



2

Girls Kingdom

Author: Nayo

Illustrator: Shio Sakura

The cover features two anime-style girls. On the left, a girl with long blonde hair and green eyes looks towards the right. On the right, a girl with long red hair and brown eyes looks back at her. They are both wearing white dresses with red accents and blue gem-like decorations. The background is a soft yellow with large white lilies and gold vine patterns in the corners. A large gold number '2' is in the top right.

2

Girls Kingdom

Author: Nayo

Illustrator: Shio Sakura



Characters



- ◆ Amanotsuka Academy's deputy chairman
- ◆ Member of the Sky Salon
- ◆ Misaki's mistress
- ◆ Wears a striking feathered hair accessory

Himeko Amanotsuka

Second-Year Societal Arts

- ◆ Himeko's Seraph
- ◆ Didn't want to be a maid but is getting used to it
- ◆ Wears donut-shaped scrunchies
- ◆ Loves donuts



Misaki Hotaru

First-Year Domestic Arts

- ◆ Kagura's Exousia
- ◆ Misaki's classmate and friend
- ◆ Has a rivalry with Sara
- ◆ Wears star-shaped hair accessories

Kirara Hoshino

First-Year Domestic Arts





- ◆ Head of the Sky Salon
- ◆ Mistress to Kirara and the Kokonoe twins
- ◆ Likes never-say-die attitudes and watching sports
- ◆ Very fond of Minako

Kagura Mikage

Third-Year Societal Arts

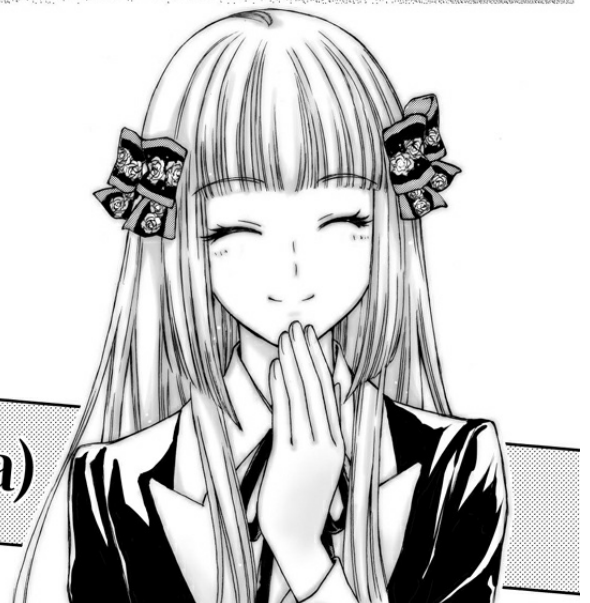
- ◆ Older twin; Kagura's Seraph
- ◆ Enjoys gathering information
- ◆ Wears a ribbon with a music note pattern
- ◆ Fond of tormenting younger students



Ayaka Kokonoe (Music Ayaka)

Second-Year Domestic Arts

- ◆ Younger twin; Kagura's Seraph
- ◆ Enjoys collecting personal data
- ◆ Wears ribbons with a floral pattern
- ◆ Fond of groping younger students



Ayaka Kokonoe (Flower Ayaka)

Second-Year Domestic Arts



- ◆ Head of the Paradise Palace
- ◆ Mei's mistress
- ◆ Has been trying (unsuccessfully) to take over the Sky Salon
- ◆ Short but full of attitude

Asuka Nekoyashiki

Second-Year Societal Arts

- ◆ Asuka's Seraph
- ◆ An excellent maid with a preference for petite young ladies
- ◆ Only likes girls under four foot nine
- ◆ Picked out all the members of the Paradise Palace

Mei Kobina

Third-Year Domestic Arts



- ◆ Member of the Paradise Palace
- ◆ Manages a restaurant on campus
- ◆ Has three Exousias
- ◆ Slightly idiosyncratic flavor preferences

Erisu Kumashiro

Second-Year Societal Arts



- ◆ Widely known as Lady Angelica
- ◆ Student council president
- ◆ Her ethereal beauty sets her apart
- ◆ Seems to be keeping a secret

Rika Yasuki

Third-Year Societal Arts

- ◆ Misaki and Kirara's classmate and friend
- ◆ Their class's head maid
- ◆ Exchange student from Britain
- ◆ Are there elegant young ladies aplenty in Britain?

Sara

First-Year Domestic Arts



- ◆ Shining star of the volleyball club
- ◆ Skilled enough that she could compete internationally
- ◆ Kagura's favorite
- ◆ Popular across the academy with her beautiful ponytails

Minako Torano

Third-Year Societal Arts





- ◆ Member of the Sky Salon
- ◆ Always upbeat and full of cheer
- ◆ Loves trying to make others laugh but rarely succeeds
- ◆ Haruka's mistress

Inaho Narukami

Second-Year Societal Arts

- ◆ Inaho's Seraph
- ◆ Highly skilled as a maid but plays the fool sometimes
- ◆ Acts like a comedy duo with Inaho
- ◆ Always hiding a paper fan somewhere



Haruka Oze

Second-Year Domestic Arts

- ◆ Head of the Mauve Manor, where roses bloom beautifully
- ◆ Like an older sister to Himeko
- ◆ Slightly intimidating personality
- ◆ Aoi's mistress



Shion Tsukuyomi

Third-Year Societal Arts

- ◆ Shion's Seraph
- ◆ A kind and affectionate Japanese beauty
- ◆ Manages the Mauve Manor



Aoi Sougetsu

Third-Year Domestic Arts

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Chapter One: The Debut

Before I knew it, the cherry blossoms had fallen from the trees and April was nearing its end. The chill in the air vanished completely, and the weather turned mild.

Thanks in large part to the Kokonoe sisters and their scheming, we had successfully won the Salon Struggle against Lady Asuka, allowing Lady Kagura to remain in charge of the Sky Salon. This meant today was a day like any other. The Sky Salon was full of elegant young ladies—celestials, as all members were called—drinking tea and enjoying a pleasant chat.

The one difference was the arrival of a new member.

“Good day, everyone. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Kirara Hoshino. I look forward to serving you.”

Bowing her head and sounding uncharacteristically nervous and formal was my classmate, Kirara. After begging to be Lady Kagura’s Seraph, she had finally been deemed worthy during the Salon Struggle and awarded an exclusive contract as a result. However, she’d also made quite a scene with all her pleading, which came with a risk of encouraging copycats if she was made a Seraph right out of the gate. Lady Kagura had made her an Exousia instead, essentially one rank lower than a Seraph.

Though Seraphs were essentially guaranteed a job as a maid after graduation, Exousias were only contracted for the duration of their time at the academy. Of course, that didn’t mean they *wouldn’t* be hired. In fact, it was common for an Exousia to carry on working for the lady she served at school and to be given a place in her household staff. The Exousia rank was generally for cases where a lady had developed an interest in a particular maid and wanted to keep her from being snapped up by someone else, but hadn’t decided for sure whether to hire her or not.

Kirara’s situation was a little different, however.

“As you all know, Kirara is currently serving as my Exousia, but feel free to treat her just like a Seraph. I plan to change her contract when the time is right.”

Lady Kagura’s announcement to everyone emphasized the fact that it was just a matter of confirming Kirara was right for the job. Essentially, it was already a done deal that she’d become a Seraph. All Lady Kagura needed to do was make the final call. Kirara was also dedicating herself body and soul in order to become her Seraph as soon as possible.

The Kokonoe sisters stood up as if to take over where Lady Kagura left off and positioned themselves on either side of Kirara.

“So, shall we introduce all the Sky Salon members?”

“You’d better remember all their names! No getting them mixed up!”

“Yes, please, go ahead,” said Kirara.

The twins’ expressions were slightly more serious than usual. *Maybe it’s because they’re taking her under their wing, I thought. They’re showing their more experienced side. I wish they’d hold off on all their mischief and sexual harassment the rest of the time, too. I know I’d have a little more respect for them!*

“I guess you don’t need an introduction from us and Lady Kagura.”

“Still, we should tell you to come to us with any questions you might have. We’ll be happy to answer—if we feel like it!”

“Okay!” Kirara said shrilly, suddenly jerking her back straight. This was not due to nerves, but because Music Ayaka had run a finger along her back.

And here I was thinking they’d turned over a new leaf.

They giggled to each other, apparently quite pleased with themselves. With their narrowed eyes, they resembled two cunning foxes. Kirara may have achieved her dream of serving Lady Kagura, but I found myself feeling sorry for her now that she was the Ayakas’ plaything.

When they acted like this, I always wished the other Sky Salon members would step in. Instead, they barely even seemed to notice. At first I’d thought

this was because they were the Seraphs of Lady Kagura, the salon's leader, but it had soon become clear that the other girls actually enjoyed the spectacle. Even when the twins' mischief went a little too far and caused a major distraction, they didn't really mind. They were happy watching over it all from a distance, as the name "celestials" implied.

The only one who seemed to actually get annoyed was Lady Kagura, and only if she herself was the target. Even then, it never looked like she was genuinely upset about it. Clearly there was a kind of trust between master and servant that I didn't fully understand yet.

After continuing to laugh for some time, the sisters got back to work. "Anyway! Let's go around the table."

"If it's all right with everyone, we'll just tell you their names ourselves."

"First is Himeko Amanotsuka."

"As you know, Lady Himeko is a member of Amanotsuka Academy's founding family and is currently serving as the deputy chairman of the board."

"In a school full of elite young ladies, she stands head and shoulders above the rest."

Himeko smiled kindly in an effort to reassure Kirara. "Glad to have you with us!"

"Glad to be here," Kirara replied awkwardly.

The twins proceeded with the introductions.

"Next up is Lady Himeko's Seraph, Misaki Hotaru."

"She achieved the spectacular feat of becoming Lady Himeko's Seraph on the first day of school, so we all have high hopes for her."

"Since you're both first years, I'm sure you'll be the best of friends!"

Not expecting to be introduced, I blurted out a "Huh?"

Kirara was my classmate *and* my roommate, so it seemed completely redundant. *And what was that about high hopes for me?*

I was so flustered that I couldn't manage much more than repeating my own

name. “Yes. Misaki Hotaru. Pleased to meet you.”

Sure enough, Kirara looked at me with pitying eyes. Even without a word, I could tell she was thinking, *What the hell is this girl doing?!*

The snorts in response came not only from the Kokonoe sisters, but some of the others present as well. I groaned in embarrassment as my face started to burn.

“Now, next to Lady Himeko is a second-year Societal Arts student, Sumire Miyamori.”

“Her father is a member of parliament.”

“Lovely to meet you,” said Lady Sumire. Her smile had the caress of a warm, gentle breeze. Lady Sumire was known for being a kind person, and I’d heard her described as the Sky Salon’s conscience. She was also sometimes called the “spring fairy.” Her hair hung in loose curls to her waist, underscoring her fairy-tale aura. Standing beside her made me feel like I was being lured into a pleasant sleep.

“Lady Sumire’s Seraph is Mihaya Suzunone, second-year Domestic Arts.”

“Mihaya has an incredible singing voice. Hopefully you’ll have a chance to hear her sing.”

“Hello,” said Mihaya.

She had an amiable air about her but also seemed somehow ephemeral. It made for a strange combination. I suspected that was because her usually cheerful disposition would never make you guess she had such a striking and delicate singing voice. I’d heard her sing for Lady Sumire before, but only from a distance. It was enough to stop any conversation and make everyone focus on listening only to her.

Whether she sang a sad song that tugged at the heartstrings or a happy tune that warmed the heart, Mihaya’s voice was enough to immerse you in the feelings of the melody. Her music resonated in the soul. One listen was guaranteed to make anybody her captive.

These two exquisite young ladies were famous at the academy for being a

soothing sight. Seeing them together was said to make you happy all day, and hearing Mihaya sing on top of that was rumored to mean your wishes would be granted. That was what the girls whispered around campus, at least. What I knew for sure was that seeing them was a joyous occasion. It was no wonder that rumors had begun to spread about them having a power beyond that.

“Next is Saeko Houjou, third-year Societal Arts.”

“She’s the daughter of the president of Houjou Bank.”

The corners of Saeko’s mouth lifted into a slight smile. She looked like a carnivorous creature licking its lips as it stalked its prey.

“If you’re having money troubles, come to me anytime. I’ll be glad to take care of you.”

Although she said this in the most neutral tone in the world, a chill ran down my spine. Lady Saeko was the type of person I didn’t want to go anywhere near. This applied to the Ayakas, too, but my reasons were different. It would have been rude to say so aloud, but Lady Saeko’s personality was kind of intense. Where the twins were mischievous, Lady Saeko was flat-out cruel. Word around the academy was that the S in Saeko’s name also stood for “sadist.”

She showed her own Seraph no mercy either. For me, it was better to let sleeping dogs lie and keep well away from her. I knew she wasn’t a bad person, but I wanted to avoid doing anything that might set her tyranny on me.

“And this is Lady Saeko’s Seraph, Matsuri Kusakabe.”

“She’s the most senior Seraph out of everyone in the Sky Salon.”

Although Matsuri was a third-year student, she bowed her head deeply before Kirara. In response, Kirara uttered a timid, “Yes, erm, nice to meet you.”

Where I’d have expected an older student to be a little more confident, Matsuri came across as faint of heart, like she was always scared of something.

I mean, thinking about her mistress’ personality, she would turn out like that. Unless she was like that all along.

This would, again, have been rude to say out loud, but Matsuri never looked all that bothered by Saeko’s harsh treatment. In fact, she seemed to accept it

and take it in her stride. The rumor mill had a thing or two to say about her, as well—the M in Matsuri's name secretly stood for "masochist."

In a way, I guess it's the ideal master-servant relationship.

"Finally, Inaho Narukami, second-year Societal Arts..."

"And her Seraph, Haruka Oze."

"Hey there, Ricey," said Lady Inaho.

"Huh?" said Kirara, frowning in confusion at this strange nickname. "What do I have to do with rice?"

As I watched, similarly baffled, Haruka whacked Lady Inaho on the head with a small paper fan. Despite having been assaulted by her Seraph, Lady Inaho looked very satisfied.

"Basically, there's a kind of rice grown in Hokkaido called Kirara 397. That's what you reminded me of."

Everyone around the table heaved a soft sigh. The twins explained the background while pressing their hands to their foreheads.

"Oh yeah, Lady Inaho's family runs a large-scale farming operation, growing crops and raising livestock all over the country."

"They even supply a lot of the ingredients the academy uses."

Lady Inaho was really into her jokes. She sometimes came out with one-liners or acted like a comedy duo with Haruka. Above all else, she loved entertaining people—if "entertaining" was the word for it. She didn't seem to care all that much if her jokes landed or not, but the listeners were always too polite to say anything anyway.

"That's every last member of the Sky Salon."

"You're a member now, too, Kirara, so you'd better conduct yourself in a way that doesn't besmirch the name 'celestial.'"

Appearing more nervous than ever, Kirara nodded and said, "I'll try."

A different mistress meant different expectations. Himeko had never said a word to me that I'd have called 'strict' or 'harsh,' but it looked like Kirara's life

would be more of a struggle.

Lady Kagura clapped her hands together. “Why don’t we get started right away? I have a job for you.” She gestured to the Kokonoe sisters, giving them some kind of signal, and continued, “We received some first flush tea from Inaho, so we’re going to share some with the other salons. I’d like you to deliver it.”

Lady Inaho’s farming operations were extensive, covering all kinds of different produce. This included fruits and vegetables, livestock, and even tea, as Lady Kagura had mentioned here. Apparently, the only thing they didn’t farm was seafood.

The twins left and soon returned with several wicker baskets containing drawstring pouches with floral patterns. I assumed the pouches were filled with tea leaves.

“Here you go!” said the twins.

Lady Kagura instructed, “Please take these to the Paradise Palace, the Blossom Bower, Anna’s Abode, and Lady Angelica in the courtyard. Also the news crew, and Minako from the volleyball club. I have a message to pass on to Minako, too.”

“Right. Yes. Got it.” Kirara hurriedly jotted down all these people and places in the note pages of her student planner.

Personally, I still hadn’t learned where every class was yet, let alone where all the different salons were. I hadn’t even heard of some of them. I patted my chest in relief that it wasn’t me who had to do all this delivery work.

Then Himeko chimed in with, “Misaki, I believe I have a job for you as well.”

“Really?” I replied warily.

“Yes. You can go with Miss Hoshino and take care of it along the way.”

I guess if my mistress asks me to do something, I can’t exactly say no. That’s why she has a maid—a Seraph, no less.

“I also want you to take some tea to my sister, Shion, at the Mauve Manor.”

“Wow, I didn’t know you had a sister.”

“Well, she’s not actually my real sister. We’re not related by blood. We played together a lot as children, and she was like an older sister to me, so I still call her that.”

“Fair enough.”

I wonder what Himeko was like as a kid. I bet she was totally adorable. Maybe I can get her to show me some photos.

I opened up my own student planner. “Right, um, Lady Shion at the Mauve Manor. Where is that, exactly?”

But before Himeko could answer, we were interrupted by two voices with additional requests: Lady Sumire and Lady Saeko.

“Himeko! Himeko! Can I ask a favor of Misaki too?”

“Perhaps I could also make a request of her, if you don’t mind.”

“No, I don’t mind at all,” replied Himeko.

“Phew,” said Lady Sumire. “Hope that’s okay, Misaki! Sorry for the extra work!”

“That’s all right.”

Lady Sumire’s smiling face was hard to say no to.

“I’m sorry to add more to your plate as well.”

“Uh, that’s fine! No problem!”

Lady Saeko’s smile was just as hard to say no to, but for *very* different reasons. I felt an intense urge to agree immediately for fear of what might happen to me if I didn’t. Though she *appeared* happy, her eyes hid a murderous glint. It reminded me of a bird of prey about to swoop down.

Lady Sumire added another two stops on my delivery route, and Lady Saeko added three. I scribbled them all down.

There are way more salons than I thought. If each salon is like a different faction, it makes me wonder if sharing things with them is really because they’re all friendly and get along, or if it’s a preventative measure to stop them from falling out. After what just happened with Lady Asuka, I bet Lady Kagura’s extra

concerned about smoothing things over right now.

I whispered to Kirara, “Do you actually know where all these places are?”

She stared at her notes with a troubled expression. “Uhm, sure. About half of them, maybe.”

Even Kirara, who seemed to know everything about the school, still didn’t know where each and every salon was. For me, there was no hope at all.

“Don’t worry,” said Lady Kagura reassuringly. “We’ll send someone with you to help this time. Just make sure you remember the salons’ locations and leaders for the future.”

“Right!”

“Thank you!”

Lady Kagura looked around the table. “Now, who should I ask?”

“Us! Pick us!” Lady Inaho leapt up from her chair, grabbing Haruka by the wrist and throwing both arms into the air as if to volunteer the two of them.

“Me and Haruka will show them around!”

“Certainly, if you’re all right with that.”

“We’re on the case!” She pounded her chest with a proud smirk.

“Then I’ll leave it in your capable hands. You too, Haruka. I appreciate the help.”

“You’re more than welcome.” Haruka placed a hand on her chest and bowed deeply, even bending her knees a little.

Every single movement she made was exactly right. Combined with her tall stature, it made for an impressive sight.

She really looks like a pro. I wonder if I’ll have it all down by the time I’m in my second year. I guess not, knowing me.

“Let’s head off, then! Just follow us!”

Inaho turned, ready to go. In unison, Kirara and I said, “Coming!”

We divided up the baskets between us and received some last advice from

our mistresses.

“Misaki, don’t forget to introduce yourself politely to everyone.”

“Make sure you get all of the little details right. In particular, don’t forget about the message for Minako.”

I felt like a child being sent out on an errand alone for the first time—which was not too far from the truth.

“Don’t worry,” I told Himeko. “I’m still learning, but I wouldn’t do anything to embarrass you.”

Kirara looked at Lady Kagura and said, “You can have faith in me. I’ll do everything I can to meet your expectations.”

This was just a simple delivery job. It didn’t require all that much effort, and I didn’t think there was that much room to mess it up, either. Still, we were representing the Sky Salon. For Kirara, it was also a first step in the road to being promoted to Seraph. I had to do whatever I could to help her get there.

Lady Himeko giggled as she adjusted my headpiece. “True, I’m not really worried. I know you’re ready for anything, Misaki.”

“Well, see you later,” I said.

“Bye for now!”



“Let’s visit Nekopeko first!”

“Nekopeko” had to refer to Asuka Nekoyashiki, a second-year student who ran the Paradise Palace. She had a bit of an obsession with the Sky Salon and had recently challenged us to a Salon Struggle, which had *almost* resulted in her taking over. She had shown open hostility toward Lady Kagura and the Kokonoe sisters, so my impression was that inter-salon relations were in a pretty bad state.

But if Inaho calls her by a cutesy nickname, maybe I was wrong about that?

We descended two floors via the antique elevator, then walked westward along the corridor. At the top of the old school building’s western tower was

Lady Asuka's salon, the Paradise Palace. It was about one floor lower than the Sky Salon, but it seemed to have a special place of its own among the vast array of salons. Apparently there were salons in the eastern tower as well, which were probably also pretty high up in the hierarchy.

"Do you get along well with Lady Asuka?" I asked Lady Inaho.

I felt like I'd started to use a lot of polite and respectful language since starting at this school. It had just kind of happened on its own. The line between lady and maid only reinforced that and pushed me further in that direction. Maybe being a maid was rubbing off on me. The weirdest part was that since starting to serve Himeko, that had begun to feel normal and natural.

To be fair, the Societal Arts students were the ones paying all our living expenses. If not for them, the Domestic Arts students wouldn't be able to attend at all, so a bit of deference was par for the course.

"She's my classmate," Lady Inaho replied.

"Oh, really? So you're friends?"

"Yeah, that's right. Errie's in our class, too.

Errie? That sounded familiar, like it might refer to someone I knew, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

Seeing the frown on my face, Kirara jumped in. "She means Lady Erisu, the owner of Erisu's École Kitchen."

"Oh, right!"

That was the place where we'd competed in a battle of table manners for the fate of the Sky Salon. It still seemed crazy to me that a high school student could own a restaurant on school grounds, but hey, Amanotsuka Academy was a different place than the world outside. I had to throw all my preconceived notions of normality out the window.

"If you're friends with Lady Asuka and Lady Erisu, how come you weren't asked to join the Paradise Palace? If it's all right to ask."

"They did ask me back in my first year, but by then I was already in with Kagu."

Kagu? She must mean Lady Kagura.

“Plus, they have a strict entry requirement. I’d never, ever, *ever* get in. Not in a million years.”

“Gosh.”

I couldn’t imagine what kind of condition they’d have that meant Lady Inaho couldn’t get in. She had made it into the Sky Salon, after all.

Unlike the Sky Salon, the Paradise Palace didn’t have an elevator leading directly to it. After we climbed up two flights of stone stairs, Lady Inaho pointed to a door painted pure white. “Here we are!”

I stared up the door. It was easily twice my height. “Wow, it’s *huge*!”

“Like a big bar of white chocolate,” said Lady Inaho.

“I see what you mean.”

The pattern on the door kind of looked like a chocolate bar as well.

“Haruka, I know you love candy. You can go ahead and eat it.”

“If I ate all that, I’d turn into a chocolate bar, milady.”

“If you were made of chocolate, it would make tea time so easy! Whenever we wanted a snack, we could just take a bite out of you!” She gazed at Haruka, licking her lips.

“That would be rather convenient. I imagine it would go something like this: Lady Inaho, I’ve brought tea for you! Feel free to enjoy me on the side. Oh dear, I tried to bow down but I’m made of chocolate, so I broke in two and died.”

“Haruka, you’re not allowed to die. You’re just chocolate, right? We can stick you back together and you’ll be fine.”

“Oh no, milady! You got me all mixed up! I’ll be known as the bizarre woman with her legs where her head should be!”

The scenario playing out inside their minds had taken quite a twist, but actually, I felt like she’d already become pretty bizarre at the moment she first turned into chocolate. *You can’t really stick people back together, but on the plus side, people can’t really turn into chocolate, either!*

While I was silently judging them, Lady Inaho suddenly turned to me with expectant eyes. “Misakins, you look like you want to say something.”

I abruptly looked away. “No. Nothing.”

Haruka’s expression was just as expectant. “I know what you’re thinking. You wish you could find out how I taste now that I’m made of chocolate. Go ahead. I don’t mind.”

She reached out with her index finger and pressed it against my lips.

“No thanks!”

I wasn’t about to get dragged into their world of nonsense. “Comedian” was nowhere on my list of ideal jobs.

Actually, if I pulled it off, I bet there’d be good money in that!

Pushing aside the slightly dangerous thought that had crossed my mind, I looked over and saw Kirara’s reaction. She had frozen, unsure what to do. I could definitely relate, since that had been my initial response as well.

“Why don’t we go inside?” I suggested. “We have a lot of other places to go, so we don’t want to dilly-dally.”

“I guess,” said Lady Inaho. “Sure, go ahead and knock.”

“Here goes.”

Awash with relief, I grasped the golden door knocker and banged it twice against the backplate. There was no answer, however.

“Maybe there’s no one inside.”

Lady Inaho shook her head. “Nah, they have to be there. Nekopeko and Errie told me they’d be coming here after class.”

“In that case, maybe they just didn’t hear.”

I was about to knock again when I heard faint voices from the other side.

“Hmm?”

I brought my ear up to the door. There were definitely people speaking, but I could only make out parts of it.

“Certainly, milady. Don’t... about... ing me. You’re welcome to... my... if you want to.”

“That’s not... I intended!”

Is that Mei and Lady Asuka? While Mei’s voice was quite far away, Lady Asuka’s was closer and easier to hear.

As I stood with my ear pressed against the door, Kirara looked at me dubiously. “What are you doing?”

“It sounds like they’re having an argument in there. I’m trying to listen.”

“An argument?” She frowned and followed my lead.

“But I... mistake. I offer my... as compensation.”

“I’m telling... you don’t need to!”

Lady Asuka’s voice grew louder to the point that I could make out virtually every word.

“I wonder what they’re talking about?” said Kirara, straining to hear. “Maybe we should take a peek.”

I considered for a moment, then said, “Yeah, you’re right. Besides, if they are fighting about something, we should probably try to calm them down.”

We nodded to each other, then gingerly reached and grabbed the doorknob. Together, we slowly pulled the door open just a hair and peered through the gap.

An *interesting* sight appeared before us. We both stared dumbfounded for a moment, then closed the door without a word.

“Well? What’s going on in there?” asked Lady Inaho.

“That’s a very good question,” I replied.

“My eyes might be playing tricks on me,” Kirara added.

We were unable to give a clear answer to Lady Inaho’s innocent question. What we had seen was very strange indeed. Mei was on all fours while a lady with a large purple ribbon in her blonde hair was sitting on her back drinking tea. Next to them, Lady Asuka’s shoulders appeared to be trembling with rage.

“Maybe it was some kind of optical illusion.”

“We’d better look again just to make sure.”

We cracked open the door again and peeked in. Now we could hear their voices clearly.

“I told you, it’s not a big deal!” cried Lady Asuka. “You don’t have to sit on her, Erisu!”

“I’m not that excited about sitting on her either, but if I don’t, she’ll never calm down.”

“Exactly,” said Mei. “Now, milady, you should join her. Think of it as a punishment.”

“I told you, I don’t want to! Besides, it’s not exactly punishment if you enjoy it! What makes you think I’m into sitting on my Seraph’s back to begin with?!”

As arguments go, this one was utterly baffling. We had indeed seen what we thought we’d seen, but it still didn’t make sense. We gently closed the door and sighed.

“What now?”

“Honestly, I don’t know.”

Kirara and I looked at each other in stunned silence. This felt like a bad moment to step in, but we couldn’t exactly stand by and do nothing.

“Come on, tell us what’s going on,” said Lady Inaho.

How on earth can I explain that?

Hesitantly, I began, “Well, you see—”

Before I could speak another word, the door was flung open and Lady Asuka appeared with a look of frustration. “What?! Do you need something? We’re kind of busy here.”

Apparently, she’d noticed us.

When she saw who was there, she said, “Oh, it’s Inaho and Haruka—and those first years from the Sky Salon.” She glared menacingly at us. “Here to gloat about what happened the other day? Come to rub it in my face, have

you?”

We shook our heads in a mild panic. “No! Not at all!”

“We’re just here on an errand for Lady Kagura.”

“What kind of errand?” She looked suspicious, which was only natural after the shenanigans involved in the Salon Struggle.

Kirara boldly stepped forward. “Lady Inaho provided the salon with some tea leaves, so we’re sharing them. Lady Kagura said to bring some to you.”

Lady Inaho spoke up. “It’s true. We’ve grown a good batch this year. That’s why we’ve enlisted the first years to help us share the wealth.”

“Right, I see. Come in, then.”

Apparently Lady Inaho’s words were enough to convince her.

Resting a hand on my chest in relief, I followed Lady Asuka into the room, as did Kirara.

“Thanks for letting us come in.”

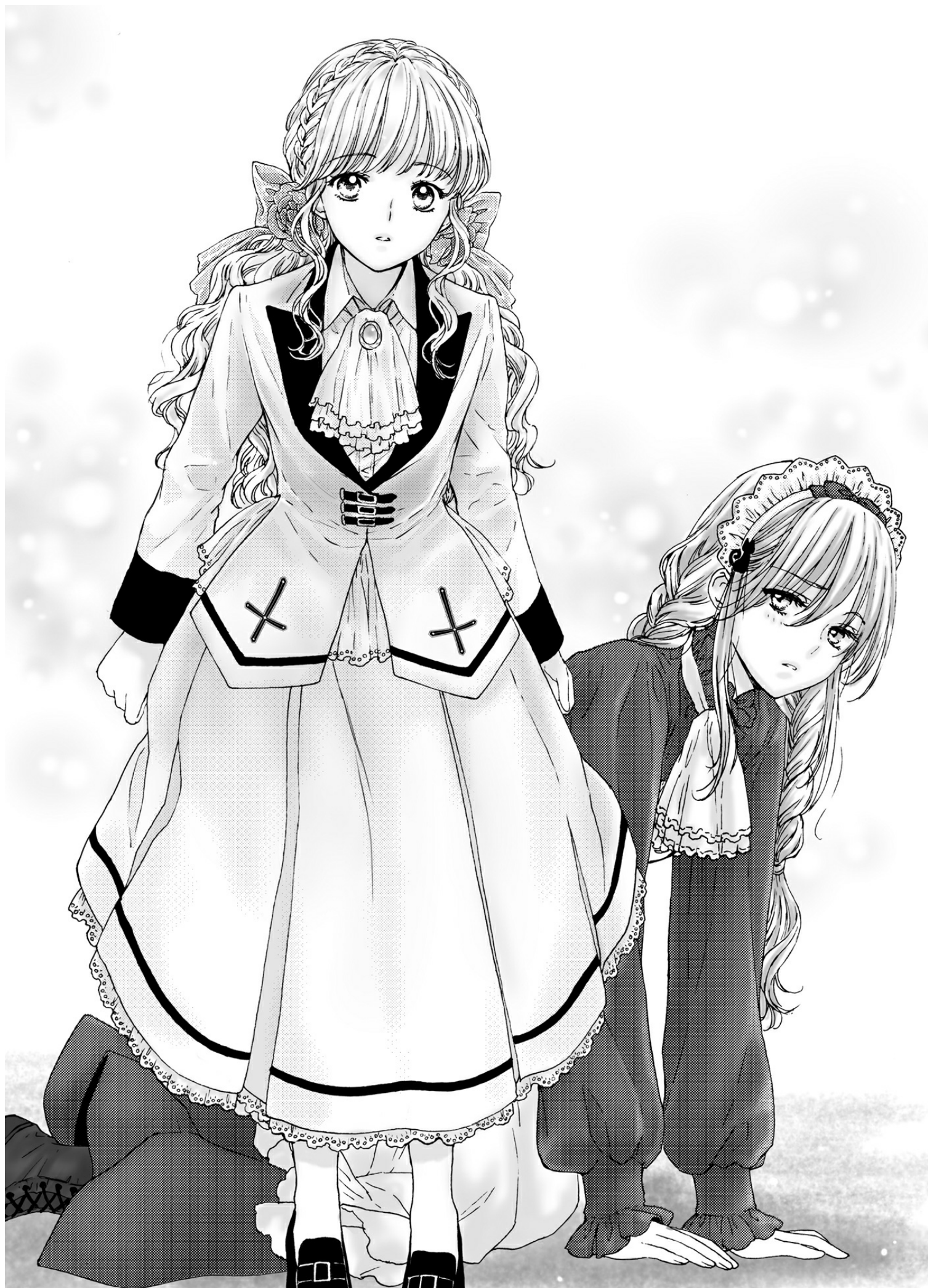
“We appreciate it.”

Inside, Mei was still on all fours with the blonde girl on top of her.

“Can you stop that, please, Mei? You too, Erisu. We have guests. You can just mop up the spillage with a towel.”

Evidently, the blonde girl was Lady Erisu. The purple ribbon in her hair was accompanied by a braid across her head and two accessories that looked like roses. Overall, she had a sweet and lovely appearance. With a height close to Lady Asuka’s, she was like a beautiful porcelain doll.

Lady Erisu silently stood up. Mei did so as well, albeit with a very reluctant look about her.



“If you insist, milady.”

I couldn't help but ask, “What actually happened here?”

“It's no big deal. Mei tripped and spilled some tea on the sofa, so she *insisted* on making up for it by acting as a replacement chair.”

“I see,” I said, not really making sense of this at all.

“Normally Mei takes care of everything without putting a foot wrong, so one little mistake sends her into overdrive. She starts blaming herself way too much.”

Even then, presenting yourself as a chair?! Only one kind of person would ever do that.

I caught myself before actually saying anything, instead emitting a vague grunt in response.

Lady Inaho smiled. “Guess you can't help it, Meimei. It's all down to your masochistic tendencies.”

“It's an honor to receive such praise.”

“You're *happy* to be told that?!” I cried, unable to stop myself. *Oops.*

With a look of glee, Haruka whipped out the paper fan. “Perhaps *you* need a whack with this as well, Misaki?”

“I absolutely do not!” I replied, brushing her hand aside.

Lady Asuka sighed in irritation and pointed at the sofa. “Shut up, all of you. Just sit down.”

Mei quickly wiped the stain, then put another towel down and rested a cushion on top of it before sitting. Lady Erisu sat down beside her, while the rest of us found available seats. One sofa was colored differently from the others, marking it out as the seat of honor; it seemed to be reserved especially for Lady Asuka.

A short distance away sat a group facing one another over a glass table piled with books. The group, presumably all members of the Paradise Palace, consisted of two Societal Arts students and a pair of Domestic Arts students

with shining golden badges on their uniforms. When my eyes met theirs, they smiled and bowed their heads, so I hurriedly responded in kind. The Societal Arts students appeared to both be third years.

“Well, make yourselves at home,” Lady Asuka began. “Welcome to the Paradise—”

“Welcome to the Petite Palace,” Mei interjected.

I blinked. “Huh?”

Starting again, Lady Asuka said, “Welcome to the Paradise—”

“Welcome to the Petite Palace!”

Silence fell for a moment. Though Mei looked perfectly composed, even wearing a grin, a vein throbbed in Lady Asuka’s temple.

What is going on?

“Mei! I told you not to call it that!”

“I’ll never give in, milady. It’s the only accurate way to describe the salon.”

