*Hmph. What's there to understand?*"

Soujuurou's comment mingled with what she was told at the end of her childhood.

'---You can understand, Aoko-chan.
But to keep being yourself still can't be easy to do---'

Those words were probably a compliment.
For Aoko, though, it was a cruel assessment.
What made it worse was that the person who told her so, looked like they were pitying her for it.

"---*Eh. Not that anything the freak's said has to do with today and now.*"

She might have been thrown for the biggest loop at that point, but hearing that from someone she was gushing over as a little girl was a shock to her young mind.

".....Tussling."
"Huh?"

Alice had said that out of nowhere to Aoko, whose chopsticks were dangling in the air while she was lost in her own thoughts.

"Sorry, I wasn't listening. By tussling, you mean a fight?"
A petite nod was tossed her way.

"Though you have no actual clue of what's happening based solely on how you feel about it.
What I mean to say, Aoko, is that you want to pick a fight with him."

Alice ate up the last of the pounded fish cake.
Hers was an opinion that hit its mark with severity, so much more than should be feasible.

"Wh.....Why would I want that!?"

I don't want to have even a second of being with that guy! It's out of the question! I'm absolutely not going for it! How did you get that far when we had nothing else to even talk about?"

"If so, why did you bring that part up?"

"Er.....because.....I, because I was telling you about what I checked today! Was there anything else that I said?"

Was there more to what she was saying?

Without knowing it, Aoko was digging her grave, and getting into that hole as the soil swallowed the dying soldier that she was. Give her several more hours after this -- when she would be getting into bed, she would then know that this was her situation with Alice.

"Nevermind, it has nothing to do with me.

Just tell me.....Aoko, do you really not like this boy?"

Diligent and no-nonsense, Alice quietly ate the oden while asking that question.

She might have retained the same disinterest as before, but she was really enjoying the way Aoko was acting at this moment.

The girl had absolutely no idea what Alice was trying to provoke her into doing.

Giving an answer should be easy, but there was a little too much turmoil inside Aoko to even think properly right now.

"In all honesty.....I mean yeah, I do. Haven't I been saying just how much I can't stand the guy?"

"I see. How about specifically?"

"Huuuh? Specifically? Like I have a reason for....."

Aoko caught herself there. At last, the problem became clear as rainwater.

"Er.....mm?"

Correct, there was not a sliver of a reason.

It was her gut instinct that made her feel out of sync with the countryboy from one glance.

But, *why* was that?

As a matter of fact, the top two things she always hated were 1) having feelings based on nothing, and 2) having assumptions based on nothing.

"Uh.....wh-what I don't like, I just don't like.....I mean, I was sure that, it had reason, enough, somewhere....."

She could barely form words with her mouth.

.....She was in trouble. As far as she could tell, Aoko had no reason to want to avoid Soujuurou.

For all the lack of common sense he had in his new surroundings, Soujuurou himself was no trouble for anyone at all.

In fact, she figured that he was being open to the idea of adapting to civilized society.

He was slow to catch on, but "listlessly" was the wrong word she felt like using for how he got himself through the day.

His body language and his general attitude were a beat off from everyone else. Because of how mindful he was of himself, all she could take away from it was that he was thoughtful of other people.

If she had to give a fair rating of Soujuurou Shizuki in terms of circumstances and personality, it was too obvious even for herself.

His was the picture of an unironically "nice person" that everyone except her had been seeing all along. She was just too stubborn in not wanting to see it.

"Has he.....seriously never been, a bad person in like, ever.....?"

She put the rest of what made him a clumsy idiot aside for now.

Her chopsticks stilled for a moment over the busily floating oden.

For some reason, her temper was gaining more ground.

Aoko's bizarre hate for the countryboy was making her head spin.

'This is bad. I can't let this happen to me!' She could keep on chasing what it meant to be repelled by the likes of Soujuurou Shizuki, but all it was doing was backing her further into a corner.

Alice stared unblinking, as Aoko's dead-end street chase reached its end.

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

A tiny sigh.

"Aoko, you are being awfully weird about this."

With that line, Aoko was finished.

She became dizzy towards the strange way she was acting.

As soon as she was done eating, Alice left for the living room. For a while, she sat glued to her chair.

However.

Aoko Aozaki never stayed down after taking a finisher to the face.

Wasting little time in finishing up the dishes, she let Alice have the bath first and left the living room.

It was a rule in this European-style building to have the lights off when the rooms were not in use, so light flooded the living room and the girls' rooms, at least.

The upstairs floor was bathed in darkness.