I was surprised to see Mei disobeying her mistress so openly. Until now, she’d come across as completely obedient. This was like a totally different person from the submissive Mei I’d seen during the Salon Struggle.

“This is *my* salon! I chose the name Paradise Palace, and I won’t hear it called anything else!”

“I fully acknowledge that, milady. The name you chose is the name you chose. For me, though, it’ll never be anything except the *Petite* Palace.”

Watching with amusement, Lady Inaho said, “I see they’re at each other’s throats again.”

“You mean this isn’t the first time?” I asked.

Mei stepped in to answer. “Allow me to explain. Looking around the salon, is there anything you’ve noticed?”

“Noticed? Well, uhm...” I swiveled my head around. “It doesn’t look any smaller than the Sky Salon.”

Both salons were at the top of a tower, so it made sense that they were about the same size. However, the interior design was a lot fancier here—a reflection of Lady Asuka’s tastes, maybe. The whole room was decorated in pale pink, with ornamental elements of various other colors set into the walls and ceiling.

For some reason, though, there were some items piled up in the corner that looked like gigantic building blocks. The size of them was enough to make me lose all sense of scale. Now that I thought about it, the sofa I was sitting on felt a little on the small side, too.

“There is something off about the scale of everything. It makes me feel like I’m in a fairy-tale cottage.”

Kirara agreed with me. “The sofas and tables are all kind of small.”

“Well observed, both of you. Anything else? Does anything stand out about Lady Asuka and Lady Erisu, for example? *All* the ladies here have something in common, in fact.”

“Something in common? Huh.” Feeling rude for staring, I compared the two of them. “Their hairstyles are kind of similar, but I guess you don’t mean that.”

“Indeed I don’t,” Mei replied, still grinning.

With a look of great understanding, Kirara said, “Based on your conversation just now, I have an idea. It feels rude to say it, but is it about how tall they are?”

She didn’t even need to clarify that it was about how tall they *weren’t* before Mei replied, “Exactly! Lady Asuka left me in charge of recruiting members, and all the ladies I invited have a height of four foot nine or less. That’s the long and short of it.”

Four foot nine? That’s pretty short for high schoolers. Lady Asuka and Lady Erisu both look like cute little dolls, so they match the decor quite well. Their height plays a big part in that, I guess.

“So that’s why you call it the Petite Palace,” I remarked.

“All the members Mei brought in fit the mood of my salon really well, so I didn’t pick up on it at first. I can’t believe she used *height* as the sole criterion! Gah!”

“Oh, but how could I resist surrounding myself with such lovely little things? You’re all so adorable! It just fills me with joy!”

Mei closed her eyes, lost in her own little world. Meanwhile, I laughed awkwardly. *Mei’s definitely not who I thought she was. She seemed so pristine and flawless. Who knew she had this fascination with petite girls?*

“Is that why you said you’d never be allowed to join, Lady Inaho?”

“Yeah. I’m four foot nine and a half.”

“Half an inch over the limit? That’s all?”

Mei interrupted, “Yes, and how frustrating it is! If she were only *half an inch* shorter, I’d have done everything in my power to drag her away from the Sky Salon.” She bit her lip as if her frustration was entirely genuine. “If anything happens to make you shorter, let me know right away. I’ll welcome you with open arms.”

“It’s not gonna happen. I’ll only get *taller*, not shorter!”

Although Lady Inaho still smiled, I could sense the unshakable will behind her reply. *Looks like she’s sensitive about her height.*

“Can we move on already?” barked Lady Asuka. “This is *my* salon. I still hate your name for it, but I’ll let you use it here inside the salon if you promise to never, *ever* use it anywhere else.”

“Very well, milady.” Mei turned to us and said, without a hint of doubt or hesitation, “Then allow me to welcome you once again to the Petite Palace.”

“Argh!” Lady Asuka’s cheek twitched. “Fine, whatever. What were your names again?”

“I’m Misaki Hotaru.”

“And I’m Kirara Hoshino.”

“I’ll try to remember.”

“Thank you!” We both bowed our heads.

Ready to fulfill our original mission, Kirara held out one of the wicker baskets. “As mentioned, we’ve brought you some tea. Here.”

“Excellent. The tea grown by Inaho’s family is always delicious.”

“It’s just as good this year!” said Lady Inaho herself.

“I don’t want to just take your kind gift and send you packing. Why not stay for some tea and cakes?”

“We’d love to,” Lady Inaho replied, “but we have a lot of other stops on our delivery route.”

“Shame. Oh well, never mind. I suppose there’s a bigger priority for today, anyway. I don’t know if *we’ll* be admitting anyone new in the near future, but I’ll count on your support if we do!”

“No worries!”

What are they talking about? Something about Lady Asuka’s knowing look makes me a little uncomfortable. She didn’t know we’d be coming today, but it sounds like she knows about some greater purpose behind it.

Lady Inaho left no time for us to dig any deeper into this. She rose from her seat and said, “Let’s get going, then.”

All we could do was follow her lead.

However, just as we stood, Lady Erisu raised a hand to stop us. “Oh, one sec. Did you say your name was Misaki?” It sounded like she had something to ask me.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“You’re Himeko’s Seraph, right?”

“I am.”

“Phew, I thought so. Glad to finally meet you! I wanted to say hello.”

“You wanted to meet *me*? Really?”

“Well, you and Himeko.” Her lips formed into a tiny smile. This sweetness was enough to captivate anyone, not just Mei. “You’re always coming to my restaurant, aren’t you?”

“Oh, right!” She was referring to Erisu’s École Kitchen. “Himeko keeps taking me there, that’s all. I wouldn’t have known about it otherwise.”

“Even so, you’re a regular customer. I’m so grateful to Himeko for her patronage—and yours! Only...” Her face clouded over slightly. “My staff are telling me they haven’t seen Himeko as much as they used to.”

“Really? I’m afraid I don’t know how often she was going there before.”

Since becoming Himeko’s Seraph, I’d been visiting Erisu’s École Kitchen with her once or twice a week, but I had no idea whether that was a lot or a little. On other days, we often ate at a restaurant on the first floor of Himeko’s dormitory, Francois Hall. With dishes from France, Italy, Japan, and beyond, there was so much variety there that we were never bored. Apparently, Seraphs and Exousias often cooked for their mistresses as well, although Himeko hadn’t yet asked that of me.

“I knew it would happen as soon as I heard Himeko had chosen a Seraph. I guess it’s not such a big surprise either way. No one wants to go to such an unappealing restaurant.”

“What are you talking about? The food there is absolutely delicious.”

“You don’t have to be nice to me. All the dishes are prepared by my Exousias. I know they’re several rungs lower than professional standard. I’m under no illusions about the quality.”

“I mean, I wouldn’t know the difference myself.”

“Himeko lowering the frequency of her visits is proof on its own. Now that she has a Seraph, why would she need to go there anymore? Besides, you of all people should know how popular it is... or isn’t. You’ve been there and seen how empty it was.”

There was nothing I could say to that. The truth was that there were hardly ever any other customers at Erisu’s École Kitchen. I didn’t know why, but the fact remained that Lady Erisu was right; her restaurant wasn’t very popular.

For me, that’s kind of a bonus, since it means we can eat there without worrying about noise or being rushed out the door. I doubt it would go down too well if I said that now, though.

“Hehe, I suppose I’m putting you in an unfair position. I’m a little overprotective, that’s all.” She cast her eyes downward and showed an impish

smile. “Everyone thinks their own baby is the prettiest, don’t they? No matter how ugly it is.”

With no idea how to reply to that, I could do nothing but let out a vague sigh.

“I don’t want to keep you. I’m just glad I got a chance to talk to Himeko’s chosen girl. Hopefully you’ll still come along once in a while. My Exousias are really devoting themselves to their craft, day in and day out. One day they’ll reach a standard that measures up to other restaurants—probably!”

“Yes, uhm, sure thing. I’ll pass that on to Himeko.”

“Thank you for the tea, Inaho. I’ll order some to serve in the restaurant soon as well.”

“Great!” Inaho replied.

Once we had left the Petite—uh, the *Paradise* Palace—I finally breathed out all the tension that had built up inside me. “Whew. That was intense.”

My forehead had begun to sweat. No matter how cute they appeared, the difference in rank between the young ladies and us commoners was clear. The aura they exuded was palpable.

Inaho explained, “Errie told her maids that if they reached a certain level of success, she’d make them into Seraphs. She’s just a little anxious because they haven’t been all that successful.”

“Oh, I see.” *She did say the girls working there were her Exousias. They must be eager to become Seraphs.* “You haven’t been there much, right, Lady Inaho?”

This was potentially a rude question, but after what she’d just said, I was burning to know *why* the restaurant wasn’t more popular. It wasn’t just Lady Inaho. I didn’t recall seeing any of the other Sky Salon members there very often—or at all, in fact. There had to be some reason for that.

“That was Errie’s decision. She said not to go there too much. According to her, it wouldn’t help the staff at all if her friends were just showing up out of pity.”

“Hmm, that makes sense.”

It sounded like Lady Erisu wanted to avoid giving her Exousias any unfair

advantages, but she couldn't help being concerned about them nonetheless.

"Anyway, let's get moving."

"Okay!"



Leaving the Paradise Palace behind, we returned to the first floor and exited into the courtyard. There we made our way to a garden terrace situated between the old and new school buildings. This didn't belong to a salon; rather, it was the place where the student council, led by Lady Angelica, often hung out after school.

I had the impression they were trying to show their faces as often as possible so the other students saw them as friendly and approachable, but it didn't seem to be going all that well. From what I'd seen and heard, not only the Domestic Arts students but even the Societal Arts students watched them from afar, never daring to come any closer.

Just being in the Societal Arts program didn't mean any given student was at the top of the pecking order. The only ones who didn't treat Lady Angelica as untouchable were the salon leaders and the girls from particularly prestigious families. The others, who were attending this school just because their families had a little bit of wealth, kept themselves at a respectful distance.

Sure enough, when we arrived, out of the twenty or so tables arranged on the terrace, there was absolutely no one sitting on the tables next to Lady Angelica's. It was like a donut-shaped ring of empty seats surrounding the student council.

With a confident spring in her step, Lady Inaho walked right over.

"Excellent seating arrangements as always, Angie."

"Oh, Inaho," she replied. "Good day. I see you've brought Haruka with you, and... you're Misaki and Kirara, isn't that right? Good to see you."

"Good day," said Lady Inaho.

After her, the rest of us spoke at once. "Good day."

I'm surprised Lady Angelica knows who we are. We have met her before, but

we're just a pair of normal Domestic Arts students, right? I didn't expect her to remember our names.

"They treat you like a zoo animal," said Lady Inaho.

Lady Angelica wore a bitter half-smile. "I wish they'd just come up and talk to us. They don't have to be so shy."

When I'd met her in the Sky Salon, she'd been surrounded by other big shots, so she hadn't stood out quite as much. Seeing her here, though, she had a bearing about her that was overwhelming. Standing close to her, I couldn't stop trembling, struck with the feeling that my soul was going to be absorbed. Her entire presence was totally unlike anyone else's.

She was a bewitching beauty. I couldn't think of any better way of describing her. Her looks set her apart from the earthly realm somehow.

"I wonder what I'm doing wrong? Hardly anyone comes and talks to us directly like this. For the most part, the only ones who don't give us a wide berth are the leaders of other salons."

She wore a gloomy expression as she complained about this. Apparently, she hadn't realized that the biggest impediment was how she came across.

Telling her that probably wouldn't help, though. What can you do about your own aura?

I didn't think it was down to Lady Angelica alone, anyway. Sitting with her were two other young ladies. One looked like a kindly princess with a tiara at the front of her head, while the other, a girl with red hair, sat in a very improper manner with her legs flung up onto the table. I'd only felt comfortable approaching because Lady Inaho had led the way. If I were on my own, I'd have stayed well away.

The girl with the tiara put her cup down and said, "You should smile more, Angie. That'd help. You always look so prim and proper. All that does is give you more of a distant mystique. Come on! Smile!"

"Like this?" she said hesitantly, turning up the corners of her mouth into a smile that looked like it took a great deal of effort.

“You look like you’re plotting some scheme,” I said.

It was as if she wasn’t used to contorting her face like that. Her expression was not even close to cheerful. It was more like a roguish smirk.

Kirara tugged at my sleeve. “Misaki, you can’t say that!”

Only then did I realize how rude I’d been. “Ack! I’m so sorry!”

“You’re surprisingly savage, Misakins,” said Lady Inaho.

Lady Angelica sighed, defeated. “It’s all right. I’m not capable of a smile that uses all the muscles in my face. I know that.”

The redheaded girl ran a hand through her disheveled hair and bluntly remarked, “What’s the problem? You’re the student council president; you’re supposed to look a bit cold and derisive. Better that than trying to please everyone and ending up looking like an idiot. Everything’s fine as it is. You have plenty of support, and if you get too friendly with the ordinary students, it’ll get in the way when you’re dealing with official business, won’t it? So who cares if they treat you like you’re in a display case?”

Lady Angelica frowned again. “Maybe you’re right, but I still wish I had a bit more of a personal connection with people.”

“Hey, it’s up to you. I’m not going to hold you back.”

The girl with the tiara added, “Indeed. The idea of sitting down with any number of the other students and having a chat over a cup of tea does sound like great fun.”

With a far calmer and more gentle expression, Lady Angelica thanked them both. This must have been subconscious, but it looked like an honest reflection of her inner feelings. If she could show that to the world, I was sure her dream would be well within reach.

She turned to us. “I’m sorry, as soon as you turned up I started complaining about my own problems. I haven’t even asked what brought you all here.”

“We’ve got goods to share, like always. The fresh crop is excellent.”

“Oh yes, I see what you mean.”

For whatever reason, Lady Angelica looked back and forth between me and Kirara.

“Hmm? Oops, sorry.” While she continued to stare like she was sizing me up, I placed the basket of tea on the table in front of her.

Stroking the edge of the basket with a finger, she asked, “Misaki Hotaru, Kirara Hoshino, how are you adjusting to life here?”

I replied, “It’s a lot to get used to, but I’m managing, I guess.”

Kirara said, “I’m eternally grateful for the wonderful school life I’m able to enjoy thanks to your efforts.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it. I’m doing what I can to make this academy the best it can possibly be, so I’m counting on your help, too.”

“Right!” we replied together.

“Also, since we’re trying to forge deeper bonds with students from both programs, please don’t be shy. Feel free to come over and talk to us anytime. We’ll be glad to see you.”

“Sure!” we both said, albeit nervously. This was quite an ask.

Sensing our awkwardness, Lady Angelica heaved a mournful sigh.



We entered the new school building and visited the news crew, Anna’s Abode, and some other stops on our list. Then it was back outside to make our way to the Blossom Bower, which was a little farther away. Our errand was going smoothly.

Along the way, one detail that jumped out at me was that Kirara and I were surprisingly well-known. This did make a certain amount of sense. I was the girl who had appeared like a bolt from the blue and been chosen by Himeko, who had been living without a Seraph. Kirara was the girl who had dared to turn the whole process on its head by *asking* to be a Seraph—not just once, but over and over again. Then the two of us had taken part in the Salon Struggle, which had been filmed by the news crew and broadcast across the academy.

We stood out so much that by this point, there probably weren’t that many

students who *didn't* know our names. Even the ones who didn't recognize us at a glance had a look of realization when we introduced ourselves.

Lady Inaho picked up on this as well. "You two are like campus celebrities. That's pretty rare for Domestic Arts students, you know."

"Yeah, I'll bet."

I wasn't sure whether to be glad about this. Either way, it was a bit late to be surprised by it. My name had started spreading around the school like wildfire the second I became the deputy chairman's Seraph.

"Where are we going next, anyway?" I asked.

"We're off to visit Minnie."

"Oh yeah, Lady Minako from the volleyball club," said Kirara, looking down at her notes. "She's the last one on Lady Kagura's list."

Where will we find the volleyball club, I wonder? The playing field? Hmm, no, I don't think I've ever seen anyone playing volleyball there. They probably meet in the gym.

Speaking her mind, Kirara asked, "How come this time we're going to meet one specific person? All the others were salons or clubs of some kind."

"Kagu's *really* fond of Minnie. She's her favorite."

"Oh, they must be pretty close," I commented.

Inaho had an awkward look on her face. "Their relationship is a little strained."

Huh. She made it sound like they were really good friends, but I guess not.

"I don't mean they're always fighting or anything. Just that they're held back by a great deal of politeness and obligation."

"Politeness and obligation?" Whatever she was talking about, it sounded very fitting for a school full of well-to-do young ladies.

"I think Minnie likes Kagu, too, but it's not my place or anyone else's to try and interfere. All we can do is watch and see what happens."

"Sounds complicated."

We soon arrived at a place that struck a stark contrast with the rest of the school. The image I had of Amanotsuka Academy—that everyone had, surely—was of a world where elegant maidens spent all their time chatting away, drinking tea, and attending balls. However, this was a very different place indeed. It was a domain where blood, sweat, and tears were the order of the day. This world was one of sporting prowess.

Amanotsuka Academy's gym was expansive enough for the handball, basketball, and volleyball clubs to all practice at the same time. The sight of all that vigorous athleticism was enough to make me doubt what kind of school this was. Cries of exertion reverberated along with the sound of balls bouncing and footsteps charging across the courts. The cacophony made my heart begin to pound.

"Incredible! I thought sports would be a bit more laid-back at a school full of fine ladies."

Even someone as woefully uncoordinated as me could tell these girls weren't holding back. This was practice at a high level.

Lady Inaho explained, "All the sports clubs here are really good. They should be, given the amount spent on facilities and training staff."

"Right, I see."

That makes perfect sense. If you can afford state-of-the-art facilities and a top-of-the-line coach, that's half the battle.

"It also means that girls who want to play sports at a high level end up gravitating toward this school."

She asked a student nearby, who looked like a team manager, to go and get Lady Minako.

"Are they all Societal Arts students?" I asked.

It was hard to tell, since none of them were wearing the school's standard gym uniform. Instead, they were wearing club-specific T-shirts or training gear, which didn't show any distinction between the programs or school years.

"A lot of them are, but there are Domestic Arts students mixed in there as

well. If they've got the skills, their background doesn't matter. You wanna give it a try, Misakins?"

"No way. I'm *terrible* at ball games."

Part of me longed to experience the youthful thrill of chasing after a ball with my teammates, but I knew I wasn't even close to good enough. The best I could hope for was to stand on the sidelines, cheering them on with all my might.

As I shook my head fervently, the manager returned with a girl who had to be Lady Minako. She wiped her forehead with a towel to mop up the sweat.

"Sorry for the wait! How can I help you?"

Lady Minako was tall, just like Mei, with a dignified appearance and eyes that turned up slightly at the corners. Her arms and legs were toned and slender, as you'd expect from an athlete, while the rest of her had no excess flesh anywhere except her chest and bottom. Her long, ginger hair was tied back with a red ribbon into four ponytails that wavered in the breeze. She was a beauty with a clear and refreshing air about her, like a bright summer's day.

"Heya, Minnie! Go team!"

As a greeting, it was much less reserved than I was used to hearing at this school.

"Inaho, if I've told you once I've told you a thousand times. Just because I'm in a sports club doesn't mean you have to greet me with 'go team.'"

"Would you rather I said 'stop team'?"

"No! The team's fine! It's not stopping *or* going!"

"You're not leaving me with many options here, Minnie. How am I supposed to know what to say?"

"Can't you just find a normal way to say hello?"

"ආයුබෝවන් සැප සනීප කොහොම ද?"

"What language was that?!"

"Bwah?!" I blurted out almost reflexively.

"Stop speaking Sinhala!" said Haruka, whacking her with the fan.

That retort was probably accurate, but how are any of us supposed to judge? I couldn't do much except stand there feeling uncomfortable.

"You never change, do you, Inaho?" She sighed, sounding defeated to the point of exhaustion. "Forget it. What brings you here, then?"

"I'm here to share some freshly picked tea along with the Sky Salon's freshest faces."

"Oh yeah, Kagura has a new Seraph, doesn't she?" She looked at both me and Kirara.

Timidly, Kirara said, "Uhm, actually I'm not a Seraph yet. I'm still an Exousia." She presented the last basket she'd been carrying.

Lady Minako turned her gaze on Kirara. "So you're the one. It must be tough being Kagura's maid."

"Oh, uhm, not really. Lady Kagura is really kind."

"It's not her I'm worried about. It's the Kokonoe sisters."

"Erk."

She's not wrong there. Looks like even Kirara can't deny it.

No one could deny that the two Ayakas were outstanding maids, but they also loved mean pranks and getting way too grabby. Thanks to them, we were left thinking we'd lost the Salon Struggle when there hadn't been any danger in the first place—and having their hands all over my butt had become a daily occurrence. Their behavior toward their own mistress, Lady Kagura, was pretty baffling at times as well. It was like they didn't see her as the one in charge, or even as their equal. Often it was like they were looking down on *her*. I was always getting nervous that whatever they were doing might genuinely send Lady Kagura over the edge.

That said, they've apparently been close since they were kids. Their relationship is probably beyond my comprehension.

"The Ayakas are being very considerate toward me," said Kirara as if the words were being wrung out of her. "I still have a lot to learn."

"Hehe. I'm sure you'll have many trials and tribulations, but Kagura herself is

indeed a kind person. Don't be too discouraged."

"Thanks, I won't."

Although Lady Inaho had told me that their relationship was strained, I didn't sense any ill will toward Lady Kagura from Lady Minako. In fact, it sounded like she had a great deal of trust in her. *What was that about politeness and obligation? I wonder what she meant. Maybe Himeko knows something about it.*

"Oh, one last thing." Kirara looked at her notes, ready to fulfill Lady Kagura's final request. "I have a message for you."

"I wonder what it could be."

"Lady Kagura says: 'Best of luck in your upcoming practice tournament. I'll be there cheering you on.'"

"Really? She really doesn't need to come to a silly little practice tournament. She must have too much time on her hands. Not that I'm complaining! The more supporters we have, the more fired up we'll be."

Although she looked slightly troubled, there was still a smile on her lips. Whatever was going on, their relationship definitely was strained to some extent.

"Understood," said Kirara.

"We'd better get going," said Lady Inaho. "If we hold up their practice too long, Kagu won't be happy."

"That's rich coming from you. Well, whatever. Thanks for the tea. Say hi to Kagura for me."

"Will do!"

With a polite goodbye to Lady Minako, who waved us off with a look of exasperation, we made our way out of the gym.



"What did you say your name was?"

As I stood there, pierced by a sharp gaze, a cold sweat found my flushed

cheeks. We had reached the greenhouse a short distance from the new school building that was home to the Mauve Manor. As the name implied, it was a beautiful indoor paradise filled with flowers that were all shades of purple.

I'd been taken into one particular section of it, where a curtain of pale purple wisterias hung down from above, blocking off any view from the outside. Directly across the table from me was a lone young lady sitting listlessly with her legs crossed, her elbow on the armrest of her chair, and her face resting in her hand. This was Shion Tsukuyomi, the last person Himeko had asked me to visit. Her deep purple hair looked like it would hang to her waist if she stood. At a forty-five degree angle on her head sat a tiara headband akin to a crown of thorns dotted with rose petals. It glimmered with a dark, metallic sheen. Looking at her, I sensed a similarity to Himeko.

Although our group had arrived at the Mauve Manor together, I'd been led here alone. For whatever reason, Lady Inaho and the others were being entertained by the salon's members, while Lady Shion and I were alone. It was pretty frightening to be left alone with a third year I'd never met before, especially one from the Societal Arts program.

To be honest, it's not just that. I think with most other Societal Arts students, I'd be fine. There's just something about her demeanor that makes me uncomfortable. It reminds me of Lady Saeko and her sadistic aura.

If Lady Saeko was like a hawk watching her prey from above, Lady Shion was like a leopard—a carnivore, stalking and ready to pounce. I could tell at first glance that I was in the presence of a predator. Her languid posture did nothing to disguise the perceptive glint in her eyes. Not a single move from her target would go unnoticed. Those eyes were laser beams, shooting at me with a burning fury. As much as I wanted to stand my ground, I couldn't help but huddle up to protect myself.

"I'll ask you again. What's your name?"

I gulped hard. *If I still don't answer, is she going to rip me to shreds with her sharp claws or bite me with her ragged fangs?*

"Misaki Hotaru," I managed eventually. That was all I could squeeze from my dry throat.

“Ah yes. I’ve heard of you.”

She offered a malicious grin that made my hair stand on end. I was sure she knew who I was without even confirming my name. The look in her eyes told me she had already caught hold of her prey and was merely toying with it.

“Heh. Word is that you and Himeko had an arrangement before you even arrived here, but that *has* to be a lie.”

A shiver ran through me. *Are we busted?*

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t try to hide it. If you’re here, I assume Himeko told you a little bit about me.”

“She said that you’re like a sister to her. That you’ve known each other since you were kids.”

“My, how sweet.” Lady Shion clapped her hands in joy, but the smile didn’t find her eyes. “She’s avoided me for a whole year, so it’s good to know she still thinks of me that way. Yes, Himeko and I have known each other for a long time. I know about all her likes and dislikes, about every person she’s involved with, even the location of every mole on her bottom.”

“So do I, actually,” I half-whispered. Despite interrupting, my voice had naturally taken on a meek and quiet tone.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“Anyway, that’s why I was a tad surprised when *you* appeared in her life out of nowhere. It doesn’t bother me, however. I see it as good news that she finally has a Seraph.”

I remained silent.

“Well? Has Himeko finally changed her mind about all that?”

“Huh? I’m not sure what you mean.”

By the time I realized what a dangerous reply that was, it had already slipped out. In an instant, Lady Shion’s mood darkened. The air turned chilly and the

smile disappeared from her face. I found myself mercilessly choked by the suffocating pressure she exuded.

“If she has a Seraph, that means she must have become more enthusiastic about the idea. But if so, why did she choose *you* of all people?”

Eek! Her eyes! They're downright terrifying!

I couldn't bring myself to meet her gaze. If I told her that, to Himeko, I was only a standin Seraph, I didn't think I'd make it out of there alive.

“Well, I only just became her Seraph, so I don't have a full understanding of the situation yet. I can't tell you if Himeko is 'enthusiastic' as you say, because I simply don't know.”

“Hmph. That's fine.”

It doesn't sound like it's fine.

“Why did she choose you as your Seraph, then, if you know so little about her circumstances?”

I could have cried. *How am I supposed to answer that? I can't just blurt out what really happened. It's even harder with her glaring at me like this!*

Instead, I replied, “Is it that weird to be chosen as a Seraph without knowing all about my mistress' circumstances?”

“That depends. For another mistress it might be normal, but for Himeko, acquiring a Seraph has a special meaning.”

Saying that didn't really help. Himeko hadn't told me her reasons, so I didn't know anything. That's what I *wanted* to say, but what came out was, “The reason she chose me is...”

“Yes?”

“Strictly confidential!”

I couldn't tell her the truth, but I couldn't lie either. The only option left was to say nothing. I shut my eyes tightly and waited for Lady Shion's response. The silence went on for an eternity as I wondered what was going through her head.

Eventually, I heard a small sigh, followed by a chuckle. “All right, then. If you

don't want to tell me, I'll forgive you, just this once."

I gasped. *Did I do it? Did I actually get through this?*

"That doesn't mean this is over. I know there's more going on here."

I knew it, I thought with a groan.

"I don't know what Himeko's intentions are, but if she has a Seraph now, that means something has changed about her mindset. Sending you to meet me has to be part of that. As such, I've decided to wait and see just a little bit longer. Tell Himeko, though, that I am *not* a patient woman."

"Yes, understood," I murmured.

It almost sounded as though Himeko and Lady Shion had some kind of agreement—and that Himeko was the one who had to follow through on it. Lady Shion seemed to be waiting for Himeko to do something, but I couldn't even guess what.

"I won't forget about you, either."

"You won't?"

"Now that you're her Seraph, both of you are in the same boat. Keep that firmly in your mind as you serve her. If you do *anything* to hurt my cute little sister, you'll have me to reckon with. Do you understand?"

Ack! Now she's smiling from ear to ear, and that makes it ten times worse! I'd rather she did just forget about me!

Agreeing to be Himeko's Seraph was starting to feel like a big mistake.

"Hehe. Aoi, my guest is leaving now. Please present her with a parting gift."

"Yes, milady," came a sudden voice from behind me.

"Wha?!"

I turned and saw a maid holding a large bouquet of roses. *Weren't we alone? Where did she come from?* From her golden badge, I assumed she was Lady Shion's Seraph.



“Here you go.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

Despite my shock, I graciously accepted the bouquet. The roses were deep purple, with a suitably deep and fragrant scent that tickled my nostrils. *I never knew roses could be this beautiful.*

Smiling meaningfully, Lady Shion stood from her chair.

“In the language of flowers, *Intrigue* cultivars symbolize pride, elegance, and a throne. I thought they might suit Himeko right now.”

As I watched her leave, I could feel the palm of my hand growing damp with sweat where it held the roses.

“That was terrifying,” I said to myself, just barely managing to avoid crumpling to the floor. I finally rejoined Lady Inaho and the others and began the journey back to the Sky Salon.



When we got back to the Sky Salon, I clung to Himeko in tears. “I thought she was going to eat me alive. Gobble me up!”

Himeko pulled a face. “Okay, I get it already. You don’t have to keep repeating it.”

“I swear I saw my life flashing before my eyes. At one point, Lady Shion’s mood took a turn for the worse. She seemed really angry and said she wouldn’t forget about me. I feel like I’m about to say goodbye to my happy high school life.”

“Oh, she said she’d remember you? How kind of her!”

“That’s *not* how she said it!”

Just thinking about it made a cold sweat come over me. In my mind’s eye, her smile was so ferocious, it was like I was being savaged by the fangs of a saber-toothed tiger. I still felt like she was lying in wait, ready to hunt me down. Once she had me in her sights, there was no escaping—not ever.

However, whether Himeko had taken in my feelings or not, she herself had an

unruffled expression. “It’s fine. Her remembering you was the point.”

“What do you mean?”

“Misaki, have you ever heard of a ‘debut’?”

“Uh, I do remember my classmate mentioning something about that. She gave me a basic idea of what it is, but I don’t know the details.”

“When someone joins a salon, there is an event called a debut to introduce them to the members of other salons and make sure they know the new girl’s name and face. In the Sky Salon, when the new member is a Societal Arts student, we reserve a venue and throw a party, but if it’s a Domestic Arts student, we send them out to introduce themselves. Everyone you met today knew all about that, so if they remember you now, it was a great success.”

“Huh, really?”

I felt ready to slump over. Now that I thought about it, there had been a *lot* of people with weirdly knowing expressions.

“You could have told me that in advance.”

“Hehe, sorry. I just thought it would be better to keep it a secret. It adds a touch of suspense.” She put a hand to her mouth and giggled. “So, what else did Shion say?”

“Let me think. She asked if you’d finally changed your mind and become enthusiastic about having a Seraph. When I told her I didn’t know, she looked pretty angry.”

“Oh dear. That’s my fault, I’m afraid.” Himeko frowned and hung her head slightly. When I didn’t respond, she added, “Aren’t you going to ask for details?”

“I am *really* curious, but it feels too soon to start asking questions. It’s like, even if you tell me the reasons, I wouldn’t have the first clue what to do about any of it.”

“I see.”

“But let’s say I thought really, really hard about it, and decided based on more than just curiosity—would you tell me then?”

“I’ll tell you anytime. You’re playing along with my own self-indulgent plan, so you have a right to ask. I’d gladly tell you everything—about why Shion said that and why I didn’t want to have a Seraph.”

“I appreciate it. I still don’t want to ask just yet, though.”

“Really? Why not?”

“I get the feeling it would only spell more trouble for me. I want to leave it until I’m *sure* I want to know.”

She cheered up slightly. “Heh, I see your point. It would make you the keeper of a closely guarded secret.”

“Exactly. Now, what shall we do with these?”

I held up the bouquet of roses from Lady Shion.

“I’ll take care of those. I see they’re still as magnificent a color as ever.” She took the flowers from me and drew them up to her nose. “They smell wonderful, too. Why don’t we put them on the table?”

As she spoke, she spun on her heel and began walking. Her nonchalant pace suggested there was nothing out of the ordinary at all.

“Over here, Misaki. We have tea and snacks all laid out, including your beloved donuts, of course! While we eat, you can tell me more about today.”

“Sure! It was a lot of work, to be honest. When we got to the Petite—uh, Paradise Palace—it looked like Mei was...”

Following her to the table, I began telling her all about my other visits that afternoon.

Chapter Two: Girls With Dreams

April came and went in a blur.

The ordinary school life I'd had in mind, where I would keep my head down and study hard, had been ripped from my grasp. As it turned out, the promise of free tuition and living costs was too good to be true; Amanotsuka Academy was actually a school for training maids. Though it was originally founded as a school for well-off young ladies, the academy had added the Domestic Arts program later on so that maids who would serve the ladies could be educated alongside them.

The Domestic Arts program was the one I had passed the exam for and was now attending, while the young ladies were in the Societal Arts program. All my classmates were fully aware of the situation—for them, it had never felt like a cruel trick as it had for me.

Honestly, it had come as a *major* shock. Needless to say, I wasn't about to give up on my dream. My normal studies just had to coexist with my new life spent learning how to be a maid.

Still, it wasn't all bad. My education and living costs were still totally free, and the Domestic Arts students even got paid for serving the young ladies. Tough as it was to try and do two things at once, it only made me more determined to make it work.

That resolve stemmed, in large part, from getting to know one young lady in particular. Although my discomfort at referring to the Societal Arts students as "young ladies" had eventually fallen by the wayside, I was caught unawares the first time I met one of them. Himeko Amanotsuka had seemed so impressive that I couldn't quite believe it.

As her surname might suggest, Himeko belonged to the family that had established the school. She was more than just a Societal Arts student. Alongside her studies, she was serving as the school's deputy chairman of the board, and she was a member of the Sky Salon, the most prestigious salon in

school. She wasn't the kind of person I really had any right to have a casual chat with.

However, in a strange twist of fate, when we bumped into each other on the first day of school, our goals turned out to be pretty well aligned, and we ended up entering into the Golden Contract.

The unknown can be pretty scary. For a week or so, I was still very reluctant to work as Himeko's Seraph—a maid exclusively contracted to her. Although I still hadn't forgotten my real goal, I was getting pretty used to my new life serving Himeko.

After I met Himeko and became her Seraph, I made friends with Kirara, and we competed together in the Salon Struggle. It was a hectic month, and I met all kinds of other people as well. Before I knew it, May had arrived, and I'd started to feel at home at the academy.

In only two days, it would be Golden Week. We'd have several days of vacation in a row.

"Are you going home to visit your family, Kirara?"

The few minutes before homeroom started gave us time for a chat. Now that Kirara was a member of the Sky Salon, just like me, she'd become *much* easier to talk to. It had already gotten better when we spent a while learning table manners together, but now she'd basically lost any reason to be jealous of me.

"Maybe during summer vacation. We're only getting four days off now, so it's not really long enough. Besides, this is no time to be lazing around. I want Lady Kagura to make me into a Seraph as soon as humanly possible!"

"Fair enough. Do you know what you actually have to do to get there?"

"I wish. It would be easier if there was some way I could show off my skills, but Salon Struggles don't come along every day. All I can do is keep my nose to the grindstone." She put a hand on her chin and heaved a loud sigh. "How about you? Any plans?"

"I'm staying here, too. I don't have the money for a trip home."

"I guess we haven't gotten our wages yet. Do you really not have enough for a

train ticket, though?”

“Nope. My financial situation is *really* precarious.”

“Oh. Well, I don’t think you’re the only one in the Domestic Arts program.”

Domestic service was a pretty common occupation, so I wouldn’t have said it was the rule, but a *lot* of people went into it who came from less affluent backgrounds. This was all the more likely to apply to students of Amanotsuka Academy, where so much was provided for free. There were plenty of girls who came here hoping to end up serving a celebrity-caliber lady, but just as many came here for purely financial reasons.

I had other reasons for not going home, but Kirara didn’t ask any more questions, maybe because she was worried about prying.

Hmm, I wonder if Himeko will be staying here as well? She could go home, but it seems like she might have some reason not to. Come to think of it, I’ve never really asked her about her home life—not that I’ve really said much about mine, either.

While I was wondering about this, our homeroom teacher arrived, ready to start. “Good morning, class!”

Ms. Hiyori was a kind teacher who was never seen without a smile. She didn’t even mind when students called her “Ms. H.” It was clear at a glance that she was a lady from a good background; her demeanor and the accessories she wore made her fine upbringing readily apparent. I’d heard she was a former student of Amanotsuka Academy, and I could definitely believe that. She was still in her early twenties, so a lot of the students looked up to her as an older sister figure.

“I have a very important announcement for you.”

Her relaxed tone didn’t make it *sound* all that significant, but she did have an unusually serious expression.

“By now, you should all be getting used to life at the academy, so after Golden Week, we’ll really get down to business.”

Gasps and murmurs broke out across the classroom.

“I’m sure you’ve all been eagerly awaiting your chance to start serving the Societal Arts students for real by being assigned to them for room duties.”

This went without saying, but the goal of every Domestic Arts student was to get a job working in the household of one of the Societal Arts students. However, just studying at the school wouldn’t provide enough opportunities to meet the young ladies and get to know them well enough for them to start handing out exclusive contracts. Also, while the ladies could trust that anyone who studied here was going to be a superior maid, that didn’t mean they’d hire *just* anyone. Sometimes, even a servant who did everything flawlessly was still a person they didn’t quite get along with—or they could find they preferred a maid who made them comfortable, with everything else taking second place.

That was what the room duties were for. They provided opportunities for maids and ladies to meet and maybe find they had an affinity for each other. Every student who didn’t already have an exclusive contract would be put on a monthly rotation of *temporary* contracts to personally take care of one Societal Arts student at a time. Then, if the lady found she really liked the maid, she might take her on as a Seraph or Exousia.

For most Domestic Arts students, it was a chance to make their mark, so they were eager to jump in. Thankfully, it made no difference to me since I already had an exclusive contract with Himeko. I could imagine it being quite an ordeal if I didn’t, especially since I never even wanted to be a maid in the first place. Every single month they’d be switching to a new lady and having to learn all the ins and outs of working for her in particular. If they weren’t compatible with their potential mistress, the strain could end up getting to them and having adverse effects on their school work. If their work got sloppy, it could potentially put the young lady in a bad mood, which would impact their grades, maybe even enough to lead to expulsion.

With all that in mind, I started feeling really lucky to be Himeko’s Seraph. She took my needs into consideration and even helped me out with my studies. In essence, she was the ideal mistress.

“In a few minutes, I’ll give you a questionnaire to fill out to help us decide which student to send where. Try to think about what kind of maid you’re aiming to be.”

I hadn't realized they'd be taking the students' wishes into account to a certain degree. It did make sense since there wasn't much point in sending a future kitchen maid to serve someone who was looking for a lady's maid. Sure, it *could* happen to be a perfect match, but it was more likely to be a waste of time. It was nice that the school took all that into account.

"Now, before I give you all the questionnaire, I'd like to select the head maid."

Head maid? What's that?

"As you all know, the head maid serves as a coordinator for all the other maids. During your room duties, you're likely to have all sorts of questions and concerns. Some of them might be sensitive topics you'd rather not discuss with a teacher. In those cases, the one you can turn to for support is the head maid. She'll act as a bridge between the teachers and students, providing help and advice to ensure you can carry out your duties smoothly."

Huh, that sounds like a tough job. I definitely have no interest in doing that.

"There's no fixed duration for the head maid role. However, the head maid is chosen from students who don't yet have a Seraph or Exousia contract. The idea is that if the student assigned to be head maid *does* receive a contract at some point, she then passes the title to someone else. However, even if she remains uncontracted, the idea isn't for her to keep the title for the entire school year—I plan to select a replacement about halfway through. That said, the students most likely to be picked also tend to be given contracts rather quickly, so I'd be surprised if anyone stays in the role for more than three months or so."

Ms. Hiyori grinned as she spoke.

That means me and Kirara won't get picked. Phew! I patted my chest in relief.

"The decision is up to the teacher, and I'd like to ask the student who has the highest grades out of those who don't have a contract yet. If the person I've chosen would strongly prefer not to do it, then I'd ask her to let me know. I understand that it can be a heavy burden, so I don't intend to force anybody. Now, without further ado..."

She looked around the classroom until her eyes fell on one particular student.

“Sara, I’d like to ask you to be our first head maid this year. Are you all right with that?”

“Yes, that sounds jolly good,” said Sara, rising from her seat. There was no hesitation in her voice whatsoever.

Sara had blonde hair that shone with a golden luster, clear blue eyes, and a shapely face with a straight nose. The slightly odd phrases she used sometimes were a sign that she was a rarity in the Domestic Arts program: an exchange student from Britain. Her hair fanned outward slightly at the bottom, while a braid hung down behind each ear, tied with ribbons that appeared to have small cherry blossom petals attached. There was a hardness to her gaze that made her seem slightly unapproachable, so I hadn’t actually spoken to her yet, but I knew she’d excelled in all our classes so far.

“Sara’s new to Japan, so I’m sure there are still ways in which she’s not quite used to our country’s customs and the systems specific to Amanotsuka Academy. I’m hoping this will be a good opportunity for her to gain a deeper understanding of both. You should all feel free to go to her with any problems you might have. At the same time, if there’s anything Sara doesn’t understand, I hope you’ll all be kind enough to help her. Is that clear?”

She swept her gaze across the room, eliciting a chorus of “Yes, Ms. Hiyori.” Among the voices, I could hear more than a few that were filled with relief at not being picked themselves. I couldn’t blame them. Any job with “head” at the start of it sounded like something I’d rather avoid.

“Now, I do have one additional request,” the teacher continued. “Misaki? Kirara?”

I jumped at being suddenly called on. Kirara’s head whipped up reflexively as well. “Yes, Ms. Hiyori!” we responded.

“Both of you already have contracts with a mistress, which is rare this early in the school year. Not only that, but your mistresses are the illustrious Himeko Amanotsuka and Kagura Mikage.”

In an instant, all eyes in the room were focused squarely on us. This wasn’t too uncommon these days—it had started when I became Himeko’s Seraph—but I still wasn’t exactly comfortable with it.

“That’s fantastic, and a great opportunity, I think. I’d like the two of you to show Sara how you work. It would be really helpful for Sara if you can give her a close look at what kind of student becomes a Seraph or an Exousia, and what a salon is like. That kind of knowledge will make it easier for her to carry out her head maid duties.”

“Oh, uhm, sure.”

I was a little uncomfortable agreeing to this. Just because I was a Seraph didn’t mean I was doing anything all that special. All I really had to do was stay close to Himeko and do my best to play the part.

How I work? What does that even mean? I know from the outside it probably looks like I’m some amazing prodigy for being chosen by Himeko in my first year, but it actually had nothing to do with my abilities. I guess everyone must think I’m a really good maid who lives up to Himeko’s high standards or something.

In a hushed voice, I asked Kirara, “What do we do?”

Unlike me, Kirara definitely *did* have the kind of domestic service skills that an Exousia could be proud of. I was wondering if it might be possible for her to show Sara enough work for the two of us. Either way, bringing her along to the Sky Salon would require Lady Kagura’s permission.

Whispering, I rushed to try and point all this out. Kirara replied, “I’m sure it’ll be fine! I see what you mean, though.”

She wore a look of pride on her face. Since becoming Lady Kagura’s Exousia, Kirara had started to come across as a little more self-confident than before.

Kirara stood and said to the teacher, “We can’t decide that on our own, I’m afraid. We’ll have to go and ask Lady Kagura.”

“Yes, indeed. I’m sure she’ll be happy to agree.” Ms. Hiyori nodded, apparently quite satisfied by Kirara’s exemplary response. “Sara, please wait until you hear back from Misaki and Kirara about this. Kagura will probably give permission, so when she does, try to look at this as a chance to learn from the best.”

“Yes, that will be absolutely fine.” She turned to us. “How do you do?”

Sara then bowed at an angle so precise that it wouldn't have been out of place in an etiquette textbook.

I replied hastily, "Uhm, fine. Nice to meet you too. I'm sure we can all learn from each other."

Where the stare of her striking blue eyes left me fraught with nerves, Kirara showed an easygoing smile. "Can't wait!"

"Now, here's the questionnaire for you all. When you're filling it out, think hard about what kind of maid you're aiming to be."

I was handed one even though I didn't really need to write anything on it since I was a Seraph already. Still, looking at it made me acutely aware once again that I was at a school specifically for training maids.



It had become a regular occurrence for our classmates to gather around me after classes were finished for the day. Mostly, they would pile on questions about Himeko and the Sky Salon, or beg to know more about the other celestials. For these girls, who were anxious for the opportunity to meet fine ladies they could serve, every crumb of information was like gold dust.

Now that Kirara was Lady Kagura's Exousia, all their fervent attention was pivoting toward her instead.

"What's Lady Kagura like as a mistress? People say she's *really* strict. Is it true?"

"Did you have your debut already? Did you get to meet a whole bunch of ladies? I'm so jealous!"

"Has Lady Kagura said anything about wanting more maids? Do you think she'd give me a chance?"

Knowing how Kirara was, I expected her to mostly shut them down, but usually she gave surprisingly straight answers to their questions. Maybe she was just that eager to talk about Lady Kagura.

I tried to give whatever answers I reasonably could, too. After all, now that room duties were starting, there'd inevitably be fewer and fewer of them, since

the other girls would start getting contracts of their own. For now, though, we still attracted a crowd of classmates.

Suddenly, Kirara stood up and gasped, putting a stop to their conversation. Putting her hands together, she said, “Sorry, everybody! We have to head out now. We’re supposed to take Sara to the Sky Salon today. Misaki, let’s get going.”

During our lunch break, we’d taken the time to tell Lady Kagura about the teacher’s request from that morning. We’d successfully gotten permission, which had not necessarily been guaranteed. Each salon was essentially its own private world. Often, entry was strictly forbidden to outsiders unless they were an invited guest explicitly given permission by the head of the salon. When we’d visited the other salons for our debut, we’d probably have been turned away at the door if Lady Inaho hadn’t been with us. Being a member of one salon seemed to provide a bit of leeway to go back and forth between the different ones, which was why it was so important to show our faces and make an impression.

This was a special case, with a particular reason for seeking permission, so Lady Kagura had agreed. However, the Kokonoe sisters had been clear about what would happen if there *weren’t* a good reason.

“Don’t bring anyone along just because they’re curious and itching to take a peek.”

“If you do, we’ll punish you by making you wear an apron and *nothing* else.”

I looked around the classroom but I couldn’t see Sara sitting anywhere. “I’m ready to go when you are, but where’s Sara?”

“Over here! Tally-ho!”

There it was again—her unusual way of speaking. When I turned in the direction of her voice, she was already waiting in the corridor, ready to go. We hurriedly grabbed our school bags and followed her.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to keep you waiting,” I said.

“You could have said something,” Kirara muttered.

“Well, my goal today is not to participate, but to observe.” True to her word, she was staring intently at us.

After a moment, I said, “You know, it’s kind of unnerving, being looked at like that.”

Kirara had clearly had enough. “Stop talking nonsense and let’s just go.”

“Certainly!” Sara chirped.

We headed to the old school building, which housed the Sky Salon. Along the way, we explained where the salon was and how to use the elevator that led there.



When we entered the Sky Salon, Himeko and Lady Kagura were already waiting.

“This is Sara, the one I mentioned,” said Kirara first of all.

Lady Kagura turned to Sara. “Welcome! I’m the head of the salon, Kagura Mikage.”

“I’m frightfully grateful to be allowed in. I’ve heard the Sky Salon puts all the others to shame. I’m thrilled to meet you, Lady Kagura.”

“Don’t even mention it. You can relax and feel right at home here. For now, why not have a cup of tea? I know you’re here to observe, but the Sky Salon’s not that big, so you should be able to get a good view of the whole place even if you’re sitting comfortably. If you have any questions at all, I’m happy to answer.”

“Oh, I’m happy to stand. No need to pay me any mind. Act as though I’m not even here.”

“Honestly, it’s no trouble. Today you’re our guest, that’s all. Sure, you may be a Domestic Arts student, but it would still be rude to leave you standing. I couldn’t live with myself.”

After a pause, Sara said, “Very well. Much obliged, then. I will have a spot of tea, if you don’t mind.”

She didn't refuse a second time, but her whole attitude was pretty impressive. Sara wasn't even slightly timid. She stood her ground and replied calmly and politely. Her ladylike demeanor would no doubt be a credit to anyone she stood beside as a lady's maid.

As urged by Lady Kagura, Sara found a seat and introduced herself to the Sky Salon members sitting nearby. Today, the celestials hadn't spread out to their favorite places in the room, but had gathered around the central table instead. It looked like this was intentional; they had known we were bringing Sara, and they wanted to welcome her.

A selection of sweets had been laid out, and the tea was ready to be served. With Sara sitting down, a miniature banquet began in her honor. Kirara and I put our aprons on and took over the role of serving everybody, hoping to make a good impression on her. Recently, I'd honed my tea-brewing technique, so it was a chance to show my stuff. Kirara hadn't even needed to be taught; she'd been determined to be a maid for so long that this kind of task was second nature to her. I couldn't let her leave me in the dust.

I did have one advantage: I'd been there slightly longer. Kirara hadn't had time to learn everyone's tastes and preferences yet. I found myself giving her various tidbits of advice as we set about serving the tea.

Meanwhile, Sara smiled and had a pleasant chat with Lady Kagura and the others. If not for her Domestic Arts uniform, this would have looked like a tea party between ladies of equal status.

The Societal Arts program had quite a few exchange students, but it was pretty strange to see a girl like Sara, who had grown up abroad and came across as someone with a good background, studying to be a maid.

It could be that she wants to get married and be a homemaker, but I don't think it's quite the right program for that. With any luck, all this will bring us closer together and I'll get a chance to ask her sometime.

Eventually, Himeko said, "You should sit down as well, Misaki. The food's going to run out otherwise."

"All right."

We'd already served everyone a second cup of tea by now, so our duties were mostly finished. I took Himeko up on her offer and let myself relax.

I've done a pretty great job today, if I do so say so myself! I didn't trip and spill any tea, and I didn't mix up any of the ladies' special orders. Kirara also did a great job considering it's only her second day officially working at the Sky Salon. I don't think she made a single mistake. Hopefully Sara will say something like, "Jolly good, both of you!"

Himeko grabbed a cookie and lifted it up to my mouth. "Here you go, Misaki."

The others made derisive comments sometimes, calling it "feeding time at the zoo," but Himeko seemed to have a thing for feeding me sweets. Ever since she gave me donuts this way on my first visit to the Sky Salon, she'd apparently developed a liking for it. Telling her how embarrassing it was did nothing to make her stop, so I'd given up and let her have her way. She never did it anywhere outside of the salon and her own dorm room, so it wasn't a big deal.

"Sara's from Britain, isn't she?" Himeko asked me.

"Yes, that's right."

"No wonder she knows so much about being a maid."

"What do you mean? Is there something special about Britain?"

"It's the birthplace of maids. Ever since the profession was formally established in the Victorian era, they've become more and more polished. Sara seems to have been studying very hard, so I'm sure her skills are excellent."

"Wow. The birthplace of maids, huh?" That did explain her incredible grades.

"That reminds me, Misaki. I want you to stay over tonight."

"Sure, got it."

Himeko was often inviting me to stay in her room. This was because taking care of her overnight or during days off came with bonus pay. Knowing that I was in a tough situation financially, Himeko had promised to take good care of me. We'd also agreed that in exchange for my services, she'd help out with my studies, so it was win-win.

At first, it had felt like I was imposing on her by staying over so often, but she

didn't seem bothered at all. In fact, she always seemed thrilled to have me there, since it let her pretend we lived together. Lately, I'd stopped trying to fight it and just accepted her kindness, which meant I was now staying the night about a third of the time.

Ding, dong! Ding, dong!

The bell rang to warn us that it was time to leave. Of course, since Amanotsuka Academy was a boarding school, no one had to *actually* leave school grounds, so most people didn't react to the bell with any particular hurry. Teachers would go around to check and send people back to their rooms, but even that would be a little while. This was just a warning to start getting ready to move.

Incidentally, the Societal Arts students could even stay out later if they applied for permission. I had even heard that they threw late-night balls on campus sometimes. Here in the Sky Salon, the ladies tended to take their time wrapping up even after the bell rang.

"Kirara, Misaki, why don't you take Sara back to the dorm with you?" said Lady Kagura.

"Okay!" we both replied at once. We set about getting our things together.

I really gave it my all today. I wonder what Sara thought? Even if she does come from the birthplace of maids, it's not like she has a contract yet. In terms of real-life maid experience, I'm technically still one step ahead. I bet she can teach me a lot, but maybe she can even learn something from me, too!

Before leaving, I stepped over to Himeko. "I'll head to your room when I'm done."

"Great! I'll be waiting."

She waved goodbye, and we left the Sky Salon.

Kirara, Sara, and I made our way back to Chambord House. Unable to hold back any longer, I decided to ask, "What did you think? Did you pick up any pointers?"

There was no denying I'd gotten a little bit conceited. I thought my

performance was worthy of a perfect score. However, the next words out of Sara's mouth threw cold water all over me.

"I was frightfully disappointed. The standards in Japan seem far worse than I expected."

I balked. "What?"

"Oh, I don't mean to lump every maid in together, of course. Certainly, though, you two first years are hopelessly lacking in the requisite skills."

With a look of anger, Kirara demanded, "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean just what I said."

I turned to face Sara. "Did we, uhm, do something wrong?"

The old school building stood tall in the distance behind her. Just a few minutes earlier, we'd been at its highest point, with the best view across the campus, doing work that might not have been perfect but was definitely good enough in my opinion.

"There was nothing you *didn't* do wrong."

I groaned. "We did *that* bad a job of serving tea?"

All my earlier confidence had vanished into thin air. I just stared at Sara like a lost little puppy.

"It runs deeper than that. Frankly, I was gobsmacked at what a mess it was. There's no way Kirara deserves to be a Seraph based on that shocking performance."

Flaring up even more, Kirara drew right up to Sara's face. "You better watch what you say!"

"Wait!" Panicking, I grabbed Kirara from behind and pulled her back. "Kirara only just became an Exousia, and there were special circumstances. It's not like she's going to become a Seraph right now anyway."

"I am well aware. We all saw Kirara's performance in the dining hall. In my eyes, it's not especially relevant, however. If Lady Kagura were satisfied with Kirara's skills and found they met her standards, she'd make her a Seraph

regardless of all else.”

“Oh, uhm, I guess.”

The reason Lady Kagura had given for not promoting Kirara straight to Seraph was that it would help prevent copycats.

But was that because the act itself—begging to be her Seraph—was something anyone could copy? Hypothetically, if Kirara’s skills had stood out, and Lady Kagura had been able to say she had decided based on Kirara’s skills rather than her actions, maybe she would have been able to make her into a Seraph right away. Anyone who lacked those skills wouldn’t have been able to copy that, so there would’ve been no problem, right?

We were still first years, though, and right at the start of our studies. Being *that* good would have been a pretty tall order. In that light, what Sara was saying made sense.

“No need to worry,” said Sara. “Now that I’m head maid, I can give you some tips, and then Kirara will be a Seraph in no time. First, I’ll outline all the mistakes you made.”

“Don’t bother,” said Kirara in what sounded almost like a growl.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m telling you not to bother. I don’t need you to teach me anything. I’m going to become a Seraph all on my own.”

“Are you capable of that?”

“Yes!”

“And when do you suppose you’ll achieve this feat?”

“Soon! Right away! Just you wait, I’ll be a Seraph before you know it—and I’ll make *sure* you know it!”

“Capital! I can’t wait.”

“Hmph. Let’s go, Misaki.”

She grabbed my hand and sped off with me in tow.

“Kirara, hold on a sec! Are you sure you should be talking like that?”

“I don’t care. If someone treats me like she just did, I’m not going to just roll over and ask for more. I don’t need her!”

Her anger didn’t abate for the rest of the walk. All the way back to our room, she was grumbling to herself in a harsh whisper.

When we got back to the room, she began to vent her anger by taking it out on her pillow. “Ugh, how *annoying!*”

I was taken aback.

“Who does she think she is? She’s just jealous because she doesn’t have a contract yet!”

The pillow she was clutching to her chest took a sharp blow to the side and folded in half.

“I didn’t get that impression,” I replied.

From the look she’d had in her eyes, I’d have guessed Sara was genuinely disappointed. That was surprising in its own way, but still, she hadn’t struck me as jealous.

Kirara looked over at me.

“What are you doing, anyway?” she asked in a slightly barbed tone.

“Oh, you know, just getting ready. Himeko asked me to stay over again.”

Flustered, I used my arms to block her view of the bag I was busy cramming full of my overnight gear. I’d already stayed with Himeko plenty of times by now, so Kirara should have been used to seeing this, but it seemed to provoke her every time. Now that Sara had put her in a bad mood, it was only going to be worse.

“Of course, how could I forget? Everything’s going great for Misaki, isn’t it? You’re a Seraph already, so you get the privilege of staying the night with your mistress.”

“Don’t take this out on me, okay? I’m planning to ask Himeko if *she* saw anything wrong with our work.”

“Tell me what *you* think, Misaki. Did we do anything wrong?”

“I have no idea. I thought I did a good job, but Sara sounded pretty convinced. Either way, if there are ways I can improve, I should try and do that, right? If we’re not going to ask Sara about it, that means we have to find out on our own.”

“Well, yeah. I guess you have a point.”

“Anyway, I’m heading out.”

I gathered up my things as quickly as I could. I could see in Kirara’s eyes that if I stayed any longer, her complaints would just run in an endless loop. Grasping my bags, I ran out of the room, eager to escape.



Droplets of water glided down Himeko’s silky smooth skin. They slid from the small hollow in the center of her collarbone to the divet between her ample breasts, proceeding ever downward. Pausing only for a moment to linger in her little belly button, the beads rolled past her abdomen.

With her hair treatment finished, I wrapped up her long hair in a towel, revealing the nape of her neck, an area of her pale skin usually hidden from everyone’s eyes. If I were a vampire, this sight, so bewitching and so vulnerable, would have been too much for me to resist. Seeing parts of Himeko’s body that no one ever could except me had an enchanting effect every single time.

“So, you wanted to know if there was anything you and Kirara did wrong?”

“Uhm, right! Yes!”

I’d been so drawn in by Himeko’s bare neck that her voice took me by surprise. Although I’d gotten used to sharing a bath with Himeko, her naked body still rendered me breathless. I couldn’t believe she had such an impressive figure when we were only one school year apart. It made me feel self-conscious about my own lack of curves, but even so, seeing her beautiful body was enough of a feast for the eyes to make up for it.

“Hmm. I’m trying to think of any mistakes you made, but I’m struggling. It all seemed fine to me.”

“Really?”

When we'd reached Himeko's room, I'd tried to broach the subject right away, but she had told me she needed some time to consider it and wanted to have a bath first. Now I was just finishing up the process of washing her hair, same as always. By this point, I didn't think there was any reason Himeko would lie to spare my feelings, so it was a relief to hear her say that straight out.

"I can't really comment on Miss Hoshino, of course. That's up to Kagura, and she might feel differently." After setting out that proviso, she continued, "There are people who think that there's only one kind of master-servant relationship and they all have to fit that mold. The thing is, that's only a one-size-fits-all solution. It might be sufficient for a maid being hired by the day, but it's nothing like *our* relationship.

"You've entered into the Golden Contract and become a Seraph, so what matters is that you serve in a way that aligns with your mistress and her needs. From the outside, people might think it looks overly permissive, but a maid only has to satisfy her mistress—me, in your case—and no one else. There's no single answer for the ideal master-servant relationship, because every master, or mistress, is different. That's what it boils down to."

"Yeah, I see what you mean."

"We agreed on the contract because it was mutually beneficial for both of us. I have no intention of making any strict demands that don't fit with that. In fact, I'm grateful to you for going along with my self-indulgent wishes to do things like take baths together. I'm not going to start complaining."

Wait, hold on a moment.

I felt a sudden pang of anguish as I realized what she *wasn't* saying.

Sure, Himeko might be satisfied with me, but that's because she isn't expecting much. There are probably still lots of things I should be doing that I'm not, and Sara picked up on that. Things that any elite maid should be able to do are totally outside of my expertise.

Why do I feel so frustrated by this? It's not like I'm aiming to be a maid in the first place. My contract with Himeko is only for a year, anyway. She doesn't want to turn me into a real maid and doesn't demand that I give her a high level of service. Still, I can't just leave things like this.

I felt ashamed of myself for quietly singing my own praises and thinking I'd already learned so much. At my current standard, I wasn't worthy of calling myself Himeko's Seraph. Even if I didn't want to be a maid for the rest of my life, I couldn't slack off. The key to a bright future was putting everything I could into the task I had at hand—I was sure of that.

While I'm at this school, I have to study to be a maid regardless. I want Himeko to genuinely be glad she made me her Seraph, not just because I'm good enough as a compromise, but because she honestly believes it.

Seeing that I was lost in my thoughts, Himeko gently cocked her head to one side. "What's wrong, Misaki?"

"Nothing!"

I'd made a secret vow to myself. I was determined now to become a Seraph Himeko could truly be proud of and no one could deny was good enough.

"Himeko, if there's anything you want me to do, or anything I *shouldn't* do, please tell me, okay?"

"Huh? Yes, sure thing."

I decided to keep my decision to myself. Declaring to Himeko that I suddenly wanted to be an amazing Seraph would probably just cause her angst.

She continued, "In that case, I have a request for you already."

"Tell me!"

"Will you wash my body for me?"

"Absolutely!"

With a respectful nod, I picked up the sponge and soap.

"What's gotten into you? Normally it's less 'Absolutely!' and more 'I suppose so.'"

"Really? I've always been happy to help with this."

I took her hand and gently rubbed it with the foamy sponge. Before, I'd always thought of it as just getting her clean, but today I was scrubbing her body with both affection and determination.

“I feel like you’re being gentler than usual, too.”

Her cheeks flushed and she closed her eyes, enraptured. Washing her was something anyone could do, but evoking *this* expression could only be done by the one who was always by her side: her Seraph. Just this slight change in my attitude had been enough to increase Himeko’s pleasure many times over. It was a challenge, but if I couldn’t achieve this in all facets, I didn’t deserve to be her Seraph.

“Let me thank you by washing you!”

“Oh, no, you don’t have to do that.”

Whether it was to thank me or otherwise, Himeko deciding to scrub me in return was another everyday occurrence. This probably wasn’t the normal way young ladies treated their maids.

“Yes, I do. I’ve finally learned the exact right amount of pressure to apply. Now I have to make sure every nook and cranny of you is squeaky clean.”

I feel like my mistress is a bit of an oddball. Becoming the kind of Seraph who can please her properly could be tricky.



The next morning, I went straight from Himeko’s room to the main school building. When I got to the classroom, Kirara was sitting there, still burning with rage. She wore a sour expression and consciously avoided looking in Sara’s direction.

Trying to talk to Kirara when she’s like this feels pretty risky, but I have to tell her what Himeko said and what conclusion I came to. Here goes nothing!

I steeled my courage and said, “Good morning, Kirara.”

She took a breath, then replied with a fairly normal greeting. “Hey. Morning.” It seemed like she wasn’t about to take out her anger on me, at least. “Well? What did Lady Himeko say?”

Stowing my bag away, I took my own seat and turned my upper body to face Kirara so I could talk to her more easily. “That there was nothing wrong with anything we did.”

“I knew it! It *was* just plain jealousy.”

From her self-satisfied tone, she clearly felt vindicated. She looked ready to leap straight out of her seat and confront Sara, so I hurriedly continued.

“Only, I started thinking there might be a difference between not doing anything wrong and actually being a good maid.”

“What are you talking about?”

I explained everything that had occurred to me when I spoke with Himeko—how even the level that was enough to satisfy Himeko could look inadequate from Sara’s point of view, and how this was totally reasonable.

“What about Lady Kagura, though? She didn’t give me any grief. I doubt she’d be all right with ‘just good enough,’ you know?”

“Well, you’ve only just started working at the Sky Salon, so she’s probably still letting you settle in. When I joined, I was treated like a guest to begin with. It took some time before I really started being taught how to serve properly. She must know it’s too soon for us to have learned that kind of thing in class, either.”

Kirara tilted her head, apparently unconvinced. “Really? You think that’s how she sees it?”

“Besides, Himeko and Lady Kagura saying we’re good enough isn’t all that matters. I think there was more we could have done and didn’t. If we can figure out what that is, we can fix the mistakes Sara was talking about, and you’ll definitely be good enough to be made into a Seraph.”

“Maybe you’re right. How are we going to figure it out, though? I *really* don’t want to ask *her*.” She jerked her chin in Sara’s direction.

“I do wonder what Sara was planning to tell us, but I don’t think we should go down that route anyway. After all, we have exclusive contracts with our mistresses. Instead of getting an outsider to tell us what to do, we have to find the right way to please them on our own.”

“Listen to you being all gung-ho.” She cast a mocking glance my way. “I didn’t think you even wanted to be a maid.”

“I don’t, but that’s a separate matter. Whatever my long-term goals are, I’m here in the Domestic Arts program and working as Himeko’s Seraph, so I can’t slack off when it comes to my maid studies. I have to spend three years working hard at this and learning everything I can. That’s what I’ve decided.”

After keeping this plan secret from Himeko, I declared it out loud to Kirara. I was certain that she and I would be able to keep pushing each other to go further from now until graduation.

“Sounds like a good attitude. Let’s exceed our mistresses’ expectations and try to surprise them with what we can do! Rubbing Sara’s nose in it along the way, of course.”

“Right!”

We nodded to one another and firmly clasped each other’s hands. Kirara joining the Sky Salon had turned out to be surprisingly motivating for me.



We racked our brains to figure out how we might have messed up, but by the time school was over for the day, we hadn’t come up with anything. I was still turning it over and over again in my mind when we arrived at the Sky Salon.

Ultimately, all we could really do there was serve tea. Learning to prepare it in the exact way that Himeko liked and presenting it with elegance and grace was no mean feat, so there hadn’t been time for much else. Now it was second nature, which was an achievement.

In a corner on our own, Kirara and I tried to formulate our strategy.

“After all that, nothing’s coming to mind,” I said. “I keep thinking about it, but I’m totally drawing a blank.”

“Me too, but we have to keep at it! It’s too soon to give up!”

I glanced around, hoping to find some hint by looking at the other girls who were there, but given that all anyone really did at the Sky Salon was chat and drink tea, the maids’ duties weren’t all that varied. If room duties were included, there would probably have been plenty of extra things we could have done, but Sara hadn’t seen us doing that. She’d judged purely based on our

work in the Sky Salon and told us in no uncertain terms that it didn't measure up. That meant there was a way for us to improve what we did here in the salon. No doubt she'd spot a whole host of other problems if she saw me and Himeko in private.

I was still deep in thought when Lady Kagura arrived a little late, flanked by the Kokonoe sisters. She clapped her hands twice to get the room's attention. "Could you all gather round, please?"

Everyone assembled around the central table.

"Sorry to interrupt while you're all relaxing. I'd just like to check in about whether you have plans for Golden Week. If not, I'd love it if you'd join me."

In a fatigued tone, the twins added remarks of their own.

"For the same thing as always."

"Yup. The very same."

What are they talking about? What does she always do?

Seeing me frown in confusion, Himeko, who was sitting next to me, began to offer an explanation. "When you had your debut the other day, you went and delivered a message to Minako, right?"

"Oh yeah, I remember. About the volleyball practice tournament."

"Exactly," said Lady Kagura, picking up on my whispering. "Tomorrow, various schools from the area will be playing a set of practice games at a local athletics center, and I wouldn't miss it for the world. I'd love it if you would all join me to cheer on our team."

She looked around at everyone, her eyes sparkling.

Why is she so eager to go to a practice tournament? Is she that big of a volleyball fan?

Lady Inaho piped up with, "I can't, I'm afraid. I have to head back home tomorrow morning to help out my folks. Haruka's coming with me, so she won't be able to either."

Similarly, Lady Sumire said, "Mihaya and I will have to bow out as well. My

father's been *insisting* I go home. He's probably planning to take me to some party or other."

She sighed wearily, and Mihaya gently stroked her head like she was comforting a child.

"Thanks, Mihaya. Sorry to be a pain, but I hope you don't mind coming with me."

"It's all right, milady. I'll help you find a suitable moment to sneak away."

"Hehe. Perfect!"

She leaned against Mihaya for comfort. Immediately, a warm and fuzzy atmosphere emanated from the two of them. This pair of girls was often said to be a soothing sight, and it was true. Just seeing them in sweet harmony with one another was enough to make me feel rejuvenated.

Lady Saeko's eyes narrowed, an audacious smile spreading across her face. "I'll join you. I have to assess the goods, after all. The last time I saw her play was spring break, so I hope she's improved since then."

Holding her head high, Lady Kagura replied proudly, "Minako's always improving, of course! She's already playing at a world-class level. All she needs is our support and she'll be able to take on anyone."

"Then I can't wait to see. Matsuri, you'll be joining me, of course."

"Eek! Very well, mistress. Allow me to accompany you."

Her whole body trembling, Matsuri nodded with such force that I worried she might hurt her neck.

Admittedly, Lady Saeko is a terrifying person, but isn't Matsuri overreacting a little? She is a Seraph, even if she is kind of a timid one. You would think she'd be used to her mistress by now. Unless Lady Saeko is only pretending to treat her well in the Sky Salon, and once they get back to her room, her inner tyrant breaks free?!

It was all too easy to picture this. I found myself trembling as well.

As if reading my thoughts, Lady Saeko turned to me with an unnaturally bewitching smile. "Oh my, Misa, you appear to be shaking. What's wrong? I

hope you're not imagining anything untoward."

"Erm, no, of course not! But I am wondering what you meant by 'assess the goods.'"

Her gaze almost felt as though it was coiling around me, like a snake about to strike. Desperate to avoid being eaten, I tried changing the subject.

She replied, "I'm talking about Minako. Perhaps it's better if I let Kagura explain."

"Yes, I suppose," Lady Kagura agreed. "It's about time the first years heard about it." After that introduction, she coughed to clear her throat. "After I graduate, I'm planning to start a business as a sporting goods manufacturer."

My eyes widened; this was *not* what I'd expected to hear. "Gosh. You sound passionate about this."

"Yes! I want to get set up as soon as I can—hopefully before I finish college. I've already decided on the name: Kagurality. Our slogan will be 'Kagurality: Taking Sports Beyond Reality.' I want to convey a sense of going beyond the real world into the realm of supernatural performance."