With only the moonlight to guide her way, Aoko crossed the dark corridor and reached her own room, which was at the furthest end of the upstairs east part of the mansion.

"---So, from what I can tell.

Surprise attacks really do make me sick."

It must have been on her mind out in the corridor, no, way back since she left the living room.

Entering her room, Aoko gave this firm statement about herself.

"I'd have to hide while pulling that off. I'll do better -- I'll tell him why and to his face!"

It was less about being easy on her target. It was even less about sympathy.

For her, it was simple: that was just how things needed to be.

"Right on. Now that my mind's made up---"

Set on her plan, she went into the study next door.

"Let's see, Thursday shelf, winter solstice paper....."

Among the huge score of books kept in this room, she took down the one she was looking for.

She had a set of introductory books she took with her when she left her parents' house, **categories**

and they were all filed into six shelves starting at Monday and ending at Saturday.

Aoko generally knew the organization of her book collection in terms of entry, classification, and intended use.

It took no time at all for her to find the source containing the information she wanted.

It was the most that she did as this study's proprietor.

.....She might be smug regarding this, but in the end, it was only in this miniscule study that she had any means of control.

The annex's library was a cluttered mess beyond the girls' abilities to handle in any way.

Maybe if the study was too lacking for her to get her job done, then she would have no choice but to let Alice know that she was going there.

".....Let's hope it doesn't come to that, OK?"

Placing the green thickbound book on the desk, she sat down.

It was a cold, rigid, and sturdy piece of furniture.

Aoko was too young to be using it, but she liked the desk for what it was: extremely sophisticated, and grandeur at its finest.

Resting the old book on its surface, she gently turned the pages.

".....I'm still not ready to make a barrier measuring up to Alice's skill with it. I probably shouldn't bet on places where people just don't tend to hang around....."

Such as deep in the mountains.

Such as forests.

Such as, a school building late at night without any students in it.

She could do without having to cast magecraft on the location, but unless her luck held out well, then a completely isolated spot was a better choice.

"Talk about ambiguous.....we've got walls of thorns and mists made out of magical energy.....to cut off an exit, let's say, then more of this, something showy would do, it can be circumstantial or based on how it looks."

Reading the passage out loud to herself, Aoko skipped what might not be as basic for her to do and flipped to the next page.

She rather not say it, but she was looking for a way to dispose of their witness from last night.

Magecraft was not a supreme force.

here

Simply put, it was a thing of this world, and merely something made manifest, and to

here

some extent, ignored time and costs to materialize what arose in reality.

world

A phenomenon that was unrecognized in this universe, could never be made manifest even with the use of magecraft.

At the heart of its existence was the perpetual use of equivalent exchange, which made use of shortcuts.

Practicing with phenomena that could be achieved by humans, all while using the caster's own power----

This was how magecraft was very often carried out.

It was a simple story, but even putting a vast lake inside this European-style building was doable if it were considered.

However, things of **an unearthly nature** were prohibited, even if it was just at the tip of the pinky finger.

For instance: even if Aoko, all by herself, were to discharge a heat amount equal to the

F-15

average fighter aircraft's afterburner, with the help of a magecraft formula, the circuit that represented Aoko Aozaki would only be a temporary input variable.

The derived equivalent itself would turn into a numerical value that was aligned with reality.

If, however, the equivalent was not a part of reality, its execution would fail.

The imaginary element that was magical energy, was like a lie that passed through order's screening process within a blink of being set off.

All things that took form in this world and had no place in it---- were illusions treading into unknown territory, thus this universe would refuse them.

ether

".....But also, since the imaginary element is created on anything that's basic, it's ultimately built on lies, pretty much.

Stuff made entirely from magical energy and nothing else, are mostly phantasms that'd go 'poof!' just like that.....a very good example of a barrier is, like say, a wall of thorns. It's something that grows out its thorns naturally, but by using magical energy, the magus can enhance its growth into completion, no waiting guaranteed.

So to sum it up, magical energy is like an easy-to-use gasoline, while putting events into motion for----"

"----Aaaand it keeps on going.

Imaginary elements and all that aside, my area of expertise is connecting my Circuits and preparing magical energy, and that's about it for me!"

Laughing at herself, Aoko read the book for a barrier that her current self could make. While their witness's identity was unknown, going to the same highschool as him gave her any excuse to ask him to meet her somewhere.

The sticky part was *after* she called him to that spot.

"As things stand, it's the accuracy I'm worried about.....he'll run after one missed shot, that's for sure."

If she had to be honest, not having Alice to back her made her feel uneasy about whether or not she could do this by herself.