It sounded like this was a play on the spiritual nature of her name.

She continued, "As a new competitor on the market, the biggest worry is whether the products are appealing or not. The best way to draw in new customers is to have a real athlete wear them and show them off. I'm planning to sign all kinds of athletes to promotional contracts, of course, but the first step—the first person I want to sign—is Minako."

Lady Kagura held up her hands in front of her, balled into tight fists.

"Minako is going to be competing on the world stage soon, I guarantee it. When she's gained international fame as Japan's star attacker, I want her to be wearing *my* company's clothes."

Her eyes were sparkling even more brightly this time, like a maiden who was madly in love. I was certain that she was picturing Minako playing before a roaring crowd on an international stage.

At this point, Lady Saeko jumped in. "I'm counting on Lady Kagura starting a

successful business, and I'm prepared to give her all the funds she needs. However, I do have to be certain that she's not making a mistake, so I must take the time to assess her chosen representative. Of course, knowing Minako, I don't expect there to be any problems. Volleyball is fairly high-profile in Japan, so as long as she continues along her current path, I'm sure she'll be representing the country in a few short years."

Lady Saeko was the daughter of the president of Houjou Bank. It looked like she was already dealing with the family business and had started working toward Lady Kagura's dream. Starting a company was a total mystery to me; I was sure I'd never do anything like that in my entire life.

At that point, I spoke up. "Wait, if you're saying you *want* to sign her, does that mean she hasn't agreed yet?"

Her shoulders sagging, Lady Kagura lowered her hands and rested them on the table. "I'm afraid not."

Thinking about it, when I met Lady Minako during my debut, Lady Inaho said their relationship was a little strained, but it didn't seem like Lady Minako hated Lady Kagura or anything. This would explain the situation.

"But I'm not giving in!" she declared, lifting her head and thrusting her fist into the air. "I *will* win her over! To do that, I can never let up. I have to keep showing her I mean business. If I can make her see just how serious I am, how badly I want her, I *know* I'll get her on my side!"

Hmm, it does sound like there's no downside for Lady Minako. For her, it must be pretty gratifying as an athlete for someone to have so much faith in her abilities. I guess it would be different if she wasn't planning to go pro.

"That's why I want to show my support whenever I can, practice tournament or otherwise. Does it all make sense now?"

"Yes," I replied, nodding earnestly.

"That only leaves you, Himeko."

"Sure, I'll join you. I don't have any plans to go back home, and I've been looking forward to watching Minako play."

So Himeko's staying here over the break. That's a relief for me.

I'd hardly ever heard Himeko talk about her family. Actually, I'd basically never heard her touch on that topic at all. I could tell it was a bit of a touchy subject, so I hadn't made any attempt to pry, but I *was* curious.

"How about you, Misaki?" Himeko asked.

"I'll come too!"

"Ooh, glad to hear it."

I had no plans to go home either. More accurately, I didn't have anywhere to go back to. My mom had racked up debts that had led to us losing the house, and although she had somehow managed to pay them off, we still didn't have anywhere to live.

I'd started attending Amanotsuka Academy at just the right time; my basic necessities were taken care of, at least. As for my mom, she'd told me she was staying at a friend's house, but neither of us had cell phones, so we hadn't been in touch since I'd left.

Still, she knows where I am. I assume she'll contact me if anything important happens,

My mom had never been all that great in the life skills department, so my childhood had been pretty tough. I'd spent my life looking at her and thinking, *Whatever I do, I cannot end up like her.* It made me determined to study hard and make something of myself.

"So, it looks like Saeko, Himeko, and their Seraphs will be joining us. Kirara, if you don't have any other plans, I want you to come as well."

"Certainly," said Kirara in reply.

Lady Kagura hadn't asked Kirara if *she* wanted to come or not. Presumably, she was looking at Kirara as her servant, someone who should be aligning her own interests with those of her mistress without question.

"I'm planning to set out at around noon tomorrow. It would be great if you could eat lunch beforehand. Oh, and one more thing. Kirara?"

"Yes, milady?"

“Tomorrow evening, when we’ve finished supporting Minako, the Ayakas and I will be returning home to my family. I’d like you to join me.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?”

Kirara’s voice was a mixture of surprise and confusion. Exousias were only contracted for work on the school grounds; it was pretty much unheard of for their mistresses to take them home. That was reserved only for Seraphs.

In other words, Lady Kagura is treating Kirara just like a Seraph. What would Sara say if she saw that, I wonder?

“I know it’s short notice, but if you’re going to be working in my household in the future, I think you might as well meet everyone. Besides, as my maid, it’s only natural that you’d come with me.”

“Understood. Thank you!”

Kirara bowed her head repeatedly, full of joy.

It looks like all that’s left is the title itself. I hope she gets made into a Seraph soon!



The following morning, Himeko and I said goodbye to the celestials who were heading home, then we ate a light lunch before making our way to the school gate. I hadn’t left the school grounds since I’d started living in the dorm, so this was actually my first time ever seeing the front gate up close. The chaos of my first day was starting to feel like a fond memory.

Once everyone was assembled, it was just a matter of setting out.

“I guess we’re not walking, right?” I asked Himeko.

“Hehe. You of all people should know how long it takes to get to the train station on foot.” Evidently, she was thinking back to my arrival as well, unable to hold back a chuckle.

“Come on, you don’t have to bring that up.”

“But it was hilarious! The way you just appeared in front of me, with your skirt all messed up and your forehead all sweaty! And how you climbed over the

fence! Teeheehee!”

She seemed to be really caught up in the memory. She looked back at me and burst into laughter for real.

How rude! I was desperate, that's all. I didn't know what else to do.

As Himeko continued unabated, Lady Kagura frowned at her suspiciously. “What are you laughing about? Anyway, the car's here.”

Then, Himeko calmed down at last. “Sorry, I remembered something funny, that's all. Misaki, as you can see, we're going by car.”

She looked out toward the waiting area in front of the gate, where a car was now pulling up. When I saw it, I let out a frenzied gasp. There before our eyes was a pitch black car with an elongated frame of the kind you normally only see in TV shows about rich people. I'd never seen one in real life.

It's called a "limo," right?

“Wow, so they really exist,” I said, expressing my genuine reaction.

Lady Saeko turned to me with a puzzled look. “I thought even normal people used cars sometimes to go to parties and such.”

“Well, yeah, *normal* cars, but it's not like normal people are going to parties every day. You know that, right?”

“Of course. I just wanted to tease you a little, since you were making such an adorably dopey face.”

Lady Saeko poked my cheek with her index finger.

Well, whatever. I'm poor enough that I'm never going to have much to do with parties or limos.

“Now, let's get going,” said Lady Kagura. “Everyone get in.”

At her urging, we each got inside the car. What I saw caused me to gasp again, even louder this time. The back seat was more or less normal, but stretching from there to the driver's seat was a sofa long enough to seat six people. In front of that was a cabinet holding all manner of drinks. The inside of the roof was decorated with lights that resembled a starry sky. A normal person

could *never* have expected to ride in a car like *this*.

If Himeko and the others can look at this and not think anything of it, they really do live in a different world.

“You don’t really keep a car like this at the academy, do you?” I asked.

Himeko sat down on the long sofa, so I joined her. Lady Kagura beckoned Kirara over to the back seat, while the Kokonoe twins, apparently leaving their mistress entirely in Kirara’s hands, took up position in the middle of the car and immediately grabbed drinks for themselves. Matsuri sat down at the frontmost end of the sofa, balancing with her bottom only halfway on the seat. It looked like she was trying to maximize the space for someone else—that someone being Lady Saeko, of course, who made good use of it.

“It’s my family’s car,” Lady Kagura replied. “I have it at my beck and call for any journeys I need to take.”

She spoke between sips of tea. *Where did that come from? Did Kirara serve it to her?*

“I’ll use it to go home this evening as well, so I asked for it to be driven here slightly early. However, if I didn’t have this available, I’d have asked the school to arrange a car for me and have it brought to the front gate. That’s an option as well.”

I should have gotten used to this by now, but none of my ideas about how the world worked applied here at the academy. *What kind of a world has high school girls who can ask their school to have a car driven up to the gate for them?! Well, this one, I guess.*

“From what Himeko said, it sounds like we’re going to the station, though. Why not go all the way to the venue if you have your own car and driver on hand?”

Lady Kagura gazed out of the window and into the distance. “I can’t do that. It goes back to when I had just become taken with Minako and went to watch her compete for the first time. I took the limo, just like today, but had the driver take me all the way to the opposing team’s school. That attracted a *lot* of attention, unfortunately. Minako told me to behave in a way that looked more

normal, and that if I couldn't do that, I wasn't allowed to come at all."

As she recalled this, Lady Kagura hung her head.

That sounds about right. If you take a car like this to a normal school, it'll cause a commotion for sure.

"Since then, I've tried to use public transport as much as possible. Minako said it's fine to take the limo to the station, but no farther."

After listening to our exchange, the Kokonoe sisters shared their thoughts with exasperated expressions.

"How ridiculous, making such a fuss about a simple limousine. Commoners are so difficult to deal with."

"They're lucky we didn't show up in a private helicopter. *That* would have shown them."

"You are kidding, aren't you?" I asked.

"Did that *sound* like a joke?"

"You do realize there's a whole side of society where our point of view is normal and yours is abnormal, right, Misaki?"

With mischievous smiles, they brought their hands to their mouths and began to laugh in high-pitched voices. "Ohohohoho!"

Part of me wanted to cling on to my belief that they were just being silly, but the idea of a private helicopter didn't seem *too* far outside the realm of reason, and that was the worrying part.

As that conversation went on, we made our way toward the station. I hardly felt any vibrations at all, nor did much sound filter in from the outside world.

When we arrived, the crowds had quite a reaction to the sight of the limo. I could understand why Lady Minako had told Lady Kagura not to come to her games unless she left it behind. The car stood out enough on its own, let alone with the added detail of Amanotsuka Academy students getting out of it—a group of absurdly high-class girls accompanied by their own personal maids.

What was an everyday sight on campus *really* stood out in town. Maids were

common enough, but they tended to take off their aprons and headpieces when they went out. We, on the other hand, were still dressed in our full Sky Salon maid gear.

Lady Kagura and the other Societal Arts students may have been used to basking in the attention, but I wasn't the only Domestic Arts student whose face was burning with embarrassment.

I tried to look at the floor and avoid anyone's gaze, but Himeko took my hand and pulled me along. "Let's go, Misaki."

"I'm too embarrassed!" I cried, clinging to her back.

"You just need to get accustomed to it. It's not like you're wearing anything you need to be embarrassed about. You look adorable, so hold your head up high. Curling up into a ball like that is what'll make people wonder if something's up."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

As we walked, the people in front of us rapidly drew back to make way. Being treated that way and seeing it as normal would have to mean either being so used to it that you could ignore it or having extreme force of will. Naturally, neither of those applied to me. I did stop trying to hide behind Himeko, but lifting my head up and acting natural was way beyond me.

When we were inside the station, I wondered if Himeko and the other ladies would queue up in front of a ticket machine, but instead, Lady Kagura went alone to the service window. After a quick chat with a clerk, she returned with a bundle of tickets and handed them out one by one.

"Here you go. They're return tickets, so don't lose them."

"Oh! Thank you!" I replied when she passed one to me.

I really hadn't expected her to buy the tickets herself, so this was all quite a surprise. It was tough to picture Lady Kagura as someone who traveled around by train.

Although, if she's not allowed to go to Lady Minako's games otherwise, she

must have done it quite a bit.

Suddenly, I felt the Kokonoe sisters' voices buzzing in my ears, one on each side.

"Rich girls do have some idea how the world works, you know. They're not total shut-ins who've never had to take a train before."

"Not to mention that this train route has a partnership with Amanotsuka Academy. If you have a card, you can essentially ride for free."

Is that the same card all the Societal Arts students have with a certain number of points on them? Those cards sound really handy.

"There can't be that many students going off campus, though, right?"

Given how many stores there were in the dorms, it hardly seemed necessary.

"*Au contraire,*" replied one of the sisters. "If you want to buy clothes or books, there's not that big a selection available on campus."

"Plus, the options for having fun are a bit limited. If you want to see a movie, for example, that means going outside. There are plenty of students who like doing that kind of thing."

"Oh, right. Fair enough."

"Are you saying you don't have any interest in all that?" they said, their voices in perfect unison.

So what if I don't? It's not like I have any money in the first place, and I don't need any clothes beyond the bare necessities. Until now, it's never even occurred to me that I might have a reason to head into town. You don't have to rub it in while syncing up your voices so ominously!

The twins each took one of my arms in theirs.

"Now, let's get going. The train's just arriving."

"Heh, maybe when you get paid, even you'll want to go shopping once in a while."

"When the time comes, we'll have to give you a guided tour!"

"Yes, sure, if you want to," I replied listlessly as they dragged me along like an

alien creature they'd captured.

This early in the afternoon, the passenger car was pretty much empty, so everyone could sit down. Our destination was four stops away. That was where we'd apparently find the athletics center, where various schools from the area would be meeting to play in a practice tournament. We were set to arrive just in time for the games to start, after the teams had spent the morning on a joint training session.

We spent the journey discussing all this and arrived before I knew it. The athletics center was so close to the station that it was practically connected. *This must be really handy in bad weather. You can go straight there without getting soaked.*

As soon as we entered the venue, Lady Kagura immediately started looking for Lady Minako.

"It's not quite one o'clock yet, so she's probably still on her lunch break."

Her many trips here had given her a very clear overview, it seemed. She made a beeline straight for the second floor and opened a door connecting to the audience seating area.

"Ah, there she is!"

Having found her target, Lady Kagura briskly strode over. It looked like the volleyball club had finished their lunch and were having some kind of huddle to talk strategy.

"Minako, I'm here!" Lady Kagura announced cheerfully.

With a little smile of her own, Lady Minako turned around. At the same moment, about half of her teammates stood up.

"You've brought a big crowd today. Looks like Himeko and Saeko came along. Not to mention the new first years—Misaki and Kirara, right?"

How nice that she remembers us!

"Yes, ma'am! We'll be here cheering you on!" I replied.

"You can do it!" Kirara added.

In response, Lady Minako laughed and gently waved a hand in the air. “It’s just a silly practice tournament. I don’t need *that* much firing up.”

Lady Kagura interrupted, her voice full of fervor. “What kind of an attitude is that? A game is a game, and I want you to win!”

“Don’t worry, I’m still going to win. That goes without saying. My plan is to play well enough that you can all just sit back and relax in the stands.”

She lightly patted Lady Kagura’s shoulder in reassurance.

Wow, she’s confident. I’ll bet it’s not just bluster, though. Based on what Lady Kagura said yesterday, Lady Minako’s good enough to go beyond even the national level. She could take on the world. A local tournament like this should be a piece of cake.

“I can’t wait to see it,” said Lady Kagura, taking Lady Minako’s hands and gripping them forcefully. “Best of luck to all of you!”

When she looked at the other players nearby, the ones who were ready and waiting in their uniforms responded with an enthusiastic fist pump. By contrast, the ones who had stood up when we arrived all had incredibly nervous looks on their faces. Looking properly, they all appeared to be first and second years, with an air about them that suggested they were Domestic Arts students.

That was when it hit me.

Oh yeah. Lady Kagura turned up with a group of other celestials in tow, and Himeko’s the deputy chairman on top of that. Even Societal Arts students would be daunted if suddenly confronted with luminaries like this.

No wonder they were nervous. For a first-year Domestic Arts student, it must have been like meeting a celebrity they’d always admired from afar. While Lady Kagura and Lady Minako had a pleasant chat, Himeko and Lady Saeko offered some words of encouragement to the rest of the team, but I wasn’t sure if any of it actually sank in.

Well, the ones in uniforms must be geared up and ready to play already, so it’s probably fine, right?

It turned out that Amanotsuka Academy’s volleyball club was even better

than I'd expected. Honestly, knowing that it was just a club at a school for fancy young ladies, I was only half convinced they would win despite what I'd heard about Lady Minako's skills.

However, the team was overwhelmingly superior to the others, and they racked up win after win. Even to an amateur like me, it was clear they were a step or two beyond the other schools. Still, while everyone on the team was playing at a high level, Lady Minako still stood head and shoulders above the rest. She bent and curved her whole body like a bow, slamming the ball into her opponents' court over and over again.

She really is in a class of her own. I understood why Lady Kagura was so enamored with her. I found myself lost in the moment, exhilarated as I watched the games with my hands balled into fists.

In the end, Amanotsuka Academy won every single game they played and the overall tournament. It was an impressive result, and even after it was finished, I couldn't contain my excitement over the whole thing. "That was incredible!"

Himeko agreed, "Wasn't it just? They must have worked really hard during spring break."

"Of course!" said Lady Kagura. "For Minako, that was just a warm-up!"

"I'm glad to see she's still on course and only getting better," remarked Lady Saeko, sounding satisfied.

Lady Kagura stopped for a moment and said, "I need to go and talk to Minako quickly. Could you go on ahead and wait for me?"

She hurried down the stairs to the first floor, her footsteps so light that it was like she was walking on air, going to meet a lover.

Just as she'd requested, we gathered our things and headed to the exit, ready to leave as soon as she got back.

Along the way, I brought up something that had been bothering me. "The only thing I don't get is why Lady Minako hasn't accepted Lady Kagura's proposal. They seem to get along really well, and Lady Kagura should be able to offer a very good deal."

I'd mulled it over repeatedly, but I still couldn't think of a good reason.

However, Himeko gave a straightforward reply. "Minako already has a sponsor. One she chose herself."

"Oh, really? Doesn't that mean Lady Kagura's cause is hopeless, then? It won't matter how many times she asks."

"I don't know if I'd say that."

Overhearing our conversation, Kirara drew a little closer. "Uhm, do you mind if I listen in as well?"

"Not at all!" Himeko replied. Then she continued, "You see, the sponsor Minako has an agreement with is a sports retailer from her hometown. That store has helped her out a lot since she was a child. Apparently, even now she goes there to buy all her equipment. She owes a lot to the owners, and that's why she's turned Kagura down. She says that if she goes pro, she wants to play under the banner of that particular store."

"Hmm. Sounds complicated."

So is this the "politeness and obligation" that Lady Inaho was talking about?

"It is. It's not my place to say anything, though. All I can do is wait and see what happens. Personally, though, I agree that she should accept Kagura's sponsorship. If she's going to play professionally and aim to compete on a global level, she'll need a suitable training environment, and that's impossible without money and good personnel. Kagura can provide all that."

"I see what you mean."

So Himeko's saying she thinks there's room to negotiate, since Lady Kagura's rival here isn't a full-fledged sporting goods manufacturer with major financial backing.

Kirara remained silent, but put a finger to her chin, perhaps thinking along the same lines.

It wasn't long before Lady Kagura returned. "Sorry for the delay!"

Lady Minako was with her. She stepped outside to join us with a spring in her step.

“Did you leave the rest of the team behind?” asked Himeko.

With a wink, Lady Minako replied, “They let me leave without them. I figure since you came here to support me, I’d better show you the proper hospitality.”

“Huh,” said Lady Saeko. “Is that what you were doing with Kagura just now?”

Lady Minako’s cheeks flushed bright red. “No, no, no. The first years just told me they’d finish packing up themselves, so I should head off with Kagura. They were *really* insistent.”

Lady Saeko smiled, her eyes twinkling. “Sounds like this year’s new recruits are well trained already.”

“Anyway, I’ll be traveling with you.”

We set off, with Lady Minako as part of the group now. Since she hadn’t lost a single game, the walk back to the station was filled with lively chatter. Lady Minako gave an outline of what had happened in each match from her point of view, so I listened intently as she described who the players to watch out for were at each school and what techniques they used to combat each team’s particular strengths. Sadly, when the conversation turned to a detailed tactical analysis, I became totally lost.

Even when we reached the platform, Lady Kagura carried on an animated discussion with Lady Minako all on her own. Even after we had boarded the train and were well underway, the two of them kept going.

It was evening now, which meant the train was busier than before. This time, there were too many students and office workers on their way home for all of us to sit down. However, even though most of the seats were filled, our car wasn’t overly crowded. The route to Amanotsuka Academy took us away from the town, so it made sense that there wouldn’t be *too* many people going that way.

Surrounded by the commuters, Lady Kagura and Lady Minako stood by the window and kept talking in hushed voices. Meanwhile, I stood next to Himeko and held on to one of the straps hanging from above as we conversed about nothing in particular.

When we were close to the first stop and the train started to decelerate, the

whole carriage suddenly shook. I heard a dainty cry of panic, and when I looked over to see where it had come from, Lady Kagura had collapsed into Lady Minako's arms.



“I never knew you had such poor balance, Kagura!”

Despite her light mocking, Lady Minako supported Lady Kagura’s body and drew it in closer, ensuring that no matter what, she definitely wouldn’t fall again. This nonchalant kindness was pretty impressive to witness.

“Quiet, you,” Lady Kagura muttered in reply. Although her face turned red, she gently grabbed Lady Minako’s waist with her right hand. It looked like she’d be pretty secure even if the train shook again.

They really do seem to get along well. It’s such a shame that she can’t accept the sponsorship offer.

The train reached the next station and the doors opened, but no one got out. In the moments before we started moving again, I whispered into Himeko’s ear, “Do you want to hold onto me as well?”

It hadn’t escaped my notice that Himeko had lost her footing slightly as well just now.

“No need. You might not think it, but I’ve had plenty of experience with riding the train! In fact, I’ve done it several—gah!”

She was mid-sentence when the doors closed and the train started speeding toward the next station. The shock of that made Himeko immediately stumble. Since I’d seen this coming, I had already put an arm around her and had no problem keeping her steady.

“Yup, looks like you’re *real* experienced.” The chance to throw Himeko’s words back in her face was too much to resist.

“Forget it, okay?” Although she pouted, she let me hold her without trying to resist.

It sounded like she was going to say “several times,” which suggests few enough that you could count them on one hand. Why bother pretending to be more experienced than really she is? There’s no need for that.

She looked down at the floor, probably a little embarrassed. Her long, silky hair hung down and brushed against my nose. The scent I was used to from our baths tickled my nostrils, and it was awfully pleasant.

Suddenly, the Kokonoe sisters, who had apparently been watching us and Lady Kagura, interrupted in a fed-up tone.

“Ugh, come *on*.”

“Do you *have* to act like that?”

“I won’t say where it’s coming from, but it *stinks* of lovey-dovey sweetness in here.”

“Have you never heard of the expression ‘get a room’?”

Even if they didn’t say so directly, it was pretty clear they were talking about us. *But what’s this about “lovey-dovey sweetness”?*

“I’m just holding her,” I said in a hesitant voice. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Oh, so she knows she’s doing it.”

“I just wish she thought about how everyone else feels being forced to watch!”

I groaned. *What do they want from me? It’s not like we can sit down, so this is going to happen one way or another. I don’t know if this is really part of a maid’s duties or not, I’d rather protect her from danger if I can.*

Lady Minako, meanwhile, looked slightly uncomfortable and let out a strained laugh. However, she showed no sign of letting Lady Kagura go.

“Kirara, maybe she needs to hear it from you,” said one of the twins.

“You’d better tell them not to go too far and run afoul of the rules,” said the other.

The rules? What are they talking about?”

Kirara looked very unsure how to react. “No, I, uhm...”

Then the sisters closed in on her from both sides.

“Could it be that you want someone to hold you as well?”

“Well, desperate times call for desperate measures, I guess.”

No sooner did Kirara cry, “What?” than the Kokonoe twins smothered her between them so tightly that all she could do was emit a muffled moan.

“Ohohohoho!”

Their high-pitched laughter echoed throughout the car. All in all, their behavior did *far* more to disturb the other passengers than ours had. It seemed like in the end, teasing Kirara might have been their main goal. If she hadn’t been there, though, I would’ve certainly been their target.

Sorry, Kirara, but you’re the one who chose to be Lady Kagura’s Seraph. You may have doomed yourself to a life of this, I’m afraid.

The only one of the mistresses I hadn’t seen in a while was Lady Saeko. When I looked around, I saw she’d found a seat at some point and was now perched elegantly on her own. Naturally, Matsuri was forced to stay standing.



From Amanotsuka Academy’s front gate, we had a sweeping view of the town, which was bathed in the reddish glow of the setting sun. It was a magical sight, and it had me feeling somehow sentimental.

“Thanks again for coming to support me,” said Lady Minako to everyone present, stretching her body as she spoke. She explained that she’d visit the club room quickly and then go straight back to the dorm, so it looked like it was time for the group to split up.

Lady Kagura asked her, “What are your plans for Golden Week? If you’re not busy, you’re welcome to come home with me.”

“Sorry! I have practice every day.”

“Ah yeah, of course. No worries, then.”

She let out a small sigh of resignation. She’d evidently been hoping to spend more of the break with Lady Minako, but for a sports club, “vacation” and “extra practice” basically went hand in hand. I’d heard that athletes never really stopped until the day they retired—definitely not a life I envisioned for myself!

“I mean, we do have a few members heading home. Golden Week is the last chance we really have to let our hair down. As soon as it ends, it’s full steam ahead with training for the summer tournament. Practice gets way tougher after this, so if they’re going to visit their families, it’s kind of now or never.”

Wow, I can't believe they have to start practicing even harder. They're so good already!

"Maybe we can start practice in the afternoon tomorrow, though, since we won't have as many members as usual."

"That will be nice," said Lady Kagura, but hearing that did nothing to lighten her expression. No surprise, since a half-day vacation didn't help them spend more time together. It had to be a full day off to count. "Before you go, though, can I ask you about my offer? Are you still not willing to accept it?"

That was the question Lady Kagura had been holding in all day. She'd probably decided not to bother Lady Minako with it to let her keep her head in the game. In all the time spent cheering her on today, Lady Kagura had never shown even the slightest hint that she was thinking about this topic.

"I'm sorry, I just can't. You know I already have a sponsor. It's too late for me to switch now."

"Oh, I see. Still, I'm not prepared to give up. I'll keep trying to convince you until you change your mind."

"It makes me happy that you care so much about me," said Lady Minako before scooping up a portion of Lady Kagura's loosely curled hair and softly pressing her lips to it. "And you're going home right away?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Then I'll look forward to seeing you again after the break."

With that, Lady Minako waved goodbye, then turned and walked away. Lady Kagura watched her leave with a forlorn expression.

Moments later, though, her mood lightened up considerably. "Oh well. That's that for now." It sounded like she'd gone through this many times before. She clapped her hands twice as if to start hurrying her maids along. "Now, we need to start getting ready to go. Kirara, can you gather your things?"

Stretching as they walked, the Kokonoe sisters began to set out.

Lady Saeko and Matsuri would apparently be staying at the academy. *I'd better ask Himeko what she's planning on doing over the next few days. If I had*

to guess, she'll ask me to stay over every single night.

The only one who didn't move an inch was Kirara. With a troubled expression, she stared at Lady Minako in the distance.

Curious, Lady Kagura asked, "What's wrong?"

Kirara slowly turned around. Her face was a picture of resolve, as though she'd made some kind of firm decision. "Lady Kagura, would you mind if I stayed behind?"

"What for? Do you have something to take care of on campus?"

Looking quite puzzled, Lady Kagura rested her elbow in her hand and tilted her head slightly. Being invited to visit her family should have been the highest of honors, so refusing it would be unthinkable without a *really* good reason.

Kirara bowed her head deeply before her mistress. "Would it be all right if I tried persuading Lady Minako? I don't know if it'll work, but if I can change her mind even a little, I want to make the effort."

Lady Kagura fell silent for a moment.

"Please!" Kirara insisted, bowing her head again.

After a few more moments, Lady Kagura finally acquiesced. "Very well. Please, go right ahead. As of now, the outlook is rather bleak, as I'm sure you've seen. If I don't obtain Minako's agreement soon, it'll interfere with my plans for the future. Maybe a fresh approach is just what we need."

"Thank you, milady!"

"Minako seems to have a soft spot for first and second years. She cares a lot about what they have to say, so it could be that you'll succeed where I've failed. All right then. During the vacation, I'll leave Minako up to you. If you do find some kind of success, I'll make you into a Seraph."

"Understood!" Kirara chirped, full of enthusiasm. Clearly, Lady Kagura had picked up on just how eager she was to be promoted as soon as possible.

"If there's anything urgent, please call me right away." She scribbled her phone number on a page of her student planner, then ripped it out and handed it to Kirara. "Hopefully I can look forward to hearing some good news!"

“I promise I won’t disappoint you!”

With a goodbye to Kirara, Lady Kagura took the Kokonoe sisters back to her dorm to get ready for their journey.

A fire burned in Kirara’s eyes. With clenched fists, she declared, “I *will* do this. I’ll convince her no matter what.” She turned to me. “Misaki, I want your help, too. Do you mind sticking with me over the next few days?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, looking at Himeko. If there was something I could do to help, then I wanted to, of course, but I couldn’t do a thing without Himeko’s agreement.

In response to my gaze, Himeko gave a light nod. “I don’t mind. Feel free to help Miss Hoshino. I’m sure she has a plan in mind. In exchange, you’ll have to take extra good care of me, though!”

“Got it!”



The next day, Kirara and I donned sportswear instead of aprons and headed for the gymnasium. It was a little after midday, nearly time for the volleyball club to start practicing.

I followed after Kirara, quite apprehensive. “Are we really doing this?”

It was a reckless plan, that was for sure, but all I could do was follow Kirara’s lead.

“Yes! Yes, we are!”

I should have guessed this from the way she’d looked while asking Lady Kagura, but Kirara was more athletically inclined than I’d expected. Her plan had turned out to be very simple indeed. It boiled down to “challenge her to a volleyball game and ask her to hear our pleas if we win.”

“Do you really think Lady Minako will agree to that?”

“I’m pretty confident she’ll agree to play us, at least. Athletes never back down in the face of a challenge. If it’s a volleyball game, all the more reason for her to agree. Why would she say no?”

That sounds like wishful thinking to me, but I don't know. Maybe she's right.

"All that's left is finding the right conditions to make it a fair fight for us."

This definitely wasn't the kind of plan Lady Kagura would have attempted. Sending the Kokonoe sisters out to fight a battle or contest on her behalf was something she might have done, but the sisters would *never* have competed in anything where the odds were so heavily stacked against them. They only liked to win in style when they were sure they had the advantage. That was my impression, at least.

"Here goes," muttered Kirara, opening the door to the gym.

I groaned faintly, but it was too late to turn back now.

Steeling our resolve, we peered in. Practice hadn't started yet; there was only a smattering of members in the room, with Lady Minako herself nowhere in sight.

"I guess we're a little early," I said.

"Looks like it. Hopefully they won't mind us waiting here."

"Yeah."

We stepped inside and stood against a nearby wall. It didn't take long for one of the players to approach us.

"Good day. Can I help you with anything? You're the new members of the Sky Salon, aren't you?"

The way she spoke suggested she was probably a Societal Arts student. The volleyball club had their own uniform with specific shirts and sneakers, which made it tough to tell what year and program the players were in.

"We have a favor we'd like to ask of Lady Minako," Kirara replied politely. Apparently she'd also deemed this girl to be a Societal Arts student.

"Oh, I see. It'll be a little longer until the third years arrive, I'm afraid."

That must mean she's a first year or a second year.

"That's all right. Do you mind if we wait here for the time being?"

"Not at all! You're more than welcome." The girl smiled, her teeth gleaming.

I decided to ask the question that had been bugging me since we walked in. “So, what is it you’re all doing in here, exactly?”

“What do you mean? We’re getting things ready for practice, of course. Getting the balls out, hanging the nets, cleaning the floor, and so on.”

“Right. I see.” I suddenly felt like I’d heard something really important.

“If the third years arrive and we don’t have everything set up, they’ll be rather annoyed.”

“Oh!” A light bulb flashed in my mind. I’d made a connection that hadn’t occurred to me before.

“Something the matter?” the girl asked.

“No, everything’s fine. Thank you so much!”

“I’m not sure I’ve done anything worthy of thanking me for, but never mind. It won’t be long before Minako arrives, so feel free to wait.”

“Sure! We’ll do that.” I bowed deeply to her, grateful for her help. *That’s it! I’ve figured it out!*

Once she had gone back across the room, Kirara whispered, “Misaki, what’s up with you?”

“It’s about what Sara told us. I’m starting to get it.”

“What about what Sara told us?”

The moment Sara’s name escaped my lips, Kirara’s face had hardened into a grimace. Any mention of Sara was enough to set off a strong reaction. *I think if she hears what I have to say, she’ll agree with me, though.*

“Kirara, who do you think gets everything ready in the Sky Salon?”

“You’ve been showing me the ropes, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, when it comes to making tea and stuff, but I mean before that. Who cleans the tablecloths and lays them out? Who vacuums the floor and waters the flowers? Who tidies everything up when everyone leaves? That’s what I’m wondering.”

“I mean, it has to be someone from the Sky Salon.”

“Exactly. It’s someone, but we don’t know who. Shouldn’t it actually be us? The first years?”

“Maybe. Hey, I’ve only been going to the Sky Salon for a couple of days, but you’ve been a member for like a month now. How come *you* don’t know?”

“Erk! Well, you know, joining the salon was something that just kind of happened. I’ve had my hands so full with serving Himeko that I could barely think about anything else, so it just didn’t occur to me!”

I blurted out every excuse I could think of. *It’s not my fault that no one told me to do it. I was busy with my own things. Still, it’s pretty embarrassing that this is the first time I’ve ever considered it.*

Kirara furrowed her brow and, sighing, pressed a finger to her forehead. “You have a point, though. We probably should be the ones doing those jobs. Let’s take them over starting from tomorrow. No, from today. Someone’ll probably still be going to the Sky Salon today, right?”

“Himeko told me she has a meeting until around three, but she plans to go there after that.” To carry out her duties as the deputy chairman of the board, Himeko had to show her face in meetings with grown-ups. She was only one year older than me, but she had a lot on her shoulders. “She said to come by and tell her how things went today. I wonder what Lady Saeko will do? She might go there for tea about the same time as Himeko.”

“Then we’d better settle things with Lady Minako ASAP.”

“And what exactly do you plan to settle with me?”

Just as Kirara was vigorously slamming a fist into the palm of her hand, Lady Minako appeared beside us. Behind her were more students, presumably third years like her.

“Lady Minako, I hereby—”

But Kirara’s attempt to immediately throw down the gauntlet was interrupted when the players who had been getting the gym ready all stopped what they were doing and came over to greet the new arrivals in a cacophonous huddle. Their welcoming cries were so loud that I felt my ears ringing. I was a little terrified, even.

The wind went out of Kirara's sails a bit now that she'd lost her moment. I heard a strangled groan from her.

A single drop of cold sweat rolled down my cheek. *Athletic types are scary! Hold on, though. Maybe it doesn't need to be this extreme, but it must be nice to arrive to such a warm welcome. Looking back, I think I've almost always gone to the Sky Salon when Himeko was already there. After class, I'm always surrounded by classmates asking questions, which makes me a little late every day. That's another thing I can work on.*

"Sorry about that," said Lady Minako, looking completely unruffled; she was evidently used to this reception. "I've taught them to always project their voices, whether they're saying hello or otherwise. Anyway, what can I help you with?"

After taking a moment to regain her bearings, Kirara faced Lady Minako and replied, "Right. Basically, we have a favor to ask you."

"What is it? Don't tell me you two are here to ask me to accept Kagura's proposal as well."