Still, Aoko was not going to accept help when her target was just an ordinary person, so she was plenty enough to get the job done.

She might not be quite there yet as a magus, but she was still a proud one.

The pages turned in a rhythm of fluttering paper.

As it rustled, Aoko's finger stopped at the page she was on.

"Found it."

A tiny smile.

It was as she remembered it -- a simple magedcraft formula for pure destruction.

*".....I could make some kind of cage.
This won't be like the usual of hunting them down. This is about trapping my prey."*
Bookmarking the page, she stood up to take it back to her room.

She felt someone watching her just then.
In the window blackened by night's darkness, was the reflection of a girl's frigid gaze.
Aoko calmly took the sight of her own face in.

---The plan to undo their witness was underway.

No, this was much easier than having a plan.
This was only a job for her to do.
All she needed was to get her cage set up beforehand, then lead her prey straight into it.
As a matter of fact, it was going to be brute force from which he stood no chance of talking his way out.

"So, I think Alice should be done about now."

As if remembering herself, Aoko suddenly wanted to acknowledge that.

It was nearly twenty minutes since she let Alice take her bath.
The girl took her baths like a crow, quick and hasty, and that did the trick for her.
Being the type who had trouble understanding how the bathing atmosphere worked, Alice would just bathe herself for the sake of personal hygiene.
Even the fun of being at a hot-spring house flew over the girl's head, thinking it was too much effort for nothing, and Aoko really felt bad for how her housemate was wired.

"Oh good, bath is empty.....wait, why are the lights in the living room on?"

It was odd that Alice would still be there.
When there was nothing left for them to talk about, she always went straight back to her room.

"Alice, you here?"
"----"

Alice nodded to her.
There was no sign of a book she was reading either. It was almost as if she was waiting for Aoko.

".....So, that's how it is. I don't trust me either, honestly."

Aoko scratched her head with a sigh.
It could be her lack of trust, it could be her worrying about it.
Alice Kuonji was being too quiet, and it was a little hard to tell what she was thinking.

"I've decided on how I'm going to do this. Wanna hear it?"

".....That look on your face is telling as it is.

I'm glad you're not floundering over this.It's still a bad habit, Aoko."

A small sigh.

It was strange that this girl in black clothes would show disapproval for showy acts.

"Right. Getting the jump on someone? Not my thing, so even if I'll be killing him, I'm doing it fair and square. I'll be upfront and tell him why I'm doing this first.

Then there won't be any worries after that. Any problems?"

"None. That said, your preferences won't matter when it gets to that point.

However----"

"I know -- getting it done for sure. My aiming's a bit off. I was going to follow up on where to take him.

I shouldn't try to do this like you would, so I'll have to take him to an actual place that won't let him get away.....Alice, any suggestions?"

The girl considered the question, giving it some thought.

Putting a finger to her lips, she gave her answer for a preference.

"How about a mirror? He'd be trapped inside a land of mirrors for all eternity, though."

".....Why do you have to make your suggestions so weird?"

Aoko frowned at her housemate's bad taste.

She was absolutely not going to take a leaf out of her housemate's benchmark for security. She was onto something, but there was no way.

Aoko wanted to learn about a barrier that she could prepare for herself. Since there were no options for a huge one that touched the realm of magic, she also had nothing to get ready.

"Then, you'll have to try somewhere else.Still, I rather you don't just think to use this place."

"I know that without you having to tell me.

Oh---- but, you know?

A mirrorhouse isn't a bad idea."

Grinning, Aoko got up from the wall she was leaning on.

"Thanks, Alice! We're all good to go here! All things considered, you really came through for me!"

Aoko took off in bright spirits.

How she managed to get ahold of blueprints, Alice had no clue, but it seemed she had it all carefully planned out.

"....."

Her housemate went to the bath, humming to herself.

Was it a year and a half already?

Alice was very familiar with this scenario: everytime Aoko Aozaki would get excited, something incredibly awful always followed.

"Hm?Should I leave it all up to Aoko, you say?"

It must have been in their living room this whole time.

The robin.....like bird, hopped about on the upholstery as it chirped.

".....True. I did say she could do this on her own, so letting her do it by herself is how trust works for two people still----"

She lifted her arm.

The bird alighted on her outstretched fingers.

".....I don't like this myself. But, trusting the request to her and trusting the job to her, are still not ways to follow through."

The voiceless bird agreed, staunchly puffing its chest out.

Her housemate's rather ominous behavior and what she whispered were, of course, nothing that Aoko would know anything about.

The next day. The sky was as cloudy as always.

Everything was normal for them at school today.

Term exams were around the corner, and then it was going to be their winter break.

Around this time, Misaki High ran on a tight schedule, but it was first and foremost a private highschool that generously took the students' freedom into consideration.

Taking the role of a diligent student was what the student council president followed to a T.

Taking the role of a footloose student was, for as much as they let themselves, to freely spend their time as they pleased after school.

As it happened, the student that could qualify as a poster boy for the "Footloose Student" campaign, happened to be the vice council president himself. Why their school gave him such a long leash was a tiny mystery.

"Knock-knock, Aozaki!"

Harboring a rumored majority of pretend milk runs was the second student council room, and its door flew open as Tobimaru Tsukiji came bursting in. He was vice council president, and a character with the commiserating job of being the student council's other half.

Just one person was waiting for him in this cramped room. Sitting up straight in one of the pipe chairs, student council president Aoko Aozaki glowered his way in answer to his loud entrance.

"It's cold in this room as usual.
Hey, let's get a heater in here sometime."

Maybe as a bold attempt to break the ice, Tobimaru started a casual conversation with the otherwise close-mouthed Aoko.

"I'd appreciate that. On that subject, do you know what you're here for?"
"Sure I do. It's just harsh to make it all business in here.
Would it kill ya to be chattier than this?"

Shutting the door, he sat across from Aoko.
He was holding a blue envelope in his hand.

"As of now, I'd rather we get this over and done with.
I got a knack for that sort of thing, right?"
"I s---- nope! Nope nope nope!"

As workaday and blatantly crabby as Aoko Aozaki was, Tobimaru pulled back on agreeing with what she said and furiously shook his head at her. No matter how much freedom he had in this school, he was still signing off as her daily spy.

"So then, let's see what you got."
"Right. I just got through the last of those I've talked to.
All the details are in that envelope. The file you lent me's in there with it."
He dropped the blue envelope onto the table.

"Good."
Aoko took it, and perused the documents for herself. Once she started, she was off in her own little world, and Tobimaru clearly had no place in it either as she just ignored him. She had a neat way of waving off distractions when it came to getting down to business.

".....Yo."

"What?"

"I, gotta ask you something."

"Tell me, what?"

The silence was deathly chilling.

Aoko was checking documents in a no-nonsense fashion, and while it was hardly anything that bothered him, Tobimaru was staring right at her.

"Aozaki, do you enjoy doing this?"

"It's not about the enjoyment, don't you think? Enjoying it, is the last thing we're ever going to feel from doing this."

"I see. I get it."

He seemed to accept her answer. Disappointed, Tobimaru rose from his seat.

"If you get to the end, you'll see I didn't get a lot of solid evidence. From what it looks like, seems none of our students were in that part of the neighborhood two nights ago. Still, don't quote me on it."

Losing his interest, Tobimaru was headed for the door.

He was just here to help with the case, and he was ready to leave it all behind him.

"----Oh, before I forget.

There's only one other student I didn't talk to about this at all. Since you didn't tell me to add him to your list, I left out our transfer student."

Aoko only looked up slightly.

That was true. She *did* leave him out of the investigation, as he was relatively new to the school.

"So, Sou-ji's got no part to play in it.

Oh, but he did kind of fess that when he was out late this one time after work.....eh, he ran into a killer, or something like that. Makes ya think he was just havin' a bad dream while tucked up safe at home, right?"

Tobimaru cheerfully took off.

"----, wha--?"

At the same time, Aoko dropped the documents back onto the table.

Not that she meant to, but for some reason, she just lost the strength in her fingertips.

".....No, it can't be."

She tried to tell herself she was overthinking it.
But, based on what she just heard, plus the nausea that was attacking her all of a sudden, Aoko Aozaki knew that her hunch was currently pointing her in the right direction.

"----It seems dumb."

But the goal would still be the same.
Taking Tobimaru as an example -- him turning out to be their witness would still lead to having him killed by her.
However, what if *he* was their witness?
As soon as that "maybe" crossed her mind, she felt herself grow cold before she could ponder it at all.

Pressing a hand to her forehead, Aoko thought deeply.
And from beyond her memory,

"Let me teach you about choices. You will always be forced to pick between two things.
The good-natured simpleton, or the mean-looking sage. There's nothing you can do to save everyone. This is where you take your pick. That, is where all of your freedom lies."

was two years ago.
Muttering the words passed down that day to her by her grandfather, the same day that she was chosen instead of her sister, Aoko gave a small sigh of grief.

"----I just think it's, so dumb."