"We are, actually, but there's more to it. If we can beat you, Lady Minako, then—"

"Ah, I see. So it's like that, is it?" A smile appeared on her face. She looked both intrigued and amused. "Why not? I'm game. What kind of a contest do you have in mind?"

"Volleyball, of course."

Well, that's the first step taken care of. Kirara was right about her not backing down from a challenge, at least.

"Oh my. Are you sure? It feels pretty unlikely that I'd lose. Have you even played volleyball before?"

"Sure, in gym class in middle school."

"Same here!" I added, thrusting my hand into the air.

Lady Minako's expression turned to one of deep confusion. "You saw me playing yesterday and thought, 'Yes, I can compete with that'?"

It went without saying that amateurs like us could never hope to compete with her, especially on a level playing field. That would have been an insurmountable hurdle.

Kirara looked up at her and spoke with intensity. “It makes sense given the stakes. If we manage to beat you despite the tough odds, you’ll have no choice but to graciously accept Lady Kagura’s offer.”

“I suppose so... but if you manage to beat me, shouldn’t *you* be the ones doing a promotional deal with Kagura?”

The words caught in Kirara’s throat.

She has a point there. It might be rude to say so, but if she loses to us of all people, there wouldn’t be much point in seeking her as a spokesperson.

“Never mind that. I’m happy to give you two a chance. We can find some way to give you a handicap. Let’s say we’ll have a two-on-two match, taking turns to serve, and to win, my team has to get to twenty-one points, and yours has to get to... hmm, five sounds about right. On top of that, if any of your attacks score a point, they count double. Or did you have something else in mind as a way to defeat me?”

“No, that sounds fine,” Kirara answered without hesitation. They were probably even better than the conditions she’d been dreaming up.

On the surface, these rules did put us at an advantage. However, with an opponent skilled enough to play at an international level, scoring even one point was likely to be a major challenge.

“Misaki, we have to win this no matter what.”

I swallowed hard. “Uhm, yeah. Got it.”

The showdown started right away. While the other members of the volleyball club stood and watched, Kirara and I entered the court and readied ourselves, our faces filled with grim determination—“grim” being the operative word, since I quickly began to feel like I was about to be struck down by the Grim Reaper.

Lady Minako’s team went first. When she held the ball ready, her eyes held

none of her usual upbeat cheer. They were the eyes of a fighter, pure and intense. I swallowed hard. *She's doing this for real.*

For a few brief moments before she began, I held on to some vague hope that if we could just get our hands on the ball, somehow we'd be able to score.

She threw it into the air with a slightly forward motion. Then, she ran up, crouched down for a moment, and sprang high up in the air.

Once she had served that ball, I couldn't imagine ever managing to touch it. I tried to fight off my nerves and stand tall, but it was hopeless.

"She really means business," I muttered.

This was a jump serve—something we hadn't even seen from her in the tournament. When an attacker like her unleashed such a powerful serve, the ball became more than just a ball. It turned into a lethal weapon.

Now the ball, visibly squashed by the force of her strike, was hurtling toward me. *I can't hit that! I can't put my hands anywhere near it!*

With a whistling sound, the ball flew past, missing my face by mere inches. My body hadn't reacted quickly enough to even *try* hitting it.

A shiver ran down my spine. If it had struck me in the face, I'd have died without a shadow of a doubt.

"Rats, I knew it. My control is all over the place lately." Lady Minako stuck her tongue out and sounded a little embarrassed.

"Huh?" was all I could manage in reply.

"That ball was out just now. You get a point."

I hadn't even noticed where the ball had landed, but apparently it had been out of bounds.

Kirara commented, "Well done, Misaki! Now we're one point ahead."

"What? Don't praise me for that! Lady Minako, are you saying you didn't have control over that serve just now?"

"Yup. It's something I'm working on, though." She sounded incredibly calm considering the terrifying implications of what she was saying.

“Doesn’t that mean you had no idea where the ball would go?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“But... I... If I’d been one step to the right, it was on course to hit me square in the face!”

“Hmm, I guess.”

I screamed internally and felt my blood run cold. “You can’t do that! That kind of serve is not allowed! No way!”

Despite the game already being underway, I furiously insisted on a rule change. Maybe it was cowardly, but my life was on the line here!

“All right. I’ll serve normally from now on.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. *At least she’s willing to listen to reason.*

“Anyway, it’s your turn to serve now.”

Oh, I guess it is. What do we do, though? I barely even know how to hit the ball properly.

“Kirara, can you do it?” I asked.

“Sure.”

She took the ball from me, held it up, then performed an underhand serve. This method wasn’t very forceful, but had a high rate of success, in theory.

“Huh, no spin on your serve.” While saying this, Lady Minako intercepted the ball with ease. She passed to her teammate, who set it into the air. The one who hit it next was Lady Minako, of course.

All my hair stood on end. That jump serve just now hadn’t been her full strength after all. It had also flown in a light parabolic arc from beyond the end of her court, yet had still managed to come at us with such force and speed. Now, all that power was driving straight toward us, readying a close-range strike. The intensity of it was far beyond anything I could have imagined.

Lady Minako’s body coiled like a spring and rebounded. She bent over in the air, warping like a bow. Her sharp gaze was aiming somewhere—but where? I wanted to run away, but I couldn’t bring myself to move. Maybe *not* moving

had been the right choice, though. The instant she made contact with the ball, I could have sworn I saw a flash of light. A split second later, a thunderclap resounded as the volleyball, more a cannonball now, zoomed into the space between me and Kirara and landed with a deafening *smack*.

“Eeeek!”

My knees rattled. *I’m going to die. I’m never getting out of this alive. Anyone who can hit a ball like that is superhuman!*

I looked at Kirara. Her face was pale as well.

“Kirara, what are we doing here? There’s no way we can win this.”

She grunted in a mix of fear and frustration. “No, it’s not that bad. They just scored a single point, that’s all. The real battle starts now.”

As much as I admired her for being able to feign confidence even after what we’d just seen, it didn’t change the facts.

A smile on her face, Lady Minako asked, “You sure you want to keep going? Why not just give up?”

“Give up? Never!” scoffed Kirara. “It’s your serve, right?”

I sighed. Giving up felt like the better option by far.

“You’ve got some guts, I’ll give you that. How about joining the team?”

“If it’ll get you to accept Lady Kagura’s offer, I’d do it gladly,” Kirara replied.

She laughed. “That’s not a deal I’m willing to make, I’m afraid.”

After flatly rejecting Kirara’s suggestion, Lady Minako readied herself. This time, she didn’t go for a jump serve, but a normal forward serve. She also hit the ball relatively lightly. *This feels like one we might be able to hit back!*

Remembering what I’d learned in gym class, I put one of my hands on top of the other and stretched my arms out in front of me. I managed to aim correctly and send the ball over in Kirara’s direction.

She tossed it and shouted, “Misaki!”

Since there were only two of us, the final attack inevitably fell to me. *Now I just have to execute a magnificent attack just like Lady Minako! Wait, hold on.*

How in the world am I going to manage this?

Looking up at the net, the idea of jumping high enough felt absolutely impossible.

“Misaki, what are you doing?!”

Kirara’s voice was fierce as I gave up on jumping and spiking. The most I could manage was returning it to the opponents’ court.

“I just can’t jump high enough! My hands’ll never go above the net!”

I figured I could probably have gotten just high enough for my fingertips to go over the net, but that wouldn’t have been enough to spike the ball.

The net in my middle school gym class must have been lower. Is this regulation height for real games?

Kirara glared at the net and let out a growl.

Intercepting the ball with ease, Lady Minako said, “How are you going to win if you can’t even attack?” Meanwhile, she took up an offensive posture. It looked like we’d be facing the cannonball once again.

“All we can do is play defensively and hope for a missed serve on the opponents’ team,” Kirara remarked.

This wasn’t a bad strategy. More to the point, it was the *only* possible strategy. However, just intercepting Lady Minako’s attacks was a dizzying hurdle to overcome.

Lady Minako leapt into the air. “Now, where shall I aim next?”

It was like wings had sprouted from her back, only they weren’t those of an angel, but those of a devil.

With a short breath, she thrust her arm downward. *Please, please, please don’t go anywhere near me!* Then, as if my prayers had been answered, it flew toward Kirara.

There was a *thwack*, and Kirara let out a strange yelp. She had reacted to Lady Minako’s attack by extending only her left arm and hitting the ball with it. However, the ball had flown off in a random direction and Kirara was now

crouched on the floor, clutching her hand.

Lady Minako slipped under the net and sped over to her. “Are you all right?!”

“Yes, I’m fine!” Even so, Kirara’s voice wavered and her face screwed up in pain.

“I never thought you’d stick your hand out like that. Can someone go and get the cold spray?” She glanced around, prompting one of the players watching to rush off. Turning back to Kirara, she said, “We’d better stop this now, I guess.”

“No, I can manage!”

She was handed the cold spray and applied it to Kirara’s left arm as she rebuked her. “Don’t put on a brave face. If you use a dangerous technique like that, there’s a risk of breaking your bones. How could I ever look Kagura in the face again if I seriously injured either of you? Or was that the plan? Are you trying to make me feel guilty so I’ll agree to Kagura’s demands?!”

“Of course not!”

“Then stop this, please. You must realize you’re not going to beat me at volleyball of all things.”

Kirara grimaced. There was no denying it; this had been a complete washout for us. There was nothing about our serves, our attacks, or any other aspects of our technique that suggested we had the slightest hope of winning.

At last, Kirara admitted defeat. “Okay, you win this time. Don’t think that means we’re giving up on beating you, though! Also, we never said what would happen if you won. Your prize is a free pass to visit the Sky Salon whenever you want. I’ll make sure Lady Kagura is aware of it, so please come by anytime. I’ll serve you tea and delicious snacks.”

“That sounds like another win for Kagura,” Lady Minako said, smiling wryly. Still, she nodded. “All right, then. I accept.”



“So much for that,” I grumbled as we left the gym behind us and made our way to the Sky Salon.

“The odds were always going to be slim. I managed to convince her to visit

the Sky Salon, and that's enough for now."

"Was that your goal all along?"

"I mean, winning would have been even better, of course."

Huh. She's more of a schemer than she looks.

She continued, "I have another plan in mind. The real plan's going to need Lady Himeko's help though, I reckon, so let's get to the salon as quick as we can and get it all set up."

"Right!"

We rode the familiar antique elevator from the top floor of the former school building to the highest point of the tower rising up from there. When we got out of the elevator, the lack of people gave it a very different aura than usual. You could have heard a pin drop.

However, it looked like it wasn't *completely* empty, since the door to the salon was slightly ajar.

"I wonder who's here," I said. *There's still some time before Himeko's supposed to arrive. Does that mean it's Lady Saeko?*

"Let's go in and find out."

"Yeah."

I opened the door a bit more. From inside, I could hear what sounded like someone humming, along with a sound akin to a running shower. The source of these noises soon became clear: it was Matsuri, Lady Saeko's Seraph, who was watering the plants alone in the Sky Salon.

Since she was facing away, I tried to get her attention by saying, "Hi, Matsuri!"

The shriek she let out was enough to make me feel sorry for her. Clearly, I'd nearly given her a heart attack. The tin watering can tumbled from her hand and hit the floor with a loud clatter.

Her whole body trembled as she turned around. "Erm, wh-what is it?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

“Oh, hello there, Misaki and Kirara. I didn’t realize it was you.” She seemed to calm down as she picked up the watering can again.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Me? Just doing my daily duties. Cleaning, watering, and so on.”

Just like I thought. Matsuri’s been doing exactly what we haven’t.

I glanced at Kirara, giving her a signal with my eyes. Then, at the same time, we said, “We’re sorry, Matsuri.”

“Huh? For what? Did I do something wrong?” For some reason, she looked very suspicious, darting her head back and forth.

“No, not at all,” I replied. “We’re the ones who did something wrong.”

Kirara added, “We’re apologizing for making you take care of all this on your own and not even realizing you were doing it.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “My, is that all? It’s nice of you to worry about me, but this is my job. You can focus entirely on serving your own mistresses.”

“No way,” I said.

Beside me, Kirara shook her head. “We can’t force you to take care of it all on your own.”

“From now on, we’re going to help you.

“Oh! No, I’m not just trying to be polite, I promise you!” Her body language made her look suspicious again. It was like she was panicking about something.

That was when someone else walked over from the other side of the salon, presumably having heard us chatting. “Matsuri, is someone here?”

It wasn’t Himeko. That meant it could only be one other person.

Matsuri placed both hands on her cheeks, exclaiming, “Oh my, oh my, oh my!” It looked like she was in shock again; the watering can crashed to the floor once more.

“Oh, shut up. What are you doing, anyway?”

“Nothing, Lady Saeko! Nothing at all! I promise!”

Yes, it was none other than her mistress, Lady Saeko. At that moment, she spotted us. “Oh, if it isn’t the first-year duo. How did it go with Minako? Did she agree yet?”

“No, it was a total bust,” said Kirara, hanging her head.

“What a shame. Now, Matsuri, what about you? If you can’t water the plants properly, I might have to punish you.” She flourished her right hand threateningly.

“Eeeeeek!”

As she let out a shriek, Matsuri covered her bottom with both hands. *Is that how Lady Saeko punishes her? With a spanking?*

I felt compelled to step in. “No, you’ve got it all wrong. This is my fault. I startled her when we came in, then we interrupted her to apologize.”

“Apologize? For what?”

“We didn’t know that Matsuri did all the cleaning on her own. We were saying she could leave it to us from now on.”

“Oh, if that’s all it is, you can stop worrying,” said Lady Saeko, echoing what Matsuri had just told us. “It’s her job. You don’t need to help.”

“Why not?”

“I guess I should tell you the background. Let’s go over there for now and chat over a cup of tea.” With a tilt of the head, she gestured toward the private space where she always sat. “Matsuri, serve them both drinks.”

“Yes, milady.”

“We can make our own,” I interjected.

“We don’t want to hold up Matsuri if she’s got work to do,” Kirara agreed.

Instead of giving a clear answer, Lady Saeko grinned and said, “Tell me, first years. Which do you think you should prioritize? Accepting my invitation or helping out Matsuri?”

We both yelped. There was no choice at all there. Feeling like a lamb being led to the slaughter, I obediently followed her, as did Kirara.

Matsuri served the tea, and there were ultimately four cups laid out on the table; Lady Saeko insisted that Matsuri sit down as well.

She began, “You see, Matsuri’s family had a spectacular business failure and racked up a large amount of debt. That happened at exactly the same time as I was looking for an obedient sla— uh, servant. I proposed that Matsuri could come to Amanotsuka Academy and work for me under an exclusive contract, and in exchange, their debts would be forgiven.”

Wait, what was that word she almost said? It sounded weirdly ominous.

“Matsuri agreed to this, which is why she’s now my Seraph. She still has to work off the debts, but I do have the power to speed things along. If there’s *anything* I can do to set Matsuri free even a day earlier than planned, I want to do it, which is why I’m letting her take on all sorts of extra tasks and deducting corresponding amounts from the total.”

Lady Saeko put on a face of deep compassion and benevolence, but it was clearly an act.

“Her cleaning duties in the salon are part of that, so if you step in and try to help, it’ll only make things worse for her. Got it?”

“Oh.” I hadn’t expected this kind of reason.

“It still feels lazy for us to not even lift a finger, though,” said Kirara.

In response, Lady Saeko heaved a powerful sigh. “I guess it’s nice that our new recruits are so diligent.” She lifted the cup to her mouth and emptied it in one big sip. “Well, if you’re that insistent, I don’t mind you helping out.”

“Really? Thank you!”

“When Matsuri and I graduate, someone will have to take over, and it might as well be you. It wouldn’t hurt for you to start learning the ropes already.”

“Yay!” Kirara and I cheered, both clapping our hands in front of us.

Being this excited about cleaning must mean this school is really getting to me. Still, what matters is that it should make Sara rethink her opinion a little.

“Matsuri, from now on I want you to start teaching these two how to do everything. Based on how successfully you teach them, I’ll reduce your family’s

debts accordingly.”

“Understood, milady,” Matsuri replied meekly.

We’d better really make an effort or Matsuri might get in trouble, huh?

Then Kirara said, “Lady Saeko, I have a question for you, if that’s okay.”

Lady Saeko fixed her gaze on Kirara. “Go right ahead.”

“Do you know the location of the store Lady Minako has her sponsorship deal with?”

Lady Saeko raised an eyebrow. “Why do you want to know that?”

“I want to try negotiating with them. Maybe they’ll agree to let Lady Kagura take over.”

She was thinking about this all along? All part of the plan, I guess.

“Hmm.” Lady Saeko bore a rarely seen look of indecision on her face. “I do know where it is, but I’m not sure if it’s my place to tell you.”

I wondered if there was some specific reason she couldn’t say. After a moment’s pondering, Lady Saeko turned to me.

“Is Himeko planning on coming here today?”

“Yes, she should be here soon.” It was after three already, so her meeting was probably over.

“Then I’ll discuss it with her first.”

After saying so, she ordered Matsuri to bring more tea. We didn’t have to wait much longer before Himeko arrived.

“Good day,” came her voice from the entrance.

I rushed over to greet her. “Good day, milady. I’ll make tea for you right away, so please sit down and relax.”

Himeko giggled slightly at my change in attitude. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to give you the welcome you deserve.”

“I don’t know, hearing you call me ‘milady’ feels a little awkward, but it is kind of novel.”

This, too, was a change for me. I always just called her “Himeko,” which was overfamiliar for a servant. It was possible Sara had picked up on that.

“I’m actually thinking of switching to calling you ‘Lady Himeko’ from now on.”

“Well, it is a shame not to be given such a lovely title, but honestly, I really like the way you just use my name on its own. Don’t you think it lets us feel closer to one another?”

“Really? But I’m a maid, and you’re my mistress.”

“Surely our relationship isn’t *just* that of a mistress and maid?”

She pulled me closer to her and gently stroked my head. *I see what she means, but this kind of treatment makes me feel like a pet. Not that I’m complaining about her stroking me! I like it!*

“I see your point, though. How about this. In public, when others might hear, you call me ‘Lady Himeko,’ but otherwise you keep doing what you’ve been doing.”

“I’m a little worried I’ll get mixed up, but sure. Let’s give that a try.”

“Hehe. One more little pleasure in life!”

With light footsteps, Himeko started to walk farther inside the salon.

“Oh, Himeko, that reminds me!”

“Yes?”

“Would you mind going and talking to Lady Saeko? She’s in her usual spot. There’s something she needs to discuss with you.”

“I wonder what it could be. Anyway, of course. I’ll head right over.”

“Thank you so much!”

Once she was on her way, I hurried to get her tea ready.

Oops, maybe I was supposed to show her to her seat and only then make the tea.

The more I thought about my maid duties, the more I realized how much I still had to learn. That said, the points I’d picked up on today were a big step

forward. Little by little, I was putting in the work and leveling up my skills.

Once we were all seated around the table, Himeko prompted, “So, what is it you wanted to discuss?”

“Basically, Kirara wants to know more about the store that sponsors Minako.”

“Right, I can see the issue.” Himeko gave a small nod and then raised her teacup to her lips. After a sip, she frowned and said, “What to do, what to do?” Clearly, this was not an easy decision for her either.

Bucking up my courage, I asked, “Is there some reason you can’t tell us?”

“It’s not that we *can’t* tell you, but I don’t know how Minako would feel about it.”

“Exactly,” Lady Saeko agreed, leaning far back in her chair and gazing up at the ceiling. “You see, Minako specifically told Kagura not to go and visit the store.”

“Why not?” Kirara asked.

Himeko took another sip of tea, then smiled. “I imagine she doesn’t want Kagura to start negotiating with them instead of her. However, if she *did* do that, there’s a high chance they’d accept her proposal, which would allow Minako to agree as well.”

Lady Saeko sat back up. “Which makes this an excellent chance. If Kagura were here, she’d no doubt put a stop to it. She doesn’t want to do anything that will make Minako think less of her.”

“Miss Hoshino, has Kagura given you any details about the store?”

“No, not at all,” Kirara replied, shaking her head.

“Then it’s fine for us to tell you, right?” said Lady Saeko. “We can blame Kagura for not saying anything beforehand when she had plenty of opportunity to do so. I’m still a little scared to tell you myself, but if Himeko lets it slip, I don’t think Kagura or Minako will say anything.”

“So you want to use me as a scapegoat?” Although there was a rebuke in Himeko’s tone, her expression was one of amusement.

Lady Saeko offered an impish look. “Rather than wasting time with this unproductive back and forth, why don’t we seize the moment and go for it?” It seemed she was totally on our side here and was trying to lead Himeko into temptation.

After another moment’s wavering, Himeko finally gave in. “All right, then. I’ll take it upon myself to tell you.”

“I knew you’d pull through for us,” said Lady Saeko teasingly. “Such a fine deputy chairman, always thinking about her students!”

“Keep your flattery to yourself,” Himeko replied with a huff.



On the third day of Golden Week, Kirara and I set off bright and early to visit the store in question. This time, we took the bus to the station, then traveled for forty minutes on a shaking train. I was glad it wasn’t an insanely long trip outside the area, at least.

Now that we’d gotten help from Himeko and Lady Saeko, and Himeko had even loaned me her special card so I could travel without paying, we really needed to get some results. If it all worked out, not only would Lady Kagura become Lady Minako’s sponsor, but Kirara would be promoted to Seraph. There was a lot riding on this; we had to do everything we could.

We got off at the station closest to the store, checked the map, then set off to find it. Around twenty minutes later, we arrived. The store with the sign reading “Yasui Sporting Goods” was definitely not a large retailer; it was clear at a glance that it was basically a mom-and-pop shop. The goods on display were from a variety of brands. I had the feeling they’d laid out whatever seemed likely to sell the best.

With some trepidation, we stepped through the door. It looked like they’d only just opened, and there were no other customers inside. For us, that was ideal, since it meant we could talk without getting in the way of their business.

Kirara took the lead, making a beeline for the lady sitting behind the cash register. “Uhm, excuse me.”

“Hello there. Are you looking for anything in particular?” The sales clerk, who

appeared to be in her mid-thirties, looked up. “Oh, those uniforms! You must go to Amanotsuka Academy.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

We hadn’t donned our aprons today, so our black uniforms were on display. The more elaborate Societal Arts uniform would have stood out even more, making our school immediately obvious to all around, but she’d recognized us from the Domestic Arts uniform.

“Hehe. Students from your school come by here a lot, actually.”

One of those must be Lady Minako. Maybe the other club members buy things here as well.

Drawing a little closer, Kirara said, “That’s actually what we wanted to talk about. Is the boss here?”

“The boss? You must mean my dad.” It seemed she was the owner’s daughter. “He’s not here today, I’m afraid. He went on an early morning fishing trip.”

“Aah. I see.” Kirara’s shoulders slumped.

“Maybe I can help?”

“Yeah, maybe. It’s about Lady Minako.”

“Oh, really? If it has to do with Minako, I’m probably the one to talk to after all.”

“That’s great!”

“Glad to hear it. Please go ahead, then. Tell me what’s going on with Minako.”

Although still a bit wary of Kirara’s sudden intensity, the woman introduced herself as Tomoko and invited us into a room in the back of the store, where we explained what was going on. Afterward, she wore an amused smile.

“Hmm, I see! So that’s what this is all about. It all sounds fine to me, though. I accept.”

“Really? That quickly?”

That was so easy that it was almost anticlimactic. It did make the volleyball

showdown feel a little pointless, but maybe luck was finally on our side.

“Minako’s told me a lot about Kagura. She didn’t say a single word about this sponsorship business, silly girl. But she did boast a lot about how much Kagura supported her—how she came to every game and always praised her to the skies.”

“Gosh,” I remarked. *Sounds like Lady Minako’s really glad to have Lady Kagura in her corner.*

“I wish she’d said something about Kagura’s ambitions. My sponsorship of Minako goes back around seven years, and it was a personal thing between me and her. I’d give her a discount on shoes, and in return, she’d promote our store. She’s the kind of girl who sticks to her word, which isn’t a bad trait, but she can be *way* too rigid about it.”

I couldn’t help laughing. *Trust someone who’s known her since she was a little girl to be brutally honest.*

Tomoko kept going and going, telling us stories about embarrassing moments from Lady Minako’s childhood. I started wondering if we should really be hearing all this.

Just then, a voice called Tomoko’s name from the shop floor. I gasped, recognizing it immediately.

Kirara’s face froze. “This could be bad.”

“Maybe her ears were burning,” said Tomoko, rising to her feet. Evidently, she had also realized who it was right away. In a loud voice, she called out, “Minako, I’m in the back! Can you come here?”

I reacted in a mild panic. “What? But, Tomoko—”

Lady Minako did just as asked. The moment she saw us, she froze. “Misaki? Kirara? What are you doing here?”

Not letting a moment pass before she stopped in, Kirara turned to her and bowed deeply, her hands on the floor. “Allow me to apologize. I knew that you’d forbidden Lady Kagura from coming here, but after learning where this store was, I couldn’t hold myself back.”

Some of the key details were missing in this explanation, but I could imagine they wouldn't have mattered from Lady Minako's point of view.

"Did Kagura tell you to do this?"

"No, it was my own personal decision. Lady Kagura doesn't even know I'm here."

"Then someone else from the Sky Salon must have told you, right?"

Kirara and I both remained silent.

"Well, Kagura was the only one I told not to come, and it's not like the store's name and location are a secret or anything. I should have foreseen this after your visit to the volleyball club yesterday." She hung her head, looking dejected.

"What are you whining about?" asked Tomoko, beckoning her to sit down. "You should have just told me Kagura wanted to sponsor you. It sounds perfect. What's not to like about a contract with her?"

"Well..."

"Well?"

"I couldn't tell you because I knew you'd tell me to go for it."

"Obviously! So what's the problem?" She laughed broadly, slapping Lady Minako on the back.

"Do you realize how much you've done for me? You've been there ever since I was a little kid. I'm too grateful to just turn my back on you. In fact, that's what drives me to be the best. One day, I want to be playing on the world stage, proudly bearing the banner of your store!"

Tomoko bluntly shot down this notion. "You know that's never gonna happen, right? Maybe at a high school level your skill is all that counts, but if you're aiming bigger than that, environmental factors matter every bit as much. The best we can give you are ready-made goods that come straight off the shelf. We can't give you made-to-measure shoes or specialized training facilities. Besides, what happens after you graduate? I don't know if you'll go to college or start job hunting, but either way, in a few short years you'll be out in the wider world. You'll probably join a company's team, right? It won't be up to you to

decide who's sponsoring you. You won't be able to keep using us forever."

"I guess you're right." In the face of Tomoko's sound argument, Lady Minako had no recourse to fight back.

"I think you've done more than enough for us, anyway. First of all, you've increased our sales by buying plenty of things here yourself, but you've also spread the word about us and increased our popularity a little. Students from Amanotsuka Academy are always coming here. I really don't think you need to worry about us anymore. Just do what's right for you. We won't go out of business without you."

"But..."

Lady Minako was still not ready to concede despite not having a leg to stand on. She must have known it would turn out like this if Lady Kagura came and spoke to them directly, which was why she'd forbidden it.

"I know! Why don't you bring Kagura here to meet me?"

"What?"

"I want to see her with my own eyes and judge if she's worthy of stealing you away. If I decide I'm happy to leave you in her hands, you'll switch over to her."

"No, I don't want you to do that!"

"Why not?"

"Because I know for sure you'll tell me to go ahead with it!"

"Maybe, maybe not. Who knows? She might not measure up after all."

"I seriously doubt that."

"Anyway, it's an order from your sponsor."

"What?"

Since Lady Minako still wouldn't agree, Tomoko had brought out the big guns. "I said it's an order. As your sponsor, I demand that you bring Kagura to me. If you don't, I'll drop my sponsorship of you. Then you'll be a free agent."

Wow, Tomoko's not messing around. She's put Lady Minako in a situation where whatever she chooses, all roads lead to Lady Kagura.

“But—”

“Once you’re released from our agreement, you can either continue rejecting Kagura’s offer even though you don’t have an alternative, or you can hope I’ll be kind enough to accept you back once you come crawling. It’s up to you whether you want to take that gamble.”

Lady Minako groaned. Sad as it was for her, she really had no choice here at all.

Once we were outside the store, Kirara and I both lowered our heads. “We’re sorry, Lady Minako.”

We’d hit her with a surprise attack, and it had been all too effective. I was fully expecting us to face her wrath.

Instead, she mostly looked drained of all energy. “Don’t worry about it. No need to bow and scrape. You two didn’t do anything wrong. I knew it would end up like this eventually; you just sped things along. When do you think I’ll be able to bring Kagura here?”

“I’ll contact her as soon I get home. She might be available as early as tomorrow.” Kirara still sounded slightly apologetic as she spoke.

“Got it. In that case, let me know as soon as you can.”

“Will do.”

“Oh no! I forgot I actually came here to buy things. You two go on ahead.”

With that, Lady Minako disappeared into the store again in a flash.



As soon as we got back to the academy, Kirara called the phone number Lady Kagura had given her. Lady Kagura did scold her a little, but she was glad to hear about the outcome, and the upshot was that she decided to head straight back to school. She was back by evening with the Kokonoe sisters in tow, and she immediately made plans with Lady Minako. They agreed to visit Yasui Sporting Goods the following morning—and that both Kirara and I would join them.

And so, one chaotic day came to an end, and the next one began. We arrived

at the store again, this time with Lady Kagura and the twins.

“Well done, Kirara. Now I just need to make a good enough impression on Tomoko.”

“Yes, milady.”

Lady Kagura looked more buoyant than I’d ever seen her before. Lady Minako, meanwhile, wore a conflicted expression and didn’t say a single word. I still wasn’t sure how to feel about the situation. Were things looking good or bad?

Ignoring the weighty atmosphere, Lady Kagura stepped inside the store and called out, “Hello?”

“Come in! I’ve been waiting for you. You must be Kagura.”

“I am indeed. I’m terribly sorry that my maid ambushed you like that. I’m grateful that you not only saw fit to forgive her, but were kind enough to show her such a warm welcome.”

“Honestly, no need to stand on ceremony! I guess being formal’s all part and parcel of going to your school. Anyway, come into the back and we can talk properly.”

Tomoko ushered us all into the same room we’d entered the day before.

“So, you’re planning to start your own sporting goods company? That’s incredible for someone your age.”

“I see you’ve heard a lot about me.”

“Yes, Minako’s always singing your praises!”

“Tomoko, stop!” Lady Minako exclaimed, finally breaking her silence. She glared and turned red with embarrassment.

“Pipe down, Minako. It’s going to be okay.”

Clearly, Tomoko was the one with all the initiative in this situation. She began an animated conversation with Lady Kagura, not allowing Lady Minako to interrupt at all. Lady Kagura gave an impassioned plea where she expressed how much she believed in both her own dream and Lady Minako’s fabulous

abilities.

Tomoko listened attentively, then suddenly said, “Now that I think about it, don’t I know you from somewhere?”

“Ohoho, well, it wouldn’t be all that unusual for an ordinary person to have heard of a person like me.”

“That’s not what I mean. I’ve seen you before, a really long time ago. I’d recognize those curls anywhere. Were you on TV as a kid or something?”

“Ah, I see! Yes, well remembered.”

Lady Kagura closed her eyes as if lost in a pleasant memory. Tomoko had apparently hit the nail on the head. *Was Lady Kagura a famous TV star or something?*

“It’s a long time ago now, but I used to be really into golf. You might have seen me back then.”

“That’s it!” cried Tomoko, clapping her hands together. “I remember now! There was a young golf prodigy on TV all the time. Her name was definitely Kagura.”

Wow, I never knew Lady Kagura had that kind of a past!

“You were wiping the floor with the grown-up players, but then you just disappeared all of a sudden. What happened? Did you quit? If you’d kept going, you might not have been on Minako’s level as a sports player, but you could have competed internationally for sure.”

“Hohoho, well, a lot of things happened.” She looked away as if hiding something.

Then the Kokonoe sisters filled the silence left by Lady Kagura, both speaking in an impish tone.

“We’ll tell you all about it.”

“There’s a *very* interesting reason, we can promise you!”

“Both of you, quiet!” said their mistress. “Stop this right now.”

They showed no sign of obeying, however.

“What’s the big deal?”

“You don’t need to hide it.”

They approached from behind and restrained her arms, then went right on talking. As usual, the twins weren’t overly concerned about showing respect to their mistress.

“It must have been when Lady Kagura was about seven years old.”

“She’d been playing golf for about two years and was starting to bask in the glory of being called a prodigy.”

So she started when she was five?! They just said it like it was nothing!

“To challenge herself and improve her own skills, she declared that she would learn how to hit a perfect shot in any possible situation.”

“That was why she decided to practice hitting a shot through the narrow gap between some trees. We tried to stop her, but she ignored us.”

I have a bad feeling about whatever they’re going to say next.

“Ayakas, I demand that you stop!” Lady Kagura exclaimed.

This made no impact on them at all, however. “Nope, sorry,” they both said at once.

They continued as before, speaking in turn.

“Anyway, I’m sure you can imagine what happened.”

“It did *not* go well.”

“If she’d missed and that was all, it would have been fine.”

“But the ball ricocheted off the branches...”

“And struck her in her left eye.”

“It didn’t blind her, but her vision in that eye was weakened significantly. It meant she couldn’t hit a golf ball properly anymore. She had no choice but to retire.”

Oof, so that’s what happened. Sounds awful. That must be why she always covers her left eye with her bangs.

“Well, now you know,” Lady Kagura admitted with a sigh. “It didn’t make sense to continue when my depth perception was so poor, so I decided to walk another path instead. I don’t have any lingering regrets. It happened because I was willing to push myself, so I accept the outcome. However, I do still have an attachment to sports, which is why I want to give world-class athletes the support they deserve.”

“And that’s why you want to run a sporting goods manufacturer?” Tomoko asked.

“Exactly. I couldn’t achieve my dream, but I figure I can give a boost to others and help them reach the height of their potential.”

“That sounds great. Minako, are you listening? If she’s this serious about it, there’s no reason for me to stand in her way. I’m entirely comfortable letting you go.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Yes. Kagura, I’m entrusting Minako to you. Do everything you can to help her reach the big leagues and beyond.”

“I wouldn’t do anything less.”

The two of them exchanged a firm handshake.

Glad to see a happy outcome. Now Kirara can be a Seraph as well.

“Come on, Minako, say something,” said Tomoko.

She frowned. “Well, I still haven’t decided if I want Kagura to sponsor me.”

“What’s left to think about? It’s all done and dusted!”

“But—”

Lady Kagura interrupted, “Minako, is there something you don’t like about the company I’m planning? I’m going to become the world’s leading competitor in this field. If you join my team, I promise you won’t regret it.”

“Even so,” Minako began, “I feel like I can’t just tell you, ‘Thanks, glad to be part of the team.’ Not after I’ve put it off this long.”

She’s blushing! I get it. She feels awkward about accepting the offer after

refusing it all this time.

“You don’t need to say that. I’d be happy enough with ‘Fine, I’ll switch over to Kagura.’ In fact, I’d be over the moon.” Lady Kagura clasped her hands together and bowed. “Please, Minako. Help me achieve my dream.”

“You *really* don’t need to start begging like that,” said Minako, putting a stop to it immediately by wrapping her arms around Lady Kagura and lifting her up. “Are you *sure* you want me, though? Like, really? Me?”