She laughed bitterly at herself for being perceptive.
How wonderful it would really be, if she had never heard those words at all.

Locking the door, Aoko left the student council room.
Calmly, and acting like there was nothing wrong, she greeted students that she passed in the hallway, all the while amazed that she was still acting like her usual self.

Things at school were still lively at this time.
Of course, those with club activities were to stick around. The schoolyard was alive with her schoolmates' chatter as they were getting ready to go home.
The gray sky could rain on them at anytime now, and they would still have nothing to seriously care about.

In the midst of all the clamor, Aoko quickly walked to the school gate.
She went past students talking animatedly with each other.

Most of them were discussing their plans now that the day was over. How to best spend their time after school was a hot topic.

Not that she would know about their wild idea of spending time out with each other, but Aoko was neither jealous nor felt like she wanted to make fun of them for it. Up until two years ago, she was just as in love with her independence as they were.

".....Maybe I was always a cold person to begin with."

She fastened her muffler tight around her neck, not quite yet feeling alone in spite of that.

To begin with, people who hardly thought much of being lonely and pretended to be on their own, were said to deny how alone they were that way.

".....How true. Being a loner speaks for itself is all."

By the school gate was much noisier than usual.

The reason being that the boys were crowded around the other side.

They were all huddled in a secret meeting, whispering furtively among themselves about what lay beyond the school gate -- a girl that was standing on the street by herself.

A black cape was wrapped around the girl's shoulders.

It was normal wear for anyone to see, but the Misaki Town population could connect her caped appearance to the uniform of a prestigious all-girls school.

Furthermore, it was an all-girls school that was distinctly different from Misaki High, completely distant in terms of mentality and actual distance.

The girls' cooped-up life in their dormitories made them a rare spectacle anywhere in this town.

An academy for wealthy young girls and its renown were all echoed by the elusive Reien all-girls school uniform.

It was enough to excite the boys plenty, but there was also the fact that the girl in question was too good to be true.

She held her standing pose in a way that was too lovely for words.

Waiting without budging an inch, she was reminiscent of a picture drawn to capture her exact likeness.

One look at it, and Aoko would be sure to describe the picture as a statement on "solitude".

".....For Pete's sake, boys! Leave it to them to still hang around here and act like spies behind a bush."

Still appalled by the scene, Aoko pushed her way to the school gate. Unlike her daily descent down the slope, she made a beeline across the asphalt and straight for the girl, who stood there waiting by the roadside.

"Aaagh!? Is that the Madame President!?"

"Aw crap, she's probably going to shoo our girl away. It's not a crime to be where she wants, it's a free country!"

"Is she gonna get it, then? Is our angel gonna get told off?"

"So what if she's from another school? I thought it'd be no big deal if she's hanging around.....just outside the school gate.....right?"

"Miss Aoko is a hard-hearted mistress. She has an awful hand when it comes to fairness, just *awful*!"

".....*sigh*."

Behind her back whispered the rabble-rousers.

Not up to the mood to turn and shout at them, Aoko made her way up to the girl, and just greeted her with a wave.

"What's up, Alice? I know you came all this way, but I did tell you nothing's worth your interest here, didn't I?"

"Wai-- *you're kidding, right!!!!?*"

The timed screams that erupted from the general area of the school gate, naturally went ignored by our heroine.

"I found a lead. ----Aoko.

These people? They need to go."

"Right, I get it. I'll get rid of 'em first."

Unlike Alice's strained voice, Aoko's booming voice rang loud and clear.

Undoubtedly, their mixed ideas of what was happening did not go unheard.

"Agh, the chief's comin' this way!"

"Gawd, quit pushin' back there and move aside! I'm goin' back to the school building!"

"Err, hold on, guys.....the chief knows that girl, right? Maybe we're gonna get introduced to her, by the chief....."

"A-ha-ha, born yesterday, were you? This young man knows not what lies ahead on the battlefield. ----Good on ya, nothing is sweeter than a good dream just before you die."

Given that they were all huddled in one place, the boys found themselves cornered outside the school gate in a mad grab for safety. At that,

"O-K now! What do we have here, but some students who still aren't packing it up and going their way home yet? What's gotten into all of you to stick around like this, hmmm?"

"Euuugh!"

the student council president frowned upon their foolishness as a heavy sound rang out in the background.

"In any case, it's almost time for the exams.

Boys, as much as I'd like for you all to tell me what branch of education you're pursuing today, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you're gathered here to ogle at a prestigious young lady from an all-girls school, but I could be wrong about this, right?

I mean, instead of gathering up the courage to talk to her, you'd rather do nothing but stand here and stare, if that's so."

Not one man bold enough to answer stepped forward to confess that yes, that was exactly what they were doing. As far as nerves of steel went for just admitting to it, said nerves had flown out the window ages ago.

".....Hey, look at that, I left something back at the classroom....."

"Man, if this was how it was going to turn out, they should've just given it a mercy killing....."

"What if I borrow a pair of binoculars from the astronomy club? Perhaps permitting me to adore her from far up on the roof."

"Ain't no such thing at that club! Why don't you try the birdwatchers' group?"

"A-ha-ha-ha-ha! The chief shut 'em down last month, didn't she? She said she'd have 'em around if there was time to indulge our bird obsession."

"A-ha-ha, haaa.....her, have 'em around, riiight.....'scuse me, but I'm takin' the back entrance out of here today, Zaki-san....."

"Cripes! Later, Chief! See ya tomorroooow!"

Leaving those words and the rest of their charms behind, the boys scattered in fear of themselves, incredibly defeated by their superior.

"That seemed fun, Aoko."

"Oh, you could tell?"

She was quick at answering to Alice's remark.

In all honesty, Aoko's schoolmates were extremely nice people, so it was a treat to talk to them all things considered.

"----OK.

So since you came here, what did you find out?"

"I stumbled upon traces of the barrier's presence. Then, I just followed my nose up to your school."

"I see. Hm.....? Alice, how long have you been waiting out here?"

"Since the moment I left school."

.....Meaning that she was standing out here for at least an hour.

For someone as sensitive to the cold as she was, it must have been miserable to stand and wait in one place for that long.

"Man, I'm sorry I made you do that."

".....Never you mind. I was just doing as I pleased."

Even as she spoke, her dark pupils scanned the crowd of students exiting the school gate.

Over the course of one hour that she stood there, Alice had been keeping an eye on things.

"Couldn't you have just waited till I got home? We'd still get to see each other even if you didn't get here by yourself."

Alice nodded to that.

She was still in the middle of finding their witness.

If the student they were looking for was really here, and once she found out who they were, Alice would have just gone straight home without waiting for Aoko.

"I didn't find anything for my part."

After getting feedback from Tobimaru's investigation, Aoko told her only what her search turned up in the end. She had no words for Alice.

With nothing else to share, all that was left for them to do was to stand in the freezing cold wind.

.....And so their wordless lookout for their witness continued on.

The student council president's schoolmates stared at both her and the student from the Reien all-girls school, marveling at the unlikely duo as they went on their way home.

Helped along perhaps by the boredom and the winter chill, Aoko heaved a sigh after more than twenty minutes.

"Say, Alice. How about we stop by Reimei on the way back?"

Aoko glanced over at her.

Reimei was the name of Aoko's favorite coffee shop.

"....."

It was hard to tell if she was disapproving of Aoko's carefree attitude to their situation, or if she was saying 'yes' to the invitation. Alice's gaze moved ever so slightly.

And at the end of what she was looking at---

"Oh, Aozaki! Are you also waiting for someone?"

A voice, an unexpected voice, prodded her awareness to life.
She knew who it was from the get-go. His naturally easy voice was difficult to miss.

"----I see. Just as well, maybe it was meant to be."

Turning her back on Alice, Aoko fixed her gaze on the approaching student.

"So, then. What are you up to today?"

There were no greetings for him.
Aoko's unhappy scowl rounded on Soujuurou, working itself into a bigger storm on her face upon laying eyes on him.
Still, even she could tell that her harsh treatment was going over his head well enough.

"Oh, I'm meeting up with the head of the swim club at the station, but I wanted to give to you all of my thanks for what you did for me."
"?"

If there was a word for what he was saying, it would be "unanticipated".
Club activities and giving to her all of his thanks.
.....However, Aoko figured that only a person as unthinkably stupid as him would try to place a gold circle in a group of yellow squares. The question was why.

".....Hmmm. Give to me all your thanks, huh? As in 'go to the shrine and make an offering to the gods' give to me all your thanks?"
"?"

He was lucky once, now he was lucky twice, because Soujuurou was still clearly in the dark about what it meant to "make his offering" to a fellow student of his.

"I don't really get what you mean, but I didn't mean to make it sound important.
It's just that in the swim club, they only get busy during the summer."

Soujuurou was going to say more about the club activities that he was urged to participate in, when Aoko cut him off with a bored expression.

"You bet it is. There's no way I can rec you to any of the clubs if you're not going to be around for their activities. Since you had at least one shot with your busy schedule, all I had to do was tell them about you."
"So I see. It worked out well, then."