“It has to be you, Minako. It couldn’t be anyone else. From the moment I first saw you, I knew you were the one for me.”

They both fell silent for a time, gazing fixedly into each other’s eyes.

“All right, then,” Lady Minako murmured, finally giving in. “I’ll help you achieve your dream. No matter what, I’ll compete on the world stage and let everyone know who was there for me—who gave me the support I needed to get there.”



Lady Kagura’s two years of heartfelt pleas had finally worked. Of course, without downplaying Lady Kagura’s extreme passion and never-say-die spirit, Kirara had been the real MVP in all this.

The last day of Golden Week arrived. Everyone who had gone to visit their families came back to the academy, which meant the Sky Salon was bursting with life again. A warm light filtered in through the windows as the first hints of summer began to appear.

Kirara stood before Lady Kagura with a nervous expression.

“You’ve done very good work, Kirara. You broke through a barrier that I couldn’t after trying for ages and ages. I have no qualms whatsoever about calling you my Seraph.”

Lady Kagura presented her with the golden school badge.

“Thank you!”

Falling to her knees, Kirara thanked her mistress just like a knight swearing fealty. All the other members of the Sky Salon watched as a new Seraph

entered the world.

Chapter Three: The Struggles of Lady Erisu

“Hehehe!”

When I heard the faintly villainous laugh from the girl next to me, I felt more than a little awkward. It wasn't *actually* some kind of evil executive plotting misdeeds, of course; it was just my friend, Kirara Hoshino. Her face showed her satisfaction more clearly than words ever could, and now her efforts to hold herself back had failed as a laugh slipped from her pink lips, apparently without her even realizing it.

I reflexively moved half a step away from her, making sure I was out of her reach, then heaved a soft sigh. “You don't have to wait here ready to ambush her. Couldn't you have just told her in the classroom?”

“That wouldn't have been enough to make me feel better!” she cried, punching the air for emphasis. “If I confront Sara in front of everyone, it'll draw the wrong kind of attention. It'll be like I'm boasting about being a Seraph. The rest of our class won't like that one bit.”

“I see your point, I guess.”

In our homeroom class just before Golden Week, a British exchange student called Sara had been chosen as the class' head maid. The teacher had then asked the two of us to help her learn about two unique features of the school that we were involved with: the salons and the exclusive contracts to be a Seraph or Exousia.

That had been fine in theory, but when we'd shown her how we did our work at the Sky Salon, Sara had come down on us like a ton of bricks. According to her, we'd done *everything* wrong, and there was *no way* Kirara deserved to be a Seraph.

Kirara had not responded well to that. She'd been determined to prove Sara wrong by becoming a Seraph right away. After some trials and tribulations, she had actually managed it; her mistress, Kagura Mikage, had just promoted her.

Thus, her plan for today was less about *telling* Sara and more about rubbing her face in it. After class was over, she sped out of the room and took up a position just outside the entrance to the building, waiting for Sara to come past.

Incidentally, Kirara had only been a Seraph for one day, so the news hadn't spread around the student body just yet. Kirara had even temporarily replaced her golden Seraph badge with a silver one just to make extra sure that Sara didn't notice anything. She was *really* invested in this. Maybe a little too invested.

Since we hadn't even asked Sara what we'd done to make her judge us so harshly, personally I didn't have such strong feelings about her. She did seem to be the brutally honest type, but I didn't get the impression she was making things up just for the sake of being mean.

Either way, all I could do for now was go along with Kirara's plan. If I tried to slip away and leave her behind, there was no telling how angry she'd get with me later.

"She's taking her time," said Kirara, gently kicking the floor and glancing at the doorway.

"Well, she *is* head maid now. She must have all kinds of things to do."

"Not today. I checked."

"Oh, fair enough."

I didn't know whether to be impressed or terrified. The sheer force in her glare was enough for the latter.

By the time Sara appeared at last, the area was crowded with other students on their way back from class.

"I've been waiting for you, Sara." Kirara showed no hesitation in flagging her down despite all the attention it drew.

"I beg your pardon?"

In a panic, I tugged on Kirara's sleeve and whispered into her ear, "Hold on a moment! If you make a scene here, isn't that even worse than in the classroom?"

“Hmm.” She furrowed her brow, finally noticing how many people were around. “Guess there’s only one option.” She turned to Sara and kept her voice as measured as she could. “Would you mind coming with us for a moment? We’d like to talk to you about something.” She gestured with a jerk of the chin.

“I say, whatever could it be?”

“Just come with us. All will be revealed.”

Now she *was* acting like an evil executive—or at least a school bully. I couldn’t get that idea out of my mind. *Does that make me a henchman?*

“What are you standing around for? We’re going.”

Kirara’s words pulled me back to reality, and I rushed to catch up to them. “Coming!”

Amanotsuka Academy’s grounds were pretty expansive. You didn’t have to go far off the beaten track to find somewhere empty enough. We soon arrived at what looked like a rose garden in the shade of some trees.

“This’ll do, I guess,” said Kirara. She stood facing Sara, her head held high. “Heh. There’s a reason I called you here, and it’s to show you this.”

She reached inside her pocket and pulled out the golden badge that proved she was now a Seraph. Before Sara’s eyes, she swapped it with the one she was wearing. The badge shone proudly on Kirara’s uniform, and she even lifted it up with her fingertips to show it off even more.

“Well?” she demanded. “Got anything to say about it?”

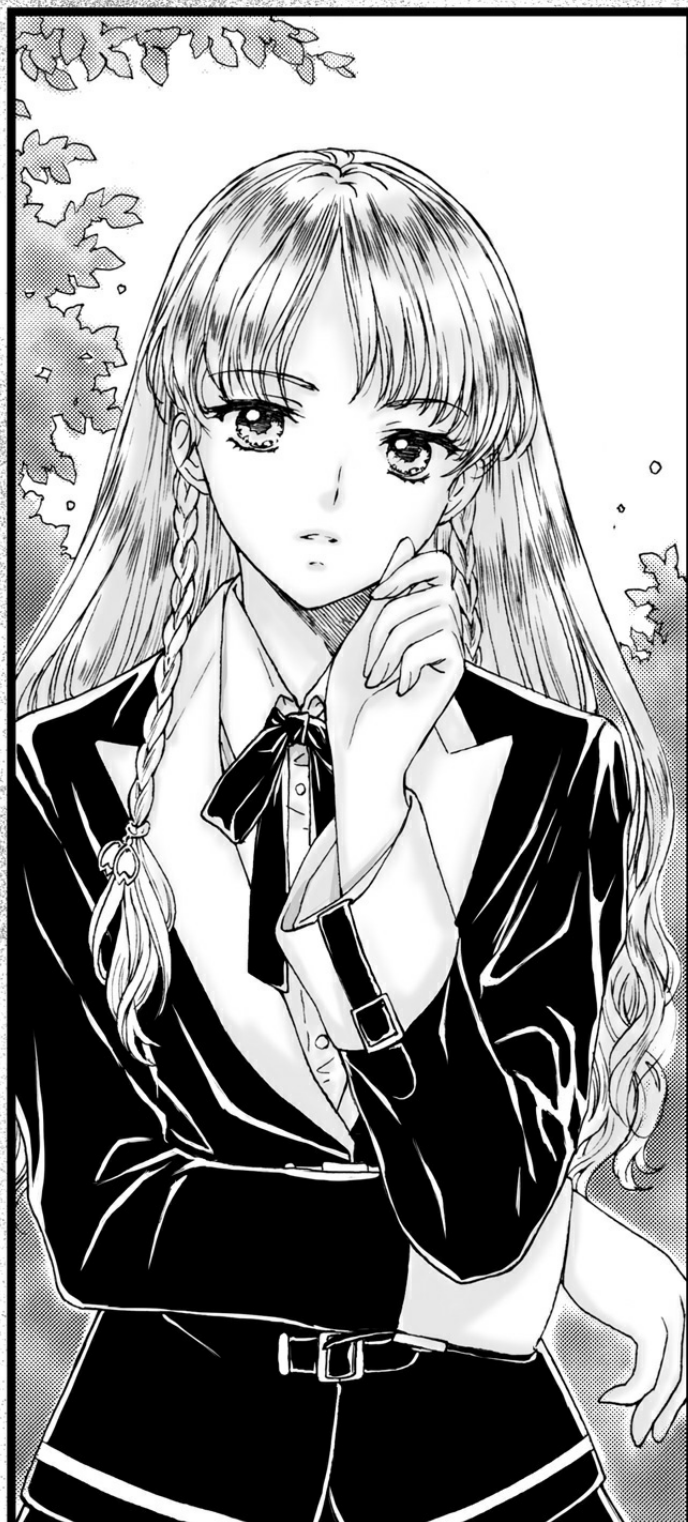
In other circumstances, I might have looked at this and found myself saying, “Wow!” This was *not* that kind of situation, however. Forget making our class jealous; if she’d acted like this in front of everyone, she’d have scared them half to death. For a second I wondered if I *really* wanted to be her friend. *I guess it’s no surprise given how outraged she was about this before...*

Sara stared at Kirara with a puzzled expression, then asked bluntly, “Did you nick that from somewhere?”

“Are you suggesting I stole it?!” In an instant, she drew so close to Sara that their faces were inches apart. She held the badge with such intensity that I

almost thought she was going to rip it off and throw it on the ground.

This did nothing to intimidate Sara, however. She didn't even raise an eyebrow. *I admire her bravery, that's for sure!*



“It was merely a jest.”

It didn't sound like a joke. I could well believe that Sara thought Kirara had stolen it, or at least found it lying around.

Sara's expression changed slightly as she tilted her head. “Though if it really is yours, I can't *imagine* how you wangled that.”

“What explanation do you need?! I earned it, so Lady Kagura gave it to me! Duh!”

Kirara spoke with disdain in her voice, but also pride when she mentioned the name of her mistress.

“Curiouser and curiouser. Have you really been made a Seraph so quickly? From what I could see, you made a dog's dinner of everything. Does this mean you've swotted up and become a good maid?”

“I don't know what *you* thought was so wrong with my maid skills, but whatever it was, I've earned myself enough points to make up for it with ease.”

“Aha, so that was your approach.” Sara nodded, apparently able to accept this explanation. “Your mistress is awfully kind, I must say. You'd have been better off not taking advantage of that kindness and dedicating yourself to your work instead. Nonetheless, I say to you, hurrah! Jolly good show.”

It was a long and winding reply before getting to the congratulations, but at the end, she started to applaud. Her eyes were filled with fondness; I didn't sense any antipathy toward the two of us at all.

“Hey! Stop that!” said Kirara, bewildered by this overly sincere show of good wishes. This was meant to be a deadly blow to her mortal enemy, but she probably felt like her attack had been parried in spectacular fashion.

As a bystander, I was just glad that it hadn't broken out into an argument. I patted my chest in relief, honestly thrilled about this.

“Was that all? If so, I'll be off. Toodle-pip.”

She began to walk off in a stately manner, but I hurriedly called after her. “Hey, wait!”

“Yes?” She turned around, raising an eyebrow.

“You remember how you told us that our skills were hopelessly lacking?”

“Indeed, I did say such a thing.”

“I think we figured out on our own what we were doing wrong. Can I check with you if we’re right?”

“I’ve no objection to that. Go ahead.” The corners of her lips turned up into a hint of an amused smile.

“We noticed that we’re always turning up to the salon late. A lot of the time, I don’t arrive until after Himeko—Lady Himeko, I mean. Even though our role should involve arriving beforehand and getting things ready for our mistresses to arrive, we haven’t been doing that at all.”

“Yes, quite. Having a good old chinwag with your school chums is important as well, but your mistress should always be your top priority. You mustn’t neglect your duties.”

“Exactly. So from now on, we’re going to aim to always be the first to arrive!” I punctuated this by pumping both my fists in the air.

“That’s an excellent mindset. What else?”

“What do you mean, what else?”

“Didn’t anything else pop into your head?”

“Uhm, not really. Not yet.”

In response, Sara let out a big, ostentatious sigh. “You’ve rather a long way to go, I fear. You must understand, arriving before your mistress to prepare everything is as basic as it gets. Being proud of yourself for working it out on your own is all well and good, but if you don’t buck up your ideas a bit when it comes to the work itself, it doesn’t matter one jot. Ladies in high society need maids who comport themselves with a degree of decorum. The way you greet them, the way you pour their tea, your posture, your elocution, et cetera, et cetera... All of it requires perfect poise and a stiff upper lip. To put it lightly, you two don’t pass muster.”

I murmured faintly, unable to form any words. *She really thinks our work is*

that much of a mess?

Cutting in with a determined objection, Kirara said, “Hold on just one second! We’re still first-year students. We haven’t learned all that stuff yet. That can come later.”

However, Sara had a reply for that, too. “I’ve no doubt you’re right about that, but I don’t recall seeing any such humility the other day. The pair of you were convinced you were the most marvelous maids there ever were—and, after all, you’re complete beginners who were given contracts far earlier than the norm. You can hardly blame me for having expectations, and those expectations were, I’m sad to say, thoroughly dashed.”

“I’m sorry!” I exclaimed, unable to keep myself from apologizing.

“Pish posh, there’s no need to apologize. Now I understand that you’re still novices, just like the rest of our classmates. As your head maid, I can start showing you what’s what.”

Sara smiled cheerfully, but her eyes said she saw us as cute little animals in need of training. With a sudden, jerky motion, Kirara thrust a finger at her.

“Pah! For a moment there, you didn’t seem too bad, but so much for that. I don’t need you to teach me a thing! I’m going to become the perfect maid for Lady Kagura without your help! You’ll see!”

“A tad ambitious. We shall see.”

“Don’t even *think* about doubting me!”

Her confidence may be kind of baseless, but she’s made it this far. I’d better redouble my own efforts and really improve my knowledge and skills. I have to do everything I can to be the kind of maid Himeko wants and deserves.

“Hehe. A bold declaration indeed.” Sara looked up slightly. When I followed her gaze, I saw that she was looking toward the Sky Salon. “Incidentally, after all that business about arriving before your mistresses, should you really be faffing about down here?”

“We told them in advance that we’d be slightly late,” I replied.

“Yeah, we did. Anyway, we’ve done what we came here for, so now we’re

going to get up there as quick as we can. Let's go, Misaki."

Sticking out her tongue at Sara, Kirara grabbed my arm and pulled me along.

"Uh, right, but you don't have to drag me along. I can just follow you normally. See you in class tomorrow, Sara!" I gave her a quick wave goodbye as I hurried after Kirara.

As we departed, Sara said, "Having a lady to serve is a great privilege. You mustn't forget that."

"Huh? Sure, we won't."

She'd spoken half to herself, so I didn't fully make out what she'd said. It was almost like she was reminding herself. When I turned to look, that was underlined by the fact that she wasn't looking at me, but off into the distance, like she was lost in thought.



"You two! Stop right there!"

It wasn't quite déjà vu, but after we'd flagged down Sara, we were the ones being stopped in our tracks. The voice was a familiar one. It still sounded quite young, but also accustomed to giving orders. There was something saccharine about it, and something languid as well. Without a doubt, it belonged to Erisu Kumashiro.

I'd seen her before at the Salon Struggle and during our debut the other day. By this point, she knew my name, too, but I wouldn't have said we were especially close. At the end of the day, she was a young lady from the Societal Arts program, and despite her youthful appearance, she was a second year just like Himeko.

She lived in a different world than I did. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't have expected someone of her caliber to strike up a conversation with me.

Despite that, Lady Erisu had asked us to stop. Flustered, Kirara and I froze in our tracks and turned to face her.

"What is it?" I said, before correcting myself with, "I mean, good day, Lady

Erisu.”

Remembering that it was rude to ask a lady for information without greeting her properly first, I hitched up my skirt as elegantly as I could and offered a light curtsy.

“Good day,” said Kirara, greeting her in the same way.

Once we’d both done that, Lady Erisu beckoned us over with her hand. It looked like she was in the middle of an after-school tea party; she was sitting at a table on the garden terrace between the old and new school buildings. She was all on her own, with no sign of her maid or any other Paradise Palace members. From what I remembered, she didn’t have any Seraphs, but she did have three Exousias who worked at Erisu’s École Kitchen.

When we came nearer, she said in a very slightly apologetic tone, “Sorry to bother you both. Actually, my business is just with you, Misaki Hotaru.”

Hearing that she had something to talk to me about—and only me—set me on edge. I couldn’t recall doing anything that might have offended her, so I hoped she wasn’t about to scold me.

“You don’t have to look so tense. I just want to ask you about something, that’s all.” She smiled gently.

Was it that obvious?

Her smile was renowned for being particularly charming. Some students even called it “the smile of an angel.” However, I was still lost as to why she’d need to ask *me* anything.

“Uhm, what can I help you with?”

Timidly, Kirara leaned in and whispered into my ear, “I’ll go on ahead and tell Lady Himeko you’ll be late.” Then she sped off, as if she wanted to put as much distance between her and this situation as possible.

Way to ditch me, Kirara!

“Well, I can understand why this might feel awkward for you. Why don’t you sit down for now? Hmm, actually, maybe it’s better if we go somewhere else.”

Lady Erisu stood and beckoned me closer. When I looked at the table she’d

been sitting at, there was nothing on it, suggesting she had been there specifically to wait for me.

If so, that means there's no use trying to run. If I make some excuse just to get away, she'll only try again tomorrow, or the next day.

"Certainly. Please, lead the way."

I steeled my courage and obediently followed her. After walking for a few minutes, we arrived at Erisu's École Kitchen. For her, this probably felt even more like "home turf" than the Paradise Palace. What did she plan to do with me—an innocent young thing she'd lured into her lair?

"Please, go in."

"Okay!"

I stepped inside the door, just as she insisted. Inside, the air felt cold. *Maybe they haven't turned on the heating yet, or this is how it is when they've just opened?*

Erisu's École Kitchen was a restaurant on the school grounds owned by Lady Erisu. The staff working there were all students as well—specifically, Domestic Arts students who had exclusive contracts with Lady Erisu to be her Exousias. Those three managed every aspect of the restaurant's affairs.

From deeper inside, we suddenly heard a powerful cry. An instant later, the one who'd made it suddenly grew panicked. The crashing and clattering that followed made it clear that she was *very* alarmed.

Rushing out to greet her mistress was Yukina, who ran the kitchen. It looked like she was in the middle of her prep work, since she was still holding on to a big chunk of meat, but she'd felt compelled to come and welcome Lady Erisu right away regardless.

"Oh, uhm, gosh, Lady Erisu, we didn't know you'd be coming today!"

Yukina was a third year, making her one year above Lady Erisu, but for a Domestic Arts student, that would never have been enough to overcome the difference in status. Since Lady Erisu was her mistress on top of that, Yukina's attitude was no big surprise.

“Calm down, and take that meat back right away. We can’t serve it to the customers anymore, of course.”

“Yes, milady!” she squealed before speeding off.

Watching her leave, Lady Erisu sighed and remarked, “Dear me. What am I going to do with her?”

Moments later, Yukina returned, sans meat. “Sorry about that, milady!”

“Apologies for making you run back and forth, but I actually don’t need anything from you right now, so you should get straight back to your work in the kitchen. I just came here so I had somewhere quiet to talk to Misaki.”

“Oh, I see. Understood, then.” Having been coldly dismissed, she left us there.

“Sorry for all the fuss,” Lady Erisu said to me. “To make up for it, feel free to order anything you want.”

“Uhm, I really appreciate it, but it’s almost dinner time. I wouldn’t want to eat too much.”

I still had no idea what Lady Erisu wanted to talk to me about, but I didn’t want to be lulled into a false sense of security with delicious food.

“You always have snacks at the Sky Salon after school, don’t you? Surely having a little something wouldn’t fill you up.”

She wore her angelic smile while making it abundantly clear that refusal was not an option.

I whimpered. “I’ll have a slice of cake and a cup of tea, then.”

“Hehe, excellent. Mizuki?” She raised one arm and another of her Exousias immediately came over.

“Yes, milady?” said Mizuki.

She was a second year, like Lady Erisu, and was in charge of making desserts and running the dining area. Although she did come across as a little scatterbrained sometimes, she had a calmer air about her than Yukina, and she was a dependable older sister type all in all.

“Uhm, could I have a slice of cheesecake and some Darjeeling, please?”

Lady Erisu added, “And I think I’ll go for the strawberry and chestnut Swiss roll that you concocted, Mizuki. To drink... Yes, some sweet matcha tea, please.”

“Coming right up!” After gracefully bowing her head, Mizuki disappeared into the kitchen.

Once she was gone, I finally braved asking Lady Erisu what I was doing there.

“Hmm, where to begin?”

She closed her eyes, looking for a moment like she was gathering her thoughts. Then, at last, she met my gaze and the words began to flow from her small lips.

“Misaki, what do you think of this place?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that, to be honest.”

“It doesn’t need to be too complicated. I just want to know what impression you have. Your gut feeling, essentially.”

“Right, I see. Well, it’s quiet and has a nice, calm atmosphere.” Casting a glance across the room, I gave her an honest account of how I always felt when I came here.

In response, Lady Erisu let out a small sigh. “Quiet, yes. Very quiet. It would be, since there aren’t any customers.”

“I guess,” I said hesitantly. Looking around again, I saw that our table was the only one occupied.

“That’s the heart of my problem.” She rested both elbows on the table and clasped her fingers together, then rested her chin on top of her hands. “Sad as it is to admit, my restaurant is not prospering by any stretch of the imagination. Maybe it’s unavoidable with those three in charge, though. I don’t know.”

I responded with just a vague murmur.

“I wonder if anyone’s turned up today. Hanaka, can you come here for a minute?”

Her third Exousia rushed over. “Yes! I’m here! Here it is!”

In her hands was a tray containing the tea and cakes we had ordered. It

seemed like she was scared Lady Erisu would be angry with her for taking too long. The way the plates rattled as she ran looked perilous.

Hanaka was a second year as well, and she mainly took care of the dining area and helped with the food preparation. She always worked flat out, but it often stood out just how nervous she was, like it did now.

“Hanaka, how many customers have there been so far today?”

“Oh, uhm, well...” Her hands, which had been busy putting the plates and cups onto the table, froze in place. “I’m not *exactly* sure. Three, maybe?”

“Really?” said Lady Erisu, looking at her with dubious eyes.

“No, now that I think, it might have been only two.” A bead of sweat rolled down Hanaka’s forehead. It didn’t take a genius to see that she was lying.

“What time did they come? What did they order?”

“Oh, uhm,” she began, but this was the end of the road. “I’m sorry. We actually haven’t had a single customer so far.”

Lady Erisu sighed with a troubled expression. At last she said, “Understood. You may leave now.”

“I’m so sorry!”

As she retreated, she bowed so deeply that her head practically touched the floor.

Turning to me again, Lady Erisu said, “Now you’ve heard the embarrassing truth.”

I once again managed no more than a murmur in reply.

“We used to have more. We even had some customers who came here often enough to be called regulars. Like Himeko, for example.”

When I heard my mistress’ name, I shot straight up in my seat. *I have a really, really bad feeling about this!* I had just picked up my fork, but I froze before it reached my cheesecake.

“What’s wrong? That cake’s for you. Let’s have a nice, pleasant chat while we eat.”

Despite the kind tone in her voice, I couldn't bring myself to look her in the eye. However, she ignored this and carried on talking.

"Himeko's supported this restaurant ever since it opened, you know. She used to come here almost every day. People saw her doing that and started to come here as well. Of course, given that we're hidden away in the woods, it's not like we had huge crowds barging in here. Still, it meant we had enough footfall that we were on the borderline of breaking even."

I gently put my fork down.

"What's wrong? You don't need to be polite. Please, eat."

"But I, erm..."

"Well, never mind. Anyway, here's the important part. My girls are telling me that Himeko's coming by a lot less than she used to. Oh, I told you about this the other day, didn't I? She's been one of our key supporters, so I have to wonder what happened. Did the staff do something to offend her? If there's any reason at all, I have to know. If you know anything, please tell me. You always eat dinner with her, don't you?"

Warily, I said, "I don't know if I'd say 'always.' She still eats with her friends in the dorms sometimes, too."

"Really? Still, I wouldn't expect anyone to know her better than her own Seraph. Asking her directly seemed a bit rude, so I thought it might be worth asking you instead."

"Oh, I see," I uttered, struggling to talk.

My stomach and my gullet had closed up so tightly that I didn't think even a drink would be able to pass through. This was no less than a cross-examination. Even though I didn't feel the kind of pressure I did from Lady Saeko and Lady Shion, as if I were about to be eaten, she still had the formidable aura of someone many, *many* ranks above me in the social hierarchy. Perhaps she didn't intend it, but Lady Erisu's effect on a commoner like me was too intimidating for words.

"Tell me, where does Himeko eat dinner these days?"

“Well, she’s taken me to various different restaurants in François House and the other dorms. There, I guess.”

“Aha. She must have gotten bored of us, then.” She looked down, a hint of melancholy on her face.

I hurriedly replied, “I don’t know if that’s it! She might just be trying to show me around as much as she can, now that I’m her Seraph. I still don’t know all that much about this school. Lady Himeko really likes this restaurant. What makes you think she’s bored of it? She’s brought me here a bunch of times. We came the other day!”

“When was that, roughly?”

“Uh, let me think. About ten days ago?”

“Ten days ago. Looks like the era where she came every day is firmly over.”

“Oh.” I had the feeling I’d dug my own grave.

“At this rate, it’s only a matter of time before we go out of business.”

“Oh no!”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not Himeko’s fault. It’s because my staff doesn’t put in enough effort.” She heaved a heavy sigh.

“I could try asking her indirectly, if you like. I’m so sure she hasn’t got bored of coming here. I think it’s like I said—she’s just trying to show me around as much as possible, and after that, she’ll start coming here more often again.” I had absolutely no basis for believing this, but I had to say it anyway.

“You think so? Well, if you don’t mind asking her, then please.”

“You can count on me. Anyway, I’d better get back to Lady Himeko now, so —”

“Leaving already? But you haven’t touched your cake.”

“Erk.”

I’d already stood up, ready to dash straight out the door, but Lady Erisu had interrupted a moment too soon. As a lowly Domestic Arts student, I couldn’t say no to the smile of an angel.

If I eat this slice of cake, I'll be indebted to her, so I won't be able to break my promise. One way or another, I'll have to report to Lady Erisu about whatever Himeko says.

After taking a moment to pull myself together, I picked up the fork. I was so shaken that I ended up with no memory whatsoever of how the cheesecake tasted. Lady Erisu watched with an entertained look as I forced it down along with the tea.

Chapter Four: Situation Analysis

“Himeko! I mean, Lady Himeko!”

Recently, I’d realized that calling her “Himeko” without any title didn’t really fit with my position. We’d agreed that I’d still do that when we were alone in her dorm, but add “Lady” when out in public.

As if that matters right now!

“Oh, there you are, Misaki. She really kept you a while.”

After finally escaping and getting to the Sky Salon, I spotted Himeko and ran over to her as fast as my legs could carry me. She greeted me just as kindly and casually as always; moments like these made me thankful from the bottom of my heart that I was *her* Seraph and not someone else’s.

Panting, I replied, “It wasn’t... that bad... but it’s... kind of... complicated.”

I finally took a look around the salon and noticed that the only ones left were us, Lady Saeko, and Lady Saeko’s Seraph, Matsuri. Everyone else had left already, which made sense, since it had to be around six o’clock by now.

Matsuri came over and asked, “Would you like a cup of tea, Misaki?”

It was kind of her to offer even though I was a first year and should really have been the one serving her, but I had to politely decline. “You don’t need to worry about me. I just had some, actually.”

As I spoke, my ordeal from minutes earlier came rushing back to me. I began staring aimlessly into the distance.

Seeing that I was mentally checked out, Himeko put a hand on my shoulder and sat me down in a chair. “Erisu asked to talk to you, right? What did she want, I wonder?”

Matsuri nonchalantly placed tea and cookies on the table in front of me. The amount of cookies was smaller than usual, which left me impressed at her attention to detail. She really got everything right.

After I thanked Matsuri and had a sip of tea, I recounted my conversation with Lady Erisu. When I was finished, Himeko tilted her head. “So, she wants to know why I’m not going to Erisu’s École Kitchen as much as I used to? I hadn’t even noticed, but I suppose she’s right.”

Did this mean there wasn’t any actual reason—that it had just happened? To confirm, I pressed, “It’s not because there was a problem with the restaurant or anything?”

“I wouldn’t say so, no. I went there regularly for at least half a year. They’re actually one of my favorite places to eat.”

I patted my chest in relief. “Phew. Then I’ll tell her so.”

From behind me, Lady Saeko interjected, “Are you sure she’ll be satisfied with that? I suspect she’ll still insist on hearing a more concrete reason.”

Lady Saeko sat down at our table along with Matsuri and leaned on one elbow. The smile on her face was filled with implications.

“You think so?” I replied. “Won’t it be enough to just pass on what Lady Himeko said?”

“Maybe, maybe not. It’s not exactly normal to suddenly stop frequenting a place for no reason in particular. The real reason’s pretty easy to guess in this case, though.”

“Oh?” said Himeko, a puzzled look on her face.

“You stopped going there after Misaki became your Seraph, right?”

Hesitantly, she replied, “I suppose so, yes.”

“Once that happened, you stopped needing to go to Erisu’s restaurant.” She chuckled to herself with a self-satisfied smirk.

“What does that have to do with me?” I asked. “My presence shouldn’t affect whether or not Himeko needs to go there. I was thinking it might be because she’s trying to show me as many different places as possible, so for now she’s going there a little less.”

However, Lady Saeko shook her head. “I doubt it. As a first-year student, Himeko *hated* going out in public. Despised it. It meant she got too much

attention. Not only was she a campus celebrity, but she didn't have a Seraph. Going out meant being surrounded by whispers, plus Domestic Arts students looking at her and hoping, *longing* to be her Seraph.

"To avoid their gazes, she tried to be alone as much as possible. This meant a restaurant that was—to put it bluntly—*incredibly* unpopular was actually perfect. Now that she has a Seraph, though, she doesn't need to worry so much about what other people are thinking, so she can be free to eat among the people again. She doesn't need Erisu's restaurant anymore."

I reflexively shot up from my chair. "No!"

Himeko appeared to be deep in thought, but then she briefly murmured, "Hmm, I see," all but confirming Lady Saeko's suspicions.

When I heard that, I balked. *I can't tell Lady Erisu that! I can't tell her that she only liked going there in the first place to avoid other people!*

Turning to me with a grin that I was getting mighty sick of by now, Lady Saeko said, "Sounds like I was right. How wonderful! Now you can go to Erisu with your head held high and tell her the reason."

"What?! No! I can't!"

She really was merciless. All the comments about the S in Saeko standing for "sadist" had to be true. How else could she drink up my struggle with such glee?

"If I tell her exactly what you just said, there's no telling how hard she'll come down on me."

"What's the problem? I'm sure she'll be happier hearing the cold, hard truth than a barrel of lies."

"That's easy for you to say!"

She's not the one who has to do it. Even the thought of reporting this to Lady Erisu is making my stomach tie itself in knots. Ugh! She can't just act like it's nothing!

Then Matsuri suggested an excellent idea. "Come now, Misaki, it's not like you have to tell her everything. Lady Himeko also said that she has no problem with the restaurant and that she still really likes it, so you could just tell her

that. It wouldn't be a lie; it would just be sharing information selectively."

"Yeah, that could work. It would make my report much easier."

However, Matsuri's idea incurred her mistress' wrath. "Matsuri, who said you were allowed to share your opinion? Especially when *I've* just uncovered the truth and *your* suggestion would mean throwing all my hard work in the toilet!"

"Eek! That wasn't my intention, milady! Not in any way, shape, or form! You must believe me, I would never, ever, *ever* even *think* about doing that!"

After Matsuri's valiant attempt at giving me a way out, it was already a closed topic. *If I say anything to Lady Saeko now, I'll be the next target of her rage!*

With feverish haste, Matsuri bowed and apologized over and over like a dancing robot on the fritz. All I could do was offer her my own apologies in my heart.

Licking her lips, Lady Saeko coldly remarked, "I'm going to punish when I get you back to my room, Matsuri."

Matsuri yelped, then collapsed into her chair, her shoulders slumping in defeat.

While Himeko glanced at Matsuri with pity, she offered me some advice of her own. "I trust you to decide the best way to approach this. You should determine what kind of report Erisu would prefer and then deliver it to her."

"Easier said than done."

"Don't worry. If Erisu does anything to upset you, I'll deal with her. This is about my behavior, after all. I won't leave you in the lurch."

I sighed.

Himeko turned to Lady Saeko with a slightly bemused look. "I'm surprised you managed to pin down the exact reason I stopped going there, though. Especially when I didn't even know myself!"

"I've been paying attention to how you act. That made it a piece of cake." Leaning way back in her chair with an air of nonchalance, Lady Saeko began to further analyze Himeko and her habits.

“You’ve changed a lot since Misaki became your Seraph. When you were a first year, spending a lot of time on your own, you often had a somber expression, but now you’re much more outgoing and chatty. Admittedly, it’s usually Misaki you’re talking about. You tell everyone about how much Misaki loves donuts, how ticklish she is on one side, how there are two small moles on her bottom, and so on and so forth. It gets old, Himeko! I’m glad you’re getting along so well, but I wish you’d be a bit more considerate of the people who have to listen to it. It’s like you’re speaking fondly of a lover.”

The gaze Lady Saeko turned on Himeko had a mocking air about it.

I protested, “Lady Himeko, it’s one thing to talk about my likes and dislikes, but do you *have* to talk about my body?!”

“But it’s so entertaining!” said Himeko, sticking her tongue out. Her tone did have a *hint* of an apology.

I had no idea she’d told people about that kind of thing. Wondering what other personal details she might have shared, my face turned bright red.

“I know I seem like an open book, but there are *some* things I’d rather keep private! Can you please keep the embarrassing parts to yourself, Lady Himeko?”

“I just want everyone to get to know you better, that’s all.”

Continuing, Lady Saeko said, “The point is, Himeko is obsessed with flaunting you. Honestly, since meeting you, it’s like she’s a different person entirely. That’s why I wasn’t all that surprised when she stopped going to Erisu’s restaurant. I was like, well, yeah, of course. She’s lost her reason for going there.”

I couldn’t help being a little impressed at her deduction skills. However, another question occurred to me. “Have you ever been there, Lady Saeko?”

“Two or three times.”

“That’s all?”

“It didn’t exactly suit my palate. The food’s made by amateurs, after all.”

Not only cruel to those she was close to, but to others as well: that was the nature of Saeko Houjou.



The next day, Lady Erisu flagged me down once again in the exact same place.

“Oh, Misaki! Is that you?”

I’d been expecting this, but I jumped out of my skin regardless.

“Good day, Lady Erisu.”

“Indeed! Good day.”

She beckoned me over to sit down at the same table as her. This time she had a cup of tea in front of her, so she presumably intended to continue the conversation here on the terrace.

“Why don’t you order something, too?”

“No, thank you. Today I’m just here to report my findings.”

My fear was that if I ordered a drink, I’d be stuck there until I finished it. Getting my task out of the way and then making my escape felt like a *much* better option.

“Really? All right.” She put her cup down and stared into my eyes. “Very well, then. Tell me the reason why Himeko stopped coming to my restaurant.”

“Right. Yes.” Before saying anything else, I went over the explanation I’d devised after giving it *far* too much thought. “The truth is, Lady Himeko herself doesn’t really know the reason why she stopped. She said there’s no particular problem with the restaurant. Like I said yesterday, I think she’s just naturally gravitated away from it because she wants to take me to as many places as she can. She even told me specifically that Erisu’s is one of her favorite places.”

In the end, I’d decided not to talk about Lady Saeko’s deduction. It just didn’t seem like something I could tell her.

“Oh, I see.”

Does that mean she’s accepted my explanation? With any luck, this ordeal is finally over.

She continued, “In that case, I assume she’ll be coming back again more regularly before too long.”

A shiver ran down my spine. *I don't like where this is going.*

“Don't you think it's about time? It's been about a month since she made you her Seraph. She must have shown you all the restaurants on campus by now.”

Nervously, I replied, “Really? I wouldn't know. I'm just being brought along for the ride, so there could be more.”

“Are you hiding something, Misaki?”

“What? No! Of course not!” My heart began to pound a mile a minute.

“Hmm.” Lady Erisu looked at me with great suspicion. “If I take what you've just told me at face value, then Himeko will soon have to start coming there just as often as she used to. If she *doesn't* do that, I'll know you were lying to me. Are you willing to accept the consequences of that?”

I swallowed hard. “What consequences?”

“Oh, you know. I've put a lot of faith in my Exousias, but if things don't pick up, I'll know there's no hope for the restaurant's future—or theirs.”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“I suppose you wouldn't know. When I opened the restaurant, I made a promise to the three of them. I said they should run it entirely on their own, and if they reached a certain level of turnover, I'd make them into Seraphs. They're hoping to work with me at other restaurants in the future—out there in the wider world, I mean. If they can't hold up their end of the bargain, then naturally I'll dissolve their contracts. Of course, if they lose their contracts at this stage, it's very unlikely that anyone else is going to accept them as Seraphs.”

“Oh no,” I said in a strained voice.

Her expression quickly changed to a broad smile. “Based on how agitated you are, you're *definitely* hiding something. Go on, tell me everything. Now's the time to do it. I promise I won't be angry about whatever you say, but I will be if I hear about it further down the line. Not to mention that Himeko will lose face as well. She'll be known as the mistress who made her Seraph tell lies.”

That was the finishing blow. “You're playing dirty.”

“I don’t mind playing dirty if it gets results. I don’t have a lot of time left, you know. Yukina’s in her third year already. If I can’t get them there soon, it’ll all be over.”

“You’re really worried about them, aren’t you?”

“I can’t help it. They’re mine, you know? I want the best for them no matter how much of a mess they make. Now, tell me the truth.”

“All right. Just don’t be upset, okay?”

Things had reached a point where I really had no other choice. With great trepidation, I recounted what Lady Saeko had correctly guessed.

Afterward, I said, “Do you see now? That was why she took a liking to it in the first place.”

With it all out in the open, Lady Erisu didn’t grow angry. Instead, she looked deflated.

“Just so you know, that was only Lady Saeko’s conclusion. It’s still true that Lady Himeko said it was one of her favorite restaurants.”

“It’s all right, you don’t have to justify it.” She sighed and murmured, “Now what?” Then, she looked up at me again. “I almost wish there *had* been some problem that made her stop coming. That would have been much easier to fix. Say, Misaki...”

“Uhm, what is it?”

“Can *you* think of a reason why I don’t have any customers?”

I thought for a moment, but nothing sprang to mind. “Not really, I’m afraid.”

“I’ll admit that those three aren’t professional chefs, so the food is all prepared by amateurs, but I’m ordering ingredients that are just as high quality as the ones the other restaurants are using. The location isn’t ideal, but I don’t think it’s enough for business to be *this* bad.”

Looking at Lady Erisu’s sad, downcast expression, I wished there was something I could do to help her.

Then a thought flashed through my mind. “Actually...”

“Yes?”

She's not going to like this. “Please just promise you won't be angry.”

“We're past that point, aren't we? You can tell me anything and I won't mind.”

Even after hearing that, it took a *lot* of courage to keep going. “Well, I asked Lady Saeko if she'd ever gone to your restaurant, and she said she'd only been two or three times. And then...”

“And then?”

“She said it doesn't suit her palate.”

“Hmm, yes, that makes sense. The food definitely isn't up to the standard of someone like Saeko.”

Lady Erisu didn't get annoyed, but she did look even more downtrodden than before. *Maybe I shouldn't have told her that after all.*

“Misaki, I'd like to swallow my pride and ask you a favor.”

“Oh. What is it?”

I felt an encroaching dread, but I had no choice but to politely let her continue. That was the tragic fate of a Domestic Arts student.

“Can you help me get my restaurant back on its feet?”

“Me? Why?”

“I don't want word to spread about how bad the situation has gotten, so who better than someone who already knows all about it? To be honest, we're at an impasse right now. We can't change the location, nor can we drastically increase the capabilities of the chefs. Unless there's some groundbreaking idea we haven't thought of, I don't think there's any way out of this. It would be best if my Exousias could figure it out on their own, but since they can't, I don't mind enlisting outside help.”

“Saying that is one thing, but I don't know the first thing about restaurants. If you put this on me, it's not going to end well.”

“Don't worry. It's already not going to end well. Nothing I can think of is going

to fix this, and the three of them aren't going to manage it either. I honestly don't know why we're getting so little business. Is the quality of the food really low enough that no one would go there at all? That can't be it. There must be some other reason. That's why I need input from someone like you who might have a fresh perspective. If you manage it, I'll be really grateful."

As she spoke, she grasped my hands and looked at me entreatingly. The situation was getting serious. Tears were gradually beginning to pool in her lovely eyes.

"Please! Help me!"

How am I supposed to say no when the eyes of an adorable kitten are right there, pleading with me?

"Okay." It was all I could say.

"Thank goodness." With a great look of relief, she wiped away her tears. It didn't seem like this was an act; she really did care that much.

"Do you mind if I ask Lady Himeko first, though?"

I didn't know how long this would take, so if Himeko didn't give permission, that would put a stop to any efforts on my part.

"Certainly. That's only natural. I'll talk to her as well. It's fine to discuss it all with the other Sky Salon members as well. I want to avoid it becoming too much of a talking point on campus, but I trust them to know they shouldn't start spreading gossip. At this point, what I really want is for you to get some honest opinions that will serve as a reference."

"Got it. I still don't know how much help I'll really be, but I'll do whatever I can."

"Thank you. Now, we'd better give you a proper introduction to the staff!"



Her eyes sparkling, Yukina's gaze stabbed me like a knife. "You're going to help us revamp the restaurant, Misaki? That's amazing!"

"No, you're making it sound like more than it is."

“With you on our side, the amazing wunderkind first year who became a Seraph on her very first day, victory is guaranteed!” Mizuki cheered, striking a victory pose to match.

“Who are we fighting?” I quipped.

Hanaka’s mood reminded me of a field of flowers in bloom. “Now even I’ll be able to become a real Seraph! Hooray!”

“We’re only just getting started. I don’t know what’ll happen!” But she didn’t listen to a word I said.

Back in Erisu’s École Kitchen, Yukina, Mizuki, and Hanaka had been told what was happening. All three of them welcomed me with *far* too much eagerness.

I was glad they were excited, but I didn’t share their optimism. The place was empty today as usual. The fact that they could stand around talking to me was actually a little sad. *Shouldn’t they be getting things ready for the dinner rush? Even if calling it a “rush” is a little generous.*

“Now,” said their mistress, “since Misaki will be helping out, I want you to think of her as my representative and do whatever she asks you.”

“Yes, milady!” replied the three of them, their voices in perfect alignment. They bowed deeply toward me. “We’ll do whatever you say, Lady Misaki.”

I recoiled. “You really, *truly* don’t have to call me that.”

Since becoming Himeko’s Seraph, I had been constantly thrust into the spotlight, so by now I was kind of used to being the center of attention. Still, it was going too far to be called “Lady” Misaki by fellow Domestic Arts students, especially ones who were older than me. I didn’t want to think about what kind of rumors would start flying around if anyone heard them.

Lady Erisu put a hand up to her mouth and chirped with laughter. “I think it’s perfect.”

“This is no laughing matter! They have to keep their expectations in check. I’m not a miracle worker; I’m just in a supporting role.”

“Oh, fine. Listen, girls, treat her like a younger student, same as you have been so far. Just don’t forget to show her the utmost respect.”

“Understood!” they all chirped.

Relief washed over me.

“Thanks again, Misaki. I’m glad you agreed to help.”

“Yeah.”

Being reminded of this again by Lady Erisu made me feel really dubious as to whether I was the right person for the job.

“And don’t forget, you three: if you *still* don’t get any results, you’d better be prepared for the inevitable.”

With a finger, she drew a line straight across her neck. She was making it clear, as literally as possible, that their positions would be terminated.

They broke out into a flurry of panic so intense that it looked like they might pass out.

“Eek!”

“Please, show mercy!”

“No, no, no!”

She really shouldn’t be putting an important decision like this on my shoulders! This is making me very, very uncomfortable.

It was too late to back out now, though.

“For now,” I told them, “I’m going to inform Lady Himeko about this and get some opinions from the other members of the Sky Salon.”

“Very well,” said Lady Erisu.

One way or another, I had to get started or this was never going to be over. With a quick goodbye, I left the restaurant and headed back to Himeko.



Himeko didn’t raise any particular objections when I explained it all in the Sky Salon. In fact, it seemed like she had a few ideas of her own.

“Anyway, now I’m supposed to help out Lady Erisu.”

“I see. I feel in some way responsible for this as well, so I’ll help you as much

as I can.”

“I just don’t see what I can really do. What could I ever say that would make a difference?”

“It all depends on what the ultimate goal is here. If we’re trying to make it into a first-rate restaurant beyond compare, that’s an impossible task for you or any other student. On the other hand, if it’s just about increasing their turnover to a certain degree, that must be possible, right?”

“Maybe. From what Lady Erisu said, rather than focusing on turnover, it sounds like it would be enough to just get ten tables each day, or maybe around fifteen people in total. That would count as a success.”

“There must be a way to do that.”

“Do you think so?”

As of now, the number of customers per day was apparently around five, so this would mean tripling that. Fifteen sounded like a small number, but we were limited to the students on campus, and they had lots of other options competing for their patronage that offered professional quality cooking. Peeling ten students away from those every day felt like a Herculean task.

“I’m sure if we think about it, we’ll come up with a few ideas.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

“Have you thought of anything so far?”

“I was going to try doing a little research first. Gather some opinions. Lady Saeko already gave an insight into why *she* doesn’t go there, so I was thinking we could get more opinions like that and see if there are any negative points to improve on.”

“That sounds like a good starting point.”

I set about doing just that. First I went to the head of the salon, Lady Kagura. I’d never seen her at Erisu’s École Kitchen even once, so I wondered what the reason for that might be. Maybe if she started going there, others would follow, just like they had when Himeko was a regular.

“You want to know why I don’t go there?” Lady Kagura asked. “Well, Erisu

originally told me I didn't need to. She said that if I went there purely as a favor, it wouldn't really help Yukina and the others. They needed to be able to stand on their own two feet and prove their worth that way, apparently. I might still have gone there if the food had been particularly good, but..."

"But it wasn't?"

"I wouldn't say it was terrible or anything. It just wasn't to my taste. I think they're reasonably skilled at cooking, so it really came down to whether it matched my own preferences or not."

After she finished, the Kokonoe sisters cut into the conversation.

"Yeah, they just haven't quite gotten there."

"They might be trying to set themselves apart from other restaurants by going for different flavors, but it's had the opposite effect."

Although they were Domestic Arts students just like me, their attitude was closer to that of the Societal Arts crowd. Apparently their background actually would have made them suitable for that program, but some special circumstances had led to them serving Lady Kagura instead. Now that Kirara was working for her as well, they could often be seen enjoying a life of leisure.

"Fair enough. Thank you very much."

Next I moved on to Lady Sumire and her Seraph, Mihaya, to find out what they had to say.

"I have nothing against that restaurant," Lady Sumire said. "I go every once in a while."

"Oh, really?"

"Only about two or three times a month, though." She added a casual wink.

I had no idea that she was a regular, but then it had only been a month or so since I joined the school, and Himeko had been taking me there a lot less often lately. It wasn't like there had been tons of chances for us to meet.

"Why do you go there?"

Phrasing it like that felt a little rude toward Lady Erisu, like I was assuming she

shouldn't be going there, but there wasn't really another way to ask.

"Good question." She looked at Mihaya for a moment, then at Himeko. "I think my reason's a lot like Himeko's, to be honest."

"You like that it's empty?"

"Yes," she said with a nod. She took Mihaya's hand. "I don't mean to disparage the place, but it's nice that there are so few customers. It's quiet there."

"So you go because it's quiet, is that it?"

She embraced Mihaya and drew her into her chest, smiling broadly. "It's perfect for when I want to eat alone with Mihaya, just the two of us."

Mihaya's face flushed, and she started trembling all over. "Sumire!"

It was the first time I'd seen Mihaya, who was usually such a reliable role model, go to pieces like this. I'd known this already, but these two got along *really* well. Their level of intimacy actually made me a little jealous. *I wonder if I'll ever have that kind of relationship with Himeko.*

"Hehehe, that's why, with apologies to Lady Erisu, I hope it *doesn't* get too successful. Losing that quiet atmosphere would be a shame for me."

"To turn that around, are you saying that even if it did get successful, you'd be fine with that as long as you still got to eat in that quiet atmosphere?"

"I suppose so."

"So if they had private rooms to eat in, other people like you might find it the perfect place for them. People who want to eat alone with their Seraph, or with a friend maybe, without having to worry about the outside world."

"Yes, I think that's a real possibility. All the dorm restaurants have an open-concept feel to them, so private rooms would give them a unique selling point."

"Right, that's what I thought." This was starting to feel like a great idea.

"There's just one thing."

"There is?"

Lady Sumire's face clouded over. "I'd like it if the food was a little tastier."

“I see.”

So even if there were private rooms, it wouldn't help unless people were drawn there by the food already. It would be an extra feature to add appeal on top of the basic quality level of the restaurant—or something like that.

“Fair enough. I'll pass that on to Yukina and the others. You helped me come up with what could be a key idea. Thank you so much.”

“Don't mention it. It would be nice if Erisu could have a little more success with that place.”

I felt like I could see the light at the end of the tunnel now. After saying goodbye to Lady Sumire, Lady Inaho was next on the list.

“You were also told not to go there by Lady Erisu, right?” I asked her. I was pretty sure she'd told me that before.

“Yup, that's right.”

It sounded like I wasn't going to get much out of her, but then another question occurred to me. “Does your family supply ingredients to Erisu's restaurant?”

“We do indeed. Rice, meat, vegetables, and tea.”

Her family ran a large-scale farming operation that provided the whole school with a lot of produce and other food.

“Aren't you curious about what kind of food they make with it all?”

“That's Errie's business, really. I hope whatever they're making is delicious—that would make me happy—but Yuki-yuki, Mizzie, and Hana are still in training, so it's only natural if it doesn't turn out perfectly. If Errie wants me to sample their cooking, I'm happy to do so anytime. She only has to ask.”

“Got it. So in the end, you wouldn't really know if there are any problems with the restaurant.”

“Nope, I wouldn't. Haruka might, though. Any ideas?” She turned and spoke to Haruka, who was sitting beside her.

Haruka, Lady Inaho's Seraph, was an excellent maid. If I had to judge who was

the best maid out of all the Domestic Arts students who served in the Sky Salon, it would be a tight contest between Mihaya or Haruka. Matsuri was highly skilled as well, but the impression she gave of being bullied into submission by Lady Saeko made it hard to see her as the winner.

Haruka replied, "I haven't been there myself, but I have heard a few thoughts from my classmates."

"What did they say?" I asked.

"They held off on saying anything about the quality of the food since they didn't feel it was their place, but they said that Mizuki and Hanaka, who handled all of the customer service, moved about with so little regard for safety that they almost had a heart attack."

All that came out of me in response was an awkward laugh.

"They're probably working so hard that they don't realize they need to hold back sometimes."

It's true. They're clearly giving it their all, but I definitely saw them almost drop things. It doesn't necessarily impact on the customers directly, but improving their level of customer service is still really important.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"Ooh! Me! Me!" said Lady Inaho, excitedly raising her hand like an elementary school student.

"Yes, Lady Inaho?" I felt like I was calling on her like a teacher.

"The customer numbers at Erisu's École Kitchen are a lot like..."

"Yes?"

"My height!"

It sounded like this was the start of another one of her jokes. In the end, I hadn't been a teacher, but an emcee telling her to come on stage. Either way, I probably had no choice but to play along.

"Uhm, how so?"

"Neither of them will ever grow any bigger!"

“What? No! The customer numbers *have* to go up!”

“Exactly,” said Haruka, whacking her over the head with her paper fan, which she’d quickly pulled out of who knows where. “It’s just *you* that won’t grow any bigger.”

“Hehe. Great comedic timing, Haruka!” She gave a thumbs-up. “But what do *you* think, Misakins? Do you agree that I’ll stay this short forever?”

“Huh? No, I didn’t say that.”

“It’s all right, I see how it is! I’ve gotta go—I just forgot I have some important crying in the bathroom to do!”

After blurting that out, Lady Inaho sped out of the Sky Salon.

“Lady Inaho!” I called after her. Apparently, she was really sensitive about her height. I didn’t know what the consequences might be for making a Societal Arts student cry, so I thought I’d better go after her and apologize right away.

However, Haruka looked perfectly calm. She stood from her seat and blocked my passage. “It’s quite all right; that was just a bit. You can carry on with your work, so don’t worry about a thing. I’ll wait for a suitable moment, then go and retrieve her.”

“Are you sure?”

I suddenly felt a surge of exhaustion. It was tough to know which parts of this to take seriously. *I hope I can get used to these two soon. Honestly, I still think she really is sensitive about her height.*

Groaning, I said, “Okay then, I’ll leave Lady Inaho in your capable hands.”

Trusting that she knew what she was doing, I went back to Himeko.

“Did you get anything useful out of the others?”

“Yes, I learned about quite a few problems and some potential solutions.”

The biggest problem is definitely the food itself, but Lady Erisu was already thinking about that. There’s no way to improve the Exousias’ skills overnight, but we might have to raise the standard so it’s not too much worse than the competition. If they can at least manage that, then we should be able to do a

few other things to drum up the numbers, like introducing private rooms and making the servers carry out their work with a little more care.

When I explained all my thoughts to Himeko, she frowned slightly. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with their cooking skills.”

“You don’t?”

“Fried or stewed, I think their meat and vegetables always turn out exquisitely. The taste is incomparable. For the desserts, they really take appearances into consideration. I’m always impressed with how well made they are.”

Confusion came over me. After all the criticism I’d heard about the food, now Himeko was being this positive about it.

“I like the quiet atmosphere there, too. I’d really like that to stay the same.”

“I see.”

I scratched my head for a moment and looked down at the notes I’d taken covering all the information I’d received. It seemed like Himeko was in agreement with the idea of having private rooms, but when it came to the cooking, opinions were sharply divided between her and everyone else. Whose opinion was I supposed to follow? The majority that included Lady Kagura and the other Societal Arts students, or Himeko, who was a regular customer?

“Anyway, it looks like you’ve gathered up plenty of thoughts you can share with them, so maybe it would be best to do that. It’s almost the end of the school day, so why don’t we hurry back to my room, then go for dinner at Erisu’s and give a report at the same time?”

“Oh, uhm, sure. Sounds like a plan.”



It was business as usual for Erisu’s École Kitchen, which is to say it was empty. Knowing the fate that might be in store for Yukina, Mizuki, and Hanaka, my stomach was tying itself in knots even though I wasn’t the one who’d be facing the consequences.

When Lady Erisu saw that we’d arrived, she came over to the entrance. “If it

isn't Himeko and Misaki! I'm so glad to see you here."

Normally she left all the running of the restaurant to the three Exousias, not really showing herself much in the dining area, but these circumstances seemingly demanded a bit more active involvement. Now that she had recruited me to help, it was time to get started on revamping the restaurant.

"Good day, Erisu," Himeko said.

"Good day. I'm grateful that you've decided to visit this evening."

Watching them exchange pleasant greetings in such a ladylike fashion, I had an image in my mind of large roses blooming all around them. It was as if I'd been instantaneously transported to a ball at the Palace of Versailles. I was getting used to this, but the Societal Arts students really did have a totally different worldview than I did. To me, they all looked like royal princesses.



The weirdest part was that I was hanging out in this world full of princesses.

Lady Erisu's next words dragged me back to reality. "You didn't come here *just* to eat dinner, correct?"

Himeko replied, "No, we've also come to report on Misaki's findings. She's been busy as a bee."

"Wonderful! You can tell me all about it while you're waiting for your meals. Please feel free to order whatever you'd like."

"All right. Then I'll tell you all the feedback I gathered from the Sky Salon members."

Reading from my notes, I went through each and every detail I'd gleaned, softening the blow a little for the less positive points. Lady Erisu listened with her eyes closed and an expression that said absolutely nothing. It was impossible to imagine what was going on inside her mind as she heard all this.

When I was finally done with the whole report, she opened her eyes and grimaced. "I thought so. The biggest problem is the food itself."

I guess that can't be reassuring to hear when your whole business is serving food.

She continued, "I said this before, but I really wonder if the quality is *such* a major issue."

"Compared to the competition at least, I think it might be."

However, my clumsy reply only made her expression darken. "Well, on that front, I can ask the three of them to go the extra mile. The idea of private rooms is a good one as well. We'll give that a try straight away. We can probably divide up the entire first floor and about half the second floor."

Himeko smiled. "Yes, I think it's a lovely idea. It would be so nice to be able to come here and eat alone with Misaki."

Then, as if that statement had reminded her of something, Lady Erisu turned to Himeko with an impish smile. "Oh, about that! I heard the reason why you stopped coming here so often, but it seemed weird to me that there'd be such a big turnaround when you didn't have any issue with the restaurant itself, so I

did a little research of my own.”

“You did?” Himeko replied, as if this was genuinely news to her.

“I know that since Misaki became your Seraph, you’ve been going out an awful lot, and when you go to other restaurants, you’ve been choosing seats that really put you in the public eye.”

“Oh, really?”

“From what eyewitnesses have told me, this has become the norm. It’s clear that you’re trying to flaunt Misaki—to show her off as much as possible.”

“I am?”

“You hold hands with her when you don’t need to, give her unnecessary orders just so people see her serving you, and make sure everyone knows how well you’re getting along. Apparently, that’s all you spend your time doing.”

Himeko fell silent and looked down. I leaned down to get a glance at her expression, and it was clear at first glance that her face had gone bright red.

“Lady Himeko?”

“I thought to myself, no wonder you stopped coming to my restaurant! If you’re trying to make everyone see you and Misaki together, you obviously can’t do that here. I can’t exactly blame you. You finally have a Seraph, and such an adorable one at that!”

A frail voice escaped from Himeko’s lips, the likes of which I’d never heard before. “That’s not... I didn’t...” The way she pressed both hands to her flushed cheeks was too cute for words.

Lady Erisu continued, “An empty restaurant is no place to flaunt your lovely little Seraph, is it?”

“That’s not it,” Himeko insisted weakly. “It’s not...”

Suddenly a thought hit me. *I see what’s going on. She’s giving Himeko a tiny bit of payback for not coming to her restaurant anymore.*

“Hehe. Well, I guess I’ll stop being mean now.”

Wiping off the sweat on her forehead with a handkerchief, Himeko finally

looked up again. “I didn’t know you had such a cruel side to you, Erisu.”

“Come on, you can take it. It was a major shock to me when you stopped coming here, so I’ve got to get my own back.”

“I suppose so. Admittedly, there was an element of wanting to take Misaki everywhere and debut her in front of everyone. I’ll come here more regularly again from now on, so please forgive me.”

“That is a relief to hear. Now, starting tomorrow, let’s put every effort we can into getting this place back on its feet.”

After that, the mood was harmonious all the way through our meal, as we discussed what kinds of changes could be made to the food and the layout.



“Goodness gracious, that was so embarrassing!”

This was now the third or fourth time I’d heard this line since getting back to Himeko’s room. She was blushing deeply and agonizing over the memory of what Lady Erisu had said to her.

We were in the bath now, and she had wrapped her arms around me, hugging me from behind—or more accurately, clutching onto me so tightly that I couldn’t move.

“So that’s how everyone’s been looking at me, is it?”

Himeko buried her face in the back of my neck and shook her head violently from side to side, sending hot bathwater splashing everywhere. The softness of her touch against my skin was in stark contrast with her mood, and it made me turn red.

“It’s fine, isn’t it? Why worry about it this much?”

She then rested her head on my shoulder and spoke right into my ear in a sulky tone. “I can’t help it. Thinking back on it all, how can I not feel like this? I wasn’t doing it on purpose, but taking you out and showing everyone was really good fun. Now that I have a Seraph, I wanted everyone to see the new me—and you, too, of course. It’s just like Erisu said. I wanted to flaunt you.”

“I really don’t think I’m worthy of being ‘flaunted.’”

“You’re wrong there. You’re adorable, you work hard, and you’re the best possible maid for me. Of course I want everyone to see what an amazing Seraph I have!”

Himeko’s words warmed my heart. It made me happy to hear such nice things said about me.

“I still have so much to learn, though! Sara even pointed out the ways I’m nowhere near good enough. But, um, if that’s how you feel, then I’ll do my best to become the kind of maid who really does deserve to be flaunted.”

“Just don’t try so hard that you burn yourself out. That would be a pain for me, so pace yourself, all right? Remember that I already like you just the way you are.”

She finally eased off on how tightly she was holding me, then nuzzled her cheek against mine. Hearing Himeko say that so directly made me feel kind of embarrassed, but it was wonderfully pleasant. I once again felt very glad that I’d become Himeko’s Seraph—a feeling I’d never have expected to have a month earlier.



The next time Lady Erisu called us to her restaurant was two days later. Himeko and I went there in the evening and saw that the individual private rooms we’d discussed had already been built.

“It’s finished already?”

“Yes, although we couldn’t do any large-scale construction work. Instead, we’ve just partitioned the space with dividers to create the effect.”

The dividers matched the restaurant in terms of style and were placed in ways that zigzagged around the tables so that no one could see in and know who was sitting there. They were also tall enough to prevent peeking over the top. All in all, they’d convincingly created the illusion of individual rooms.

Himeko seemed to like it. “Very well done. It looks like we’ll be able to eat here without a care in the world.”

“This alone won’t be enough to drum up more business, so we’ll have to do

something about the food as well.”

Lady Erisu snapped her fingers, a signal that looked like it should summon her Exousias to appear in a silent, ninja-like fashion. However, the results were much more haphazard; the three of them stumbled cheerfully into the front of the restaurant.

“What are you doing?!” Lady Erisu said, flicking each of them in the forehead one by one and sighing with exasperation. “Anyway, listen to me. Me, Himeko, and Misaki are here for one purpose, and that’s to give you one last chance. We’re going to close the restaurant for the weekend so that you can do some special culinary training. Then, at the start of next week, we’ll have the grand reopening. I’m going to advertise it far and wide, so you need to give me results. If not, I’m afraid I’ll have to cut you all loose. Your Exousia contracts will be void.”

Her words were spoken so strictly that even I began to feel nervous.

Yukina threw herself down at her mistress’ feet. “Lady Erisu, no! Working for you is our dream!”

Mizuki trembled violently, her face grim. “Exactly. If you abandon us, we’ll be adrift! Lost at sea!”

Meanwhile, Hanaka was practically babbling. “No, no, no, no, no! Lady Erisu’s stick is coming for us, and we don’t know where the carrot is!”

“Stop talking nonsense and pull yourselves together. I want you to work for me—that’s why I made you my Exousias in the first place. Please, show me that you can succeed if you put your minds to it.”

Lady Erisu was at the end of her tether. Underneath it all, it was clear that she cared about them.

She stood on tiptoes and rubbed their heads. “I’ll be there to sample everything, okay? So let’s get started with the special training.”

This was enough to make them snap out of it at last.

“Understood, milady. We’ll give it absolutely everything we’ve got.”

“We’ll make dishes that will blow you away!”

“Yes, you won’t be disappointed! We promise!”

They put their arms around her with tears in their eyes. *They’re all on the same wavelength, with enthusiasm to spare. I just hope that’s reflected in their cooking!*

Lady Erisu turned back to us. “If you don’t mind, I’d like you two to help with sampling the food as well.”

“I’d love to,” said Himeko immediately.

I was a little more hesitant, but after coming this far, I couldn’t exactly drop out now. “Sure, if you think I can help.”

And so, the three Exousias’ boot camp began.

Chapter Five: The Restaurant's Fate

Foreheads glistened with sweat, cries of exertion resounded, and spices flew everywhere. They say the kitchen is a battlefield, but this fit the bill a little *too* well. Their training was so fierce and intense that it gave me a new understanding of what cooking was and could be. Though they repeatedly made the same mistakes over and over, every little improvement was tangible. We tasted one dish after another.

Honestly speaking, I hardly ever knew what to say. It would have been great if I could make exciting comments straight out of a cooking manga, something along the lines of “It’s like the meat and vegetables are having a catfight in the frying pan!” or “It’s as delectable as ambrosia, the food of the gods!” Instead, all I could manage were trivial things like “It’s nice and crispy!” and “I’d have liked a little more sauce on this.”

I didn’t feel helpful at all, but thankfully, Himeko and Lady Erisu were there to make up for it. They were both used to the highest caliber of cooking, so they could give clear and direct advice. They exchanged opinions with serious expressions on their faces while I just watched and mostly sampled the dishes in silence.

It bugged me that even after being taken to so many different restaurants by Himeko, I still couldn’t tell what was good and what was bad in the realm of high-class cooking. By now I’d eaten plenty of things like caviar and shark fin that I’d only ever heard of before, but the only impressions I’d formed of them were along the lines of, “Oh, so that’s how that tastes.” I was the most common of commoners; I thought cod roe was tastier than caviar and salmon was tastier than shark fin. The world of *haute cuisine* remained a mystery to me.

Eventually, Lady Erisu and Himeko looked at one another and nodded with satisfaction.

“I think we can leave it here, don’t you?” Lady Erisu said.

“I agree. There’s a clear difference in quality now.”

Evidently, the new menu was complete. Yukina, Mizuki, and Hanaka, standing nearby, just about collapsed with exhaustion.

“Good work, all of you. Now it’s just a case of waiting until the reopening. Get some rest today to make sure you’re ready for it.”

“Yes, milady.”

“Understood.”

“Now I just *know* we’ll be your Seraphs soon!”

Hanaka may have been jumping the gun a little, but after all the effort they’d put in, I was convinced as well. I still had a smidgen of doubt, but as the smoke finally cleared from the battlefield, I had the proud sense that we’d done everything we could.



A new week began. When the sun went down, Erisu’s École Kitchen wasn’t necessarily full to bursting, but it did have a lot more customers than usual during the dinner shift.

Himeko and Lady Erisu had arranged it so that during lunchtime, this place had been the topic on everybody’s lips. Just by talking about it at their own tables, word had basically spread on its own. Students who belonged to a salon were high profile enough that everyone else wanted to copy what they were doing. That was my theory, at least!

There were three groups sitting at open tables, and about three-fourths of the private rooms were occupied. Interestingly, around half of those were made up of first-year Societal Arts students. Most likely, new students who hadn’t heard of the place before had become aware of it today through word of mouth and were eager to try it out.

I’d never seen it so full. With more people to serve than they’d ever had before, the girls were running all over the place. Cries of “Is that everything?” and “Thank you for waiting!” rang out all over the place.

However, despite this level of business being a first-time experience, Mizuki and Hanaka had bright smiles on their faces as they zoomed around the

crowded floor. It looked like the joy of seeing their restaurant full of guests mattered more to them than the stress of serving them all.

When Hanaka spotted us, she rushed over with a look of joy. “Lady Himeko, Misaki, you came!”

“It’s so busy,” said Himeko. “Maybe we should have held off for now.”

“After how much you helped us? No way, it wouldn’t be right without you here! The more the merrier—I mean that!” She rolled up her sleeves and flexed her dainty arm muscles in a pose that showed she meant business.

With a giggle, Himeko replied, “Then we’ll gladly have a table for two, please.”

“Absolutely! We have an extra special table just waiting for you.”

“I didn’t realize there was such a thing.”

“You’ve been our most regular customer and our biggest supporter all along, so you deserve the table with the best view in the house.”

“I can’t wait!”

The pleasant exchange continued as we were led to our table. It was on the second floor, on the opposite side from the stairs. From the window, we could see the moonlit school buildings and lamplit gardens in the distance. Candles covered with pink glass flickered on the table, effortlessly enhancing the mood.

Stroking the pink glass with her index finger, Himeko smiled beguilingly at me from across the table. “How nice to have a meal in such a different atmosphere than usual.”

Like the restaurant, Himeko seemed quite unlike her usual self. My heart started racing of its own accord. When the stage was set like this, I became acutely aware of Himeko’s beauty all over again. For some reason, my face grew hot.

“It looks like they’re off to a good start,” she said. “Hopefully this means they’ll be Erisu’s Seraphs before too long.”

“I know they will. After how much work they’ve put in, it has to be enough.”

With a sense that victory was within reach, we savored the new menu.



One week later, Lady Erisu stood staring at the restaurant's ceiling. She threw her arms up in the air and began to spin around and around like she was doing some weird kind of dance. "I'm lost for words," she said forlornly.

I didn't know what to say about this disastrous scene either. Himeko, too, cradled her head in her hands. As for Yukina, Mizuki, and Hanaka, the way *they* looked was beyond description.

The grand reopening had been such a success that the place was overflowing with customers. Now, after only a week, the numbers were pretty much down to the level they were at before. They weren't at zero, but they weren't too far off either.

Why? How?!

That was the unspoken question on everyone's mind. We'd been so certain of success that the alternative hadn't even occurred to any of us. The future had seemed set in stone.

When she finally stopped her strange dance, Lady Erisu looked around for someone to inquire to.

"Yukina... No, she's currently running away, so, Mizuki."

"Yes?"

"How many customers have we had today?"

"There have been eight."

"And yesterday?"

"Seven."

"What about the day before that?"

"Nine."

"And before that?"

"Sixteen."

The first night, there had been more than thirty students there, but before we

knew it, the numbers were right back to normal. Maybe that was an exaggeration; they were a little better. Even so, after tasting that explosive success, this defeat was a bitter pill to swallow.

“What happened?” Lady Erisu asked—a simple question that no one could give an answer to. We’d thought we were invincible, so what in the world had gone wrong?

At the lowest estimate, there had been at least a hundred guests over the course of the first three days, but none of those had been repeat visitors. Given the limited number of students at the school, if we couldn’t hook people and have them coming back, achieving our goal would be impossible.

“Maybe it’s hopeless.”

These words from their mistress were like a death sentence to Yukina and the others.

There must be something we can do! But thinking that was about as far as I got. I couldn’t come up with any ideas.

That was when Lady Sumire emerged from one of the private rooms on the first floor, accompanied by Mihaya. “Oh, Himeko, it’s you. What are you, Erisu, and Misaki all doing together?”

“Lady Sumire, I didn’t realize you were here,” I remarked. Admittedly, she was the other Sky Salon member who had said she came here regularly, so her presence wasn’t too big a surprise.

“Well, I felt it would be a shame not to come after you implemented my feedback. Right, Mihaya?”

“Yes, you’ve crafted a wonderful atmosphere.”