Aoko bore no signs of opposing Soujuurou's impressed reaction.
Back then, she thought it was a waste of time to look for something club-related for him to do, and trying to persuade the head of the club to take him.

"At the very least, I owe you a debt.
I want to tell you how grateful I am for all you've done for me."

Soujuurou's humble bow of thanks to her right then and there, made Aoko put a quick stop to it.

"OK, enough already. You don't have to put on a show to thank me.
.....So, how's the swim club working for you, then? Did you do well?"

Her keen stare changed into something uneasy.
While Soujuurou noticed how uncomfortable Aoko suddenly seemed, he simply had no idea why that was.
Therefore, he decided to give her an update on his progress instead.

"Yeah, they didn't accept me into their club."
"Wh-Why did they do thaaaaat!?"

Without thinking, Aoko cried out at the unexpected twist.
.....She leapt like a jack-in-the-box.
Whatever inner turmoil she was struggling with, it was immediately swept off the board by the extremeness of this development.

"But, you, you said you were meeting up with the head of the club.....!"
"Oh, that. We'll be going to the heated swimming pool over at Yashirogi from now on."

Soujuurou nodded at the surprised Aoko.

".....That doesn't make sense. Things were going well for you, so how did you get turned down anyway!?"
"That's because, I can't swim."
"----"

'I see. No wonder he got sacked.' Aoko was pressing a finger to her forehead.

".....Shizuki-kun. Remember what I asked you yesterday? I made you choose which of the two you were OK with: to run or to swim.
Please correct me if I'm wrong.
You said you preferred 'to swim', yes.....?"

"Sure. Back then, I wanted to get over my problem of not being able to swim. In the end, though, I turned out to do much better at running and favored it the most."

Now that it made sense, Aoko's energy was spent.

"Though it seems that I got the most basic training for at least a year.

Even though they gave me a three-year member status for the next three months, they still can't accept a member that doesn't know how to swim at all.
But the head of the swim club is very understanding and wants to help me get better at it, so I'll be getting swimming lessons from now on."

Whatever it was that was making Soujuurou so happy as he spoke, Aoko was having a hard time understanding.

*"*sigh*.....In other words, they're pushing their deadweight onto somebody else.....and not being up front with the head about it.....err, wait a second!"*

"Shizuki-kun. The head of the swim club? Then....."

'A girl.' She stopped herself before she could say it.
And the moment she said it, she got nervous about running her mouth off about something very awkward.

".....God, fine. I get how you feel about this, so could you go someplace far away now, please? I'm not really all that tired, but I can't hang out with you today."

"Tobimaru said the same thing. Aozaki, he says you're tireder than usual, both yesterday and today. Is everything alright?"

"Not really. It's fine, though. I guess I've just made up my mind is all.

But anyway.....Shizuki-kun, how do I look? I bet I'm tired from your perspective."

Why was she asking this?

Aoko was acting strange,

and for no reason at all, saying things that just flew out of her mouth.

'.....If I have to say it, it's because this is it, this is the last time we'll have anything as normal as a conversation.' It was possible that this was why.

After a moment of him thinking, Soujuurou gave her a smile that lightened the mood more than it should.

"You're right, you look like you have a lot of energy instead of being tired. A wolf will work the fields if he has to, but he'll feel like tearing off in high spirits when he goes for a hunt he hasn't had in ages."

He was so happy at the thought of it.

As if it were something he himself was going through, he smiled broadly.

"-----"

Without realizing it, Aoko was clamping a hand over her cheeks.

If what he said was true, her face was going to break into a grin the likes of which she had never done before.

Of course, nothing was worse than her flubbing it right here and now.

"At any rate, thank you. Alright, till tomorrow then."

Maybe still not as carefree as to wave his hand goodbye, Soujuurou gave a sincere farewell that she could see and hear in his entire being, and turned to leave.

"Wait. There's something I want to ask you. You can go after that."

Aoko called Soujuurou back.

Her voice was cold, warning herself against a temperament close to tranquil.

"Hm?"

"There's this fable I heard once.

.....Here it goes. Let's say that you're starving to death, and in front of you, are two animals in the same situation as you.

Shizuki-kun, you are handed a rifle. Which of the two animals are you going to shoot?

On your right is a lion, and on your left is a kitten. You can choose to do what you want here."

Her question seemed planted inside a children's story.

It was a fable that enabled cruelty, a moral lesson, and a person's say-so on what was the right thing to do.

This was the kind of do-it-yourself story that had limitless possibilities.

However, he had a simple answer to it.

"No, I don't think I'll use the rifle. I mean, I can do whatever feels right. And besides, all three of us are hungry."

It was just as well -- there was no point in worrying at all.

His was a solution that chose to be just as helpless as the two animals. He chose to make a decision as pure as driven snow.

".....You'll live long and prosper, my friend."

"That's an extremely flattering thing to say to me. That's probably the first time I've heard anything like that from you."

In his smile were words that were ill-fitted to it.

"----What, the *heck* was that?"

.....She chose to call after him at the last minute.

'Even if I *was* going to hear what he had to say.'

And so, Soujuurou Shizuki went down the slope and on his way.

Today was another busy day for him, being forced to stay out late by his part-timing. The only ones left were Aoko and Alice, who was lurking in the background this whole time.

"That bumpkin is completely.....throwing me off with his 'harmless as a baby' gimmick!"

Aoko talked to herself, clenching her fist.

Unless she really sucked air into her lungs, a vaguely loud voice would hardly carry out as sound in this place.

.....It was hard to say or know for sure if she was cursing his existence, or hers.

"Aoko."

She heard Alice's faint voice from behind. Aoko knew ahead of time what she was going to say.

.....Before now, she was ready to hear the name of whichever student that they were hunting down, then everything changed as soon as Soujuurou was brought into the equation.

"You don't have to say it. He's our guy, right?"

Coldly,
she spoke of him as if they had never met before.

---The lion and the cat.

They each had their strengths and weaknesses, and in the end, she made up her mind to target a creature besides herself.

Considering her options, the lion was the bigger threat. It would have a chance to retaliate the minute she aimed the rifle in its direction.

Therefore, even if it took courage to shoot the lion, with it came the lack of a guilty conscience for taking up arms against it.

In addition, the lion was a strong animal. Guilt for using the rifle could be erased with the human instinct for self-preservation.

As for the cat? It was a weak animal.

The lion was the simple and obvious choice. Still, the decision would make anyone sick. Even if it was never about being equals, the balance was tilted far too much in her favor. And for Aoko, Soujuurou stood no chance of winning against her at all.

".....*That's right, I thought the same thing.....*"

She had her mind made up, for as far back as the student council room where she was feeling uneasy about it. But her resolve shook in the face of Soujuurou's words.

confusion

Getting jostled in her entire being, had nothing to do with second thoughts created by how wrong this felt for her.

Soujuurou Shizuki was not a person she liked, was a weak opponent, and was more docile than anyone she had ever met.

Still yet a question of why she was feeling uncertain about him.

He was a student who flew straight from the countryside and landed in the heart of the city, and he had no relatives here whatsoever.

His sense of decency was unlike other people's. If he vanished off the face of this planet, only so few would make a commotion over the event.

If she killed him, he would be taken down in a way similar to strangling a cat.

.....In all truthfulness, all the good things about him were enough to make her lose her head over it.

What a lucky person he was! She felt like flailing and kicking him in his buttocks. To come right out with it, she was burdening herself by looking after him and getting annoyed----

".....I don't believe it. I am, not liking this. This isn't right.

---This just, isn't me."

Alice could probably hear her muttering to herself.

However, contrary to her partner's fury,

"He has a cloth around his neck."

she brought up something completely unrelated to the situation.

It gave Aoko a wake-up call.

"Neck? Wha--?"

".....Yes. I wonder if he injured himself trying for the swim club."

Alice was talking mostly to herself, giving the matter a lot of thought.

"Actually.....he was wearing that on the first day we met, too. Though it's hard to see it from how tight around the neck it is."

It was nothing of note, and nothing of use.

Their conversation may not have fixed anything, but Aoko's uncertainty was brought to a complete halt thanks to it.

".....Thanks, Alice. I feel much better.

I can do this right now.

While I still have the chance, I'll get things taken care of before he even gets to talk."

Aoko turned her back on the school gate and went on her way.

First things first -- she was going back to the European-style building to make preparations.

".....If you say so, but when, and where are you going to kill him?"

.....However hushed her voice was, those were not words meant for the public to overhear.

Usually, it was Aoko who would tell Alice to keep her inauspicious behavior in check when it happened, but today, she was also just as bad as the other girl in terms of inauspicious.

"Tonight's the night. I'm taking him someplace beyond his wildest dreams."

Without any misgivings towards Alice, a ghost of a smile steadily floated its way to Aoko's mouth.

Her words, full of mystery and meaning, told her friend of a meeting she had with her special someone.

--End of Chapter--