“Thank you,” Lady Erisu replied feebly. “It makes me happy to hear you say that.”

Lady Sumire and Mihaya were cheerfully arm in arm, just like a couple. Given how effectively the restaurant set a mood while eating, it made sense that a pair like them, who already got along so well, would find their feelings reaching a new, deeper level.

“Uhm, Lady Sumire, can I ask you something?”

“Certainly.”

It was a slim hope, but I was wondering if she might have some other useful tip for us. I began by asking, “What do you think of the revamped restaurant?”

“The private rooms are excellent. I was glad to be able to enjoy a quiet meal alone with Mihaya.”

“So you’ll keep coming here in the future?”

“Yes, of course. I don’t plan on changing that.”

She doesn’t plan on changing that? Why does that phrasing make me wary somehow?

“And what do you think of the food?”

“It’s the Erisu’s École Kitchen style I know and love.”

I fell silent for a moment. I have the sense she’s being diplomatic. Let me think, though. The reason she liked this place is because of how quiet it was. That’s exactly why Himeko used to come here all the time as well. What am I missing here?

“Thanks, got it. Are you heading out now?”

“Yes,” she replied uncertainly.

“Then I’ll go outside with you and see you off.”

Himeko looked at me with suspicion. “Misaki, is everything all right?”

I pretended I hadn’t noticed this and insistently led Lady Sumire outside. There was something I *had* to check with her no matter what. It was possible I’d missed out on something big before.

When we got outside, Lady Sumire tilted her head slightly. “What’s going on, Misaki?” Apparently she’d picked up on my strange behavior as well.

“I have an important question for you, if you don’t mind.”

“Go ahead.”

“I’d like it if you answered as straightforwardly as you can. No holding back.”

She shrank back a little in the face of my intensity. “What’s this about?”

Honestly, asking this was quite rude toward Lady Erisu and her Exousias, but it was possible there was a *really* simple answer.

“Do you think the food here tastes good?”

Silence. Lady Sumire couldn’t find the words to answer.

It had occurred to me that not once had I ever heard Lady Sumire describe the food as anything along the lines of “tasty” or “delicious.” Nor had Himeko ever said anything similar.

Lady Kagura had said it didn’t suit her palate. I’d taken this to mean that it wasn’t sophisticated enough to satisfy someone of her elite tastes, but it was possible it boiled down to something much simpler. The problem wasn’t that they were amateurs, but that they were seasoning the food in a way that just didn’t taste nice.

“Please, those three Exousias have their whole future riding on this. I need to know your pure, unvarnished opinion.”

She made a deeply troubled face. That alone was an answer to my question, of course, but I still needed to hear her say it out loud.

Eventually, she replied, “I wouldn’t say it’s *bad*.” She looked very reluctant to talk about this, but she kept going. “There’s nothing wrong with the actual preparation and cooking. They clearly work very hard at it. However, the flavors they go for, the ways they season the food, are perhaps a little... unique. Don’t get me wrong, it’s fine to have their own style. I think that’s what sets this restaurant apart. I just don’t know if it has mass appeal. For people who like eating in a quiet setting and have slightly off-kilter tastes, it’s the perfect venue. That’s the category I fall into. I don’t think the flavors they go for are all that bad.”

“I wonder if Lady Himeko sees it the same way as you do.”

“Hmm, probably.”

Thinking back, Himeko hadn’t really said anything negative the entire time we were tasting their efforts to improve their cooking.

“I guess you haven’t ever told Lady Erisu about this?”

“It’s her restaurant, not mine, and she’s my classmate. I don’t think I’d feel comfortable saying the kind of flavors they go for don’t have mainstream appeal.”

“Yeah, I can understand that.”

Even when it came to normal restaurants, there weren’t that many people who were comfortable being straight-up negative when expressing their opinions. If you didn’t like how the food tasted at any given establishment, you just wouldn’t go there again.

Could it be that all the people who have come to Erisu’s so far just aren’t all that picky about the food, so they put up with it for the sake of having somewhere quiet enough for them? If so, someone has to tell Lady Erisu the truth. But who? Not me, surely? Right?!

The thought of doing that was unbearable. It would be one thing to tell her before the big revamp, but both Himeko and Lady Erisu had sampled all the food and decided it was up to standard. For me, a mere Seraph and Domestic Arts student, to contradict them was way beyond my station.

If I start rebelling against my mistress, she might be okay with it, but nobody else who sees or hears about it will. The only ones who get to talk to a Societal Arts student like that are people on their level or higher.

I couldn’t say anything about it—but what about Lady Sumire?

“Good luck, Misaki. There’s nothing I can do to help except keep coming back, which I was planning to do anyway. Well then, have a nice evening!”

She’d seen through my plan and gotten one step ahead.

“But—”

Like a wave receding from the beach, Lady Sumire and Mihaya left without a moment’s hesitation.

I groaned. I’d found my answer, but I couldn’t do anything with it. After laboriously dragging myself back inside, Himeko rushed over looking concerned.

“Misaki, are you okay? You look pale.”

“I’m fine,” I replied weakly.

Think, Misaki, think! I don’t have a minute to lose here. I have to make Lady Erisu understand the truth right away so they can make the food taste better.

I racked my brains to come up with someone who’d be able to tell Himeko and Lady Erisu the harsh truth without putting themselves in an awkward position.

If I can just get someone like that to help me, maybe it’ll turn out all right. Who, though? Who?!

“So, uhm, I’m wondering if we could have another strategy meeting tomorrow, or something along those lines.”

“Do you have another good idea?” Lady Erisu asked, a light of hope burning in her eyes.

“Not exactly, but I know who might. I want to bring them along.”

Himeko’s eyes began to glimmer as well. “You know someone else who can help?”

“I think so. Hopefully.”

“Very well. I’ll consider this my Exousias’ very last chance and leave it in your hands, Misaki.”

That was a lot of responsibility. Just in the nick of time, though, I’d thought of just the right people. They’d be able to tell the truth. It might just work out.

Imagining what they might demand in return is making my stomach ache again, though. I just have to hope for the best.



“Fine, we’ll help if we must.”

“We’ll sample the flavors.”

The people I had run to for help were the Kokonoe sisters. They were always brutally honest with everyone, which made them perfect. Even though they showed a basic level of respect toward their mistress, Lady Kagura, they never cared about being obedient and submissive. Whether they were interacting

with Domestic Arts or Societal Arts students, they always stayed true to themselves, no doubt because their backgrounds would have left them feeling at home in the Societal Arts program.

They were well known throughout the academy, and no one ever seemed to find fault with their behavior. Plus, when I'd gone around getting feedback on the restaurant, they'd come the closest to giving negative feedback on the flavors specifically. I knew that if they gave Lady Erisu their opinion, they wouldn't hold back. They'd give an honest assessment of how it tasted.

After grabbing me from both sides so tightly that it felt like a straitjacket, they whispered into my ears.

"You know we'll want something in return, though, right?"

"You're making us go *really* far out of our way."

"I understand," I said, nodding in resignation. "Whatever you say, I'll do it."

Everything came at a price with them—I knew that. I couldn't even guess what they'd make me do, but for now, the restaurant had to come first.

"It's a deal," they said in perfect unison before letting me go.

Goosebumps rose up all over my body and a shiver ran down my spine.

Lady Erisu looked like she was hanging by a thread. "I'm sorry to ask this of you, but please, help us."

"Leave it to us."

"We'll give your food the honest judgment it deserves."

With that, the twins set about sampling the three Exousias' cooking.

"Don't you think this sauce tastes a little weird?"

"Yes, the garlic sauce is too strong."

"It goes *well* beyond the point of whetting the appetite."

"A savory lemon sauce would go much better with this."

"The scent is pungent. It's going to put a lot of people off."

"If it makes a lady smell strongly of garlic whenever she opens her mouth,

that alone will give the place a negative image.”

“There’s dried plum sauce as well, I see.”

“I won’t say it’s incompatible with French cuisine, but it’s eccentric enough to give me pause.”

“It’s really sour, too. It might work if they could reduce that just slightly.”

“Yeah. How about using grapefruit? It would make for a milder scent, and focusing more on the fruit feels more refreshing in general, don’t you think?”

“Shall we try the steak next?”

“It’s not prepared badly at all. It’s a rare steak cooked just right.”

“It does taste a little strange, though.”

“There’s some kind of hidden flavor they’re using.”

“Are they using their own blend of spices?”

“They should stop with that. It covers up the taste of the high-quality meat. What a waste.”

“The simpler the better. Just salt and pepper is enough.”

“It looks like they’ve used wine in the sauce as well, but did they reduce it enough for it to lose the alcohol content?”

“Now, I wonder what kind of flavor they’ve given the fish?”

“Did they manage to properly bring out the taste of the ingredients?”

“When it comes to the cheese platter, people have really strong likes and dislikes.”

“Did they go for a choice that suits the palates of young ladies? There are definitely options to avoid.”

“I’d give the desserts a passing grade.”

“However, there are ladies who prefer the sweetness to be restrained a tiny bit more.”

“The coffee is quite bitter.”

“They should probably select different beans.”

“The tea’s not bad either.”

“They have matcha as an option, it looks like. Aah, the leaves came from Lady Inaho.”

“It would be better if they presented it in a way that fit better with French cuisine. Although I suppose anyone who orders it must like it, so maybe it’s fine to just put it on the menu as is.”

One after another, they pointed out so many faults that I began to wonder what we’d been doing all this time. Lady Erisu listened with a deeply pained expression.

When they finished, she asked, “Was it really that awful?”

“It’s not that it’s *awful*.”

“More that the cooking seems to be made with very specific tastes in mind.”

Moving identically, the twins tilted their heads.

“Who was this food made for?”

“Who decided that the flavors were okay, and they should go ahead with it?”

Lady Erisu looked over at Yukina, Mizuki, and Hanaka, and said, “The one who oversaw the flavors was me. The one who judged it as suitable was also me. If you’re saying it was made with specific tastes in mind, it must mean...”

The three Exousias all turned to Lady Erisu with beseeching eyes.

“We wanted you to like it, milady.”

“You’re our mistress.”

“It’s you we want to please.”

Lady Erisu quietly pressed a hand to her forehead. “In other words, the problem was caused by my own tastes being so off-kilter.”

The twins smiled.

“Sure seems that way.”

“How nice that you figured it out!”

“Now there’s only one thing left.”

“You should redo it all until *Misaki* thinks it’s delicious.”

After saying that, they grabbed both my shoulders and pushed me forward.

“What?!” I spluttered. “Why me?”

“A restaurant that can’t satisfy a representative of the common folk like you has no right to be coming up with its own unique recipes. So far you haven’t said a single word about what tasted good to you and what didn’t, right?”

“First satisfy *Misaki*, then polish and refine it from there.”

I let out a groan. “Why bother doing that? Won’t it appeal to the masses if *Himeko* says it’s delicious?” Going the long way around to get there felt like a waste of time.

“Nope. The problem is that *Himeko* is the kind of person who doesn’t really complain about things.”

“Exactly. You could serve her the most weird and wonderful food and she’d accept it without a word.”

Now that I think about it, that does sound like her. She kept coming here again and again, despite it being a restaurant that Lady Sumire said wouldn’t have mainstream appeal. I began to feel like there were some things even *Himeko* didn’t have a lot of experience with, and giving criticism was one of them.

It was clear now how the restaurant had ended up in this situation. Lady Erisu had been satisfied with her *Exousias*’ cooking, so to continue appealing to her, they’d gone for seasonings that satisfied her. As long as it wasn’t *too* gross, *Himeko* accepted it as within the realm of reason, and was happy to eat it. I, meanwhile, just assumed it was what high-class cooking tasted like. None of us was approaching it with a sense of what the ordinary person was looking for, so the food hadn’t been made to appeal to the general public.

The Kokonoe sisters bore down on me.

“*Misaki*, be brutally honest about what’s tasty and what isn’t.”

“Ignore who made it and how classy it’s supposed to be. Judge entirely based on what your tongue is telling you.”

“What?! But—” This felt like far too big a responsibility.

Simultaneously, they cut me off with, “After making us deal with this folly, the *least* you can do is see it through to the end.”

I whimpered. *Folly? Those three girls’ whole future is riding on this!*

Looking quite uncomfortable, Lady Erisu said, “Sorry to keep bothering you, Misaki, but would you mind helping me out a little while longer? Apparently, I’m not a good judge of what other people think is tasty.”

“Oh, uhm...”

“And you three.” She turned to her Exousias. “I understand you’ve been working really hard for my sake because you want to be my Seraphs, but from now on, I need you to cook in a way that will satisfy the customers.”

“Yes, milady,” they muttered.

After all this hard work, it didn’t feel right for me to give up now. “All right. I’ll stick with this until the end, so just don’t be too offended by what I say, all right?”

“I wouldn’t worry,” Lady Erisu replied. “You can’t do any more damage than the Kokonoe sisters already have.”

I didn’t know *what* to say to that. In any case, it was time to set about improving the menu once again.



“Once we learned the cause of it all, solving it was relatively simple,” Himeko murmured almost to herself.

“I sure hope so,” I said quietly.

After a great deal of time and effort spent adjusting the food so that the flavors appealed to the average person, I thought we’d succeeded. Given the limits of my own palate, however, I couldn’t do much more than judge the general direction. Beyond that, it had all been up to the hard work of Yukina, Mizuki, and Hanaka, who had done all kinds of research and found out exactly what would have mass appeal.

It felt like we'd finally reached the starting line of the restaurant's revival. From here, the trio would have to keep developing their skills and finding unique taste sensations that would set Erisu's École Kitchen apart while not being *too* off the wall.

Himeko and I opened the door to the restaurant and stepped inside. It was far busier than we were used to; they apparently had at least twenty people dining there every day now.

A girl in an apron came to greet us and show us to our seats. "Oh, good day! If it isn't Himeko and Misaki!"

"Good day, Erisu."

"Good day, Lady Erisu."

This doll-like beauty wasn't wearing her usual cold expression, but a gentle smile instead.

I found myself grinning. "How come you're dressed like that?"

"What do you mean? It's to greet the guests, of course. It's great that so many people are coming here, but it does leave us a little short-staffed."

She glanced around the restaurant, satisfied. I couldn't believe the indulgence of having Lady Erisu, the restaurant's owner and a member of the Paradise Palace, be the one to lead us to our seats.

"I'm incredibly grateful to you, Misaki."

"Well, uhm, it's nothing." In the end, I didn't feel like I'd been all that useful after all, so I didn't think it was worth thanking me.

"Trust me, it's *not* nothing. Thanks to you, those three will be Seraphs very soon indeed."

With kind eyes, she looked toward Mizuki and Hanaka, who were nearby, and Yukina, who was in the kitchen.

She must have really wanted to make them her Seraphs all along, right? If not, she wouldn't have gone out of her way to build a restaurant on school grounds to train them.

“I’m glad to hear that. It’s a huge weight off my shoulders.”

“I can imagine! Thanks again. You know, I should do something to show my appreciation.”

“You really don’t need to.”

“Yes, I do. You’ve gone to a lot of trouble for me.” She mulled it over, then pulled me close to her. “Could you bend down for a moment?”

“Huh? Sure.”

Just as she asked, I bent my knees, putting my eyeline on the same level as hers. Her face drew nearer, and I suddenly felt a warm sensation on my cheek.

My eyes widened. It took me a moment to realize that Lady Erisu had kissed me.

Himeko spoke in a deep rumble that I’d never heard from her before. “Uh, Erisu? What exactly are you doing?”

“What do you mean? I gave Misaki a kiss to thank her, of course. Hehe! Was once not enough? Should I do it again?”

Before I could say a word, Himeko refused on my behalf. “Once is plenty!” She pulled me away, hugging me tightly from behind and glaring daggers at Lady Erisu.

“Oh my, what a shame.”

“What are you trying to pull here? Misaki’s *my* Seraph!”

“What’s wrong with a little kiss? She doesn’t seem to mind.”

“Misaki, how dare you!”

“Oh, um, I’m sorry. Am I blushing?” Since realizing she’d kissed me, my face had felt so hot that I thought it might melt.

My mistress pouted. “What’s with that expression, like you’ve been hypnotized?!”

“Lady Erisu, why did you do that?” I asked, still a little dazed.

“I told you, it’s to show my appreciation. Okay, maybe I wanted to be a little

mean, too.”

“Mean? What for?”

“Think about it. I had to suffer the embarrassment of being told my own tastes were really weird, and then Himeko was supposed to help with judging the food, but she was completely useless.”

Both Himeko and I were left in a stunned silence.

“Hehe. Anyway, the special table is ready and waiting for you two again tonight, so please, enjoy your meal.”

After that, she asked Hanaka to take over showing us to our seats, then went over to another guest. *Was she waiting at the door for us to arrive just so she could do that?*

“Hmph,” Himeko grunted.

She still had a peevish expression. *If I tell her how cute it looks, I bet sure it’ll only annoy her even more.*

For our entire meal that evening, her mood didn’t improve. She kept scowling at me the whole time, though I had no clue why.

Epilogue

Even after we finished and got back to Himeko's room, she was *still* bothered by it. In the bath, she kept grumbling about it at length.

"I really think it was bad-mannered of her! You just don't do things like that to someone else's Seraph. You should have pushed her away!"

"Are you saying it's my fault?" I replied, flustered. In the moment, I hadn't really felt able to object, but I didn't want to say that out loud.

"Come on, I'll wash your hair and face, so close your eyes."

"All right."

Her hands gave my head a good scrubbing. She worked a lot more forcefully than usual, reflecting her state of mind. "I feel completely hoodwinked. I'd never have taken Erisu for someone who'd do a thing like that!"

"Yes, I know what you mean. I was a little surprised, too."

"Surprised? Are you sure you don't mean 'overjoyed'?!"

"Yes! Totally sure! I promise!"

"You don't *sound* very sure." She put even more force into her hands. "Well, it's no surprise that you'd get a lot of attention. You're so charming, and such a fine maid."

"You think so?"

"From now on, you have to exercise proper self-defense. Yes, I'd better inform the Ayakas as well. So far I haven't had any problem with their affectionate treatment of you, but it would be no good if it went too far."

It was like there'd been a sudden revolution in Himeko's mindset. Putting Lady Erisu's joke aside, I was glad to hear she'd pay more attention to the Kokonoe sisters' sexual harassment from here on out.

"Ugh, doing *that* to *my* Seraph." Himeko's hands stopped moving. When I

opened my eyes, she chided me straight away. “Don’t open your eyes yet. You’ll get hot water in them.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

I hurriedly closed them again. In the brief moment they’d been open, however, I’d caught a glimpse of Himeko’s face in the mirror. It looked like something was *really* troubling her.

With my eyes closed, I waited for Himeko to scoop more water over my face, but nothing happened.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Why has this got me feeling so gloomy? I don’t like it.”

Then I felt a soft sensation on my cheek. It continued for a few moments, then disappeared. Right after that, a deluge of hot water splashed down onto my head. Before applying any shampoo, she poured water onto me again and again and again.

“Uhm, Himeko, I think that’s enough now.”

“Right, yes. Probably.”

Her voice held a hint of embarrassment. I couldn’t see her face, so I didn’t know exactly how she looked at that moment, but I could guess.

I’m too nervous to lift my head right now either. That sensation just now, it had to have been... It was definitely... Those were Himeko’s lips, weren’t they?

My face burned like fire. I felt entirely unlike when Lady Erisu had kissed me. The beating of my heart grew quicker and I felt like the flaming sensation in my cheeks spread throughout my whole body.

It’s no use. I can feel a smile breaking out.

After that, we were very consciously aware of each other, but we didn’t do anything to draw attention to it. We just pretended not to notice anything, rinsed ourselves off, and got out of the bath.

A few days later, when life had returned to normal, some silver tableware was delivered from Lady Erisu addressed to me and Himeko as a genuine thank-you.

Along with those, some cookies arrived for the Kokonoe sisters, but when they bit into them, they screwed up their faces in disgust.

“I knew it! She’s out for revenge!” they said in unison.

It looked like Lady Erisu had decided to pay them back with cookies that *fully* reflected in her own personal taste in food.

Side Story: Sumire and Mihaya

“Mm-hm-hmm... Mm-hm-hmm...”

Mihaya’s soft humming resounded in our little paradise high in the sky. Even without any accompaniment, she sang the melody in perfect pitch. Just hearing it was enough to calm me down.

I closed my eyes and let her angelic voice wash over me. It was only humming, not even singing, but it was more than enough.

After placing my now-empty cup on the table, I rested my head on Mihaya’s shoulder. It was the kind of pleasant moment we always shared while enjoying our tea. When the two of us were alone, Mihaya was happy to keep sitting with me this way. We were in our own private world. Even the other Sky Salon members wouldn’t invade this idyllic space of ours without a fair warning.

That’s why I can release my inhibitions and indulge as much as I want!

Just then, though, Mihaya nudged me with her shoulder and hissed, “Sumire. Sumire!” Her voice sounded exceptionally impatient, and she started scooting her chair inch by inch as if to get away from me.

Puzzled, I opened my eyes and sat up.

“Someone’s watching us,” she explained, her lips barely moving and her eyes downcast.

With a glance, she gestured toward the entrance to our private area. I looked in the same direction and saw a figure nervously hovering there. The intruder let out a quiet gasp when our eyes met. From her hairstyle, I knew immediately who it was.

“You don’t need to hide, Misaki. You can come over.”

After I welcomed her, she finally showed her face properly with an apologetic expression. “I’m so sorry. I could hear Mihaya’s voice, and I just ended up being drawn to it.”

“I can’t blame you, I suppose.” If there was anyone who *didn’t* find Mihaya’s singing voice utterly charming, I’d certainly never met them.

“Are you by yourself? Is Himeko not here yet?”

“Lady Himeko had to go to a meeting today, so she’ll be a little late.”

“Oh, I see. She has a lot on her plate, doesn’t she?”

I couldn’t believe a young lady the same age as me had to work as the deputy chairman of the board. It came down to who her family was, so she couldn’t do much about it, but still.

That being said, she does seem to be enjoying herself more than last year. I see her smiling a lot more often. Making Misaki her Seraph has taken a load off her mind.

“In that case, why don’t you stay with us for a little while? I haven’t had much chance to talk to you yet, so it would be a nice opportunity.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” Misaki asked.

“Not at all!”

Given the way she and Himeko were joined at the hip—which was only to be expected, since Misaki was Himeko’s Seraph—there weren’t all that many chances to get to know each other despite how much time we all spent in the Sky Salon.

It was my fault, too, of course. Even if I didn’t mean to, I spent so much time with Mihaya alone. Actually, I hadn’t found time to talk to Kagura’s new Seraph yet either.

“Is Kirara around by any chance?” I asked.

“She is, but the Kokonoe sisters are holding her prisoner.”

“Oh dear, that sounds like a pain. Well, never mind.”

As older and more experienced Seraphs, the twins were no doubt teaching Kirara all kinds of things. They probably kept her very busy.

“Feel free to come and sit with us. Mihaya, could you get another chair for Misaki?”

“Certainly.”

“Don’t worry, I can get it myself!” she said politely.

“No need for that. Mihaya can take care of it.”

Misaki seemed not to understand this yet, but ladies with their own Seraphs basically never asked anyone else to take care of things for them. Otherwise, how could you proudly show off your own Seraph’s hard work?

Everyone always thinks their own Seraph is the absolute best. Himeko’s the same way, I know. That’s why she keeps Misaki right by her side the whole time. Teehee! I wonder when Misaki will pick up on that?

“Here you go,” Mihaya said a few moments later, presenting a chair. It was rare to see three around our table. It was a new feeling.

“Thank you very much,” Misaki said, taking a seat. With a polite bow of her head, she continued, “I appreciate you having me as well. I’m sorry for barging in.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re a Sky Salon member, just like us. You’re welcome here anytime—although I suppose it won’t be possible except when Himeko’s not around.”

“I guess congratulations are in order for having a mistress who shows you so much affection,” Mihaya murmured, sounding deeply impressed.

“Yes, at first I was surprised to hear that she’d made a brand-new student into her Seraph, but your meeting was quite fortuitous, wasn’t it?”

“I suppose so. That’s definitely how I feel by this point.” She nodded with a sentimental expression, as if she was reflecting back on that special day.

“You didn’t have much interest in being a maid before this, isn’t that right?” I asked.

“Huh? Well, uhm, to be completely honest, it’s more like I had no interest whatsoever.”

That was pretty rare at this school. It was almost unheard of for someone to join the Domestic Arts program unless they planned on working as a maid in the long term. However, Misaki definitely wasn’t the only one.

"You *are* an exception to the rule, but actually, so is Mihaya. She has no real interest in being a maid either."

"Really?" Misaki replied.

"Isn't that right, Mihaya?"

"Don't put me on the spot like that!" Mihaya insisted.

"It's true, though. Think about it: I'm Mihaya's mistress, but what does she call me?"

Misaki thought for a moment before replying, "Come to think of it, she just calls you 'Sumire,' right?"

"She does indeed. How often do you think that happens around here?"

"Almost never, I guess. There aren't any Domestic Arts students who would talk to a Societal Arts student so informally. Even the Kokonoe sisters don't do it."

"Hehe, well observed. Even they maintain the bare minimum level of respect for their mistress. Mihaya and I don't bother with that, though."

"Why is that?" Misaki asked.

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes." She nodded her head with a look of honest curiosity.

"Sumire, you don't need to tell her about this!"

"Come on, I'm allowed to talk about my own Seraph, aren't I? Seeing a fresh-faced pair like Himeko and Misaki makes me all the more eager."

"Fine. I'll go and make tea for Misaki, so you tell her while I'm gone, all right? Honestly, Sumire!"

She always got self-conscious like this when she became the subject of discussion. It was cute to see, at least!

"Let's go for it, then. Misaki, come closer and I'll tell you all about how Mihaya and I realized we were made for each other."

"Okay." Misaki moved her chair a bit nearer to me.

“The first time we ever met was at my tenth birthday party.”



Yes, it was six years ago now, but I still had a vivid memory of how Mihaya had looked as a child.

Although the event was officially presented as “Sumire Miyamori’s Birthday Party,” it was nothing remotely like the name would suggest. All the guests were adults wearing suits, with not even a single child my age attending. You could have called it anything else and no one would have batted an eyelid. Everyone who arrived did come up to me to offer their congratulations and best wishes, but as soon as they were done, they immediately started talking to my father or the other guests and paid me no further attention.

For them, the birthday party was just a pretext, and their real purpose was quite different. They were all there to meet in the hopes of learning any tidbits of information that might help them advance in their careers. It was essentially a political fundraiser, with the key difference being that they didn’t have to pay any membership dues.

My father, who was just starting out as a member of parliament, had to expand his network, so he was using my birthday party to bring together friendly politicians, supporters, big shots from major companies, and so on. I was there purely as window dressing.

Of course, I wasn’t such a child that I would be annoyed by something like that. I knew my father loved me, and he didn’t hesitate to show it, so I was willing to help him out even if it wasn’t what I really wanted. When the people in suits came to say happy birthday, as the situation demanded, I presented them with the biggest smile I could, determined to show my father in the best possible light.

“Why, thank you so much,” I’d say to them—the same exchange more times than I could count. Overly formal birthday wishes got an overly formal reply.

After repeating this enough, I passed the point of being bored by it and actually grew quite impressed with my father. *He’s managed to attract a lot of people. Maybe he really has a future in politics.*

The only problem was, I was getting *really* worn out. Just sitting politely was all well and good, but I hadn't even eaten any of my cake yet. Secretly, I was struck with the desire to cut and run, but I was the ceremonial star of the show, so that wouldn't have been right.

That was when she appeared: someone who didn't fit in with the others at all. More accurately, she was the kind of person who *should* have been there, and it was the others who didn't fit.

"Are you Sumire? Erm, *Miss* Sumire, rather?" asked the girl. "My dad told me he couldn't be bothered to wish you a happy birthday himself, so he asked me to do it."

She was around the same age as me, standing there in a red party dress that she didn't look very comfortable in. Her sour expression didn't match the birthday wishes she'd come over to give me.

"I'm Mihaya," she said.

Her voice is beautiful. What does it remind me of?

"The sound of a bell," I murmured once it occurred to me.

Her eyes widened in surprise. "How did you know that?"

"Huh?" Wondering if I'd said something wrong, I blushed in embarrassment.

"That's exactly what my surname means. Suzunone—the sound of a bell."

"What a wonderful name!" It fit her to a tee.

"Who cares about my name? What I want to know is why there are no other kids here. The only reason my dad brought me was because it was meant to be a birthday party for a girl my age."

"Well, you know, there are reasons. The party's actually just an excuse for all these grown-ups to get together."

"I don't get it. It's supposed to be *your* birthday party. You don't care that no one's celebrating it?"

"It's still a celebration. The venue and the food are all for my sake."

"It's nothing like any birthday parties I've ever been to."

“I suppose not. Some of them *are* like this, though.”

“Well, I think it’s weird.”

I giggled. After her honest, suitably childlike statement, I couldn’t help it. I was entirely used to it, but she was right; it *was* weird. She’d brought that feeling out of me.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. It’s just refreshing to hear someone say that. Did you already eat? Was the cake nice?”

“I haven’t eaten a thing. We only just got here.”

“Oh, really? Then why not come and have some with me? I haven’t had a bite to eat yet either.”

“Even though the cake is for *your* birthday?”

“Yep, that’s right. It’s for me, but I still haven’t had any.”

“So weird.”

“You’re right. It really is weird.”

I took Mihaya by the hand and stood up. I’d had enough of being a doll for now. “Let’s go. I’m too hungry to keep sitting around.”

“Is it okay for you to leave your seat?”

“It’ll be fine.”

The real focus of the event was my father, anyway. It wouldn’t matter in the slightest if I wasn’t there.

Mihaya and I went over and had some of the cake and sandwiches laid out for the party. Then, after letting my father’s assistant know and promising we wouldn’t leave the building, we left the party hall.

“That cake was *yummy*.” Mihaya still had crumbs around her mouth. Her eyes sparkled.

“Yes, it was the yummiest cake I’ve ever had in my life.”

I’m sure that’s because Mihaya ate it with me. It had been way, way more

delicious than any cake I'd eaten while surrounded by grown-ups.

I told her, "You know, I really want to be your friend. Actually, no, I want *you* to be *my* friend."

I used my index finger to wipe away some cream stuck to Mihaya's face, then brought it up to my mouth and licked it off. Seeing that drove Mihaya into a tizzy. She hurried to wipe her own face, but it was too late.

"I don't mind," she replied, "but I'm worried my dad'll take advantage of it."

"You're saying that if you and I become friends, your father will try to capitalize on our affiliation?"

"Erm, maybe. Depends on what those words mean."

"I'm saying your father could try to use me to pressure *my* father to act in a way suits *your* father's needs. Was that what you were getting at?"

"Oh, right. Yeah, something like that."

"In that case, I don't really mind. There are already plenty of people trying to do that kind of thing. I'm not a little kid who worries about that kind of thing."

"You *are* a little kid, though."

"Hehe, I suppose. Still, whatever ulterior motives he might have, I'm pretty sure you'll only be paying attention to me—Sumire Miyamori, the individual. Beyond that, whatever your father might do has nothing to do with me. To me, he's just another person playing the game. What I care about is my relationship with you. That's all."

"Then that sounds fine, I guess. Don't you have any other friends, though?"

"I have plenty of people I could describe as friends, but none I can really play with."

Sadly, all the girls my age were looking for what they could gain from my friendship. They were looking straight past me and only seeing my father standing behind me. I didn't have anyone I could say was a true friend. I had known a few children who seemed like they could have become proper friends with me, but too much time had passed, and now it was too late to start again from scratch.

If I was going to make a friend, it had to be someone I could be open with about everything from the very start and then keep spending time with. With Mihaya, I believed that was possible. It felt real.

“I think playing with you would be really good fun, Mihaya.”

“Oh, erm, I think so too, maybe.” She shuffled her feet, looking very bashful indeed. Even this reaction was thoroughly refreshing. I’d never had this type of person in my life before. “Yeah, I’d like being friends with a girl as pretty as you, Sumire. Wait, is it okay to just call you ‘Sumire’? If we’re friends, I don’t need to use ‘Miss’ or anything, right?”

“Right! That sounds perfect.” I nodded with a beaming smile.

After that, we talked for a long while. We covered our likes, our dislikes, and more. I told her things I’d never told anyone, including every gripe I had about my life.

“Wow, so rich girls have it pretty tough as well. I figured you’d be living a life of luxury doing whatever you wanted all the time.”

“No chance of that, I’m afraid. I have so many obligations that freedom is a distant prospect indeed.”

“No wonder you can say complicated things like that when you’re still only my age.”

“Hehehe. Still, I feel like I managed to get one kind of freedom today: the freedom to have a friend I can talk to about anything.” I gave her a wink.

“Hey, now that we’re friends, I’d better give you a birthday present.”

“Oh, you’re going to give me a gift?”

“Sure. I can give you a song.”

After saying that, she stood up and turned to face me. Then, ever so softly, she began to sing.

For the first time, my heart trembled. I felt her singing voice conjure up all sorts of images within me: gentle sunlight falling upon a clear lake’s surface, a world of pure white feathers dancing in the wind, flowers blooming beautifully as far as the eye could see. The sound of it was too pleasant for words. I’d never

been so moved by a song before.

This was not only because of her voice, but because of the song itself. To my surprise, Mihaya was improvising the whole thing on the spot, both the lyrics and the melody. I listened as intently as I could, careful not to let even a single word slip by unheard.

The song was a crystallization of everything Mihaya felt after having met me that day: the change in perspective after originally not wanting to meet me, the experience of getting to know each other, and the discovery that she really liked me. Because of all that, she wanted to wish me a happy birthday from the bottom of her heart.

By the time she finished singing, my vision was blurry with tears.

“That’s not fair. I never thought you’d sing so wonderfully, or that you’d fill me with such joy. It’s too much!” To ensure she didn’t see my disheveled face, I buried my head in her chest. “It’s the best birthday present I’ve ever gotten in my whole life.”

“I’ve never met anyone who made me feel this happy before either,” she replied in an embarrassed tone, holding me gently. “Happy birthday, Sumire.”

“Thank you, Mihaya.”



“That was how Mihaya and I became friends. By now, we’ve become very close friends indeed.”

With a kind smile, Misaki replied, “Wow, that sounds really lovely.”

“It was. If I had one complaint, though, it’s that even though we ended up going to the same school, we had to be in different programs.”

“There’s no way around that,” Mihaya interjected, reappearing. Her timing was impeccable. “You and I have always lived in different worlds, Sumire. I have no complaints about being your Seraph because at least that way I get to be with you. It’s not like I don’t know how you really feel about me.”

“Of course. We’ve whispered about it enough times while sleeping in the same bed.”

“What?! But... I... Don’t say things like that, you dolt!”

It looked like I’d hit a nerve somehow. Even though she’d only just gotten back, she sped away again at high speed.

“Uhm, so you and Mihaya sleep in the same bed too?” Misaki asked.

“Hmm, that ‘too’ is intriguing. I suppose you and Himeko must sleep together as well?”

“Lady Himeko says that when I’m staying over to serve her in her room, it’s a normal part of my duties. It sounds like that’s true... right?”

“Yes, absolutely. Letting you sleep in her bed is a sign of her strong trust in you. It’s very common between Seraphs and mistresses who get along really well.”

“I see! So it’s not just Lady Himeko finding a convenient excuse to get what she wants. Right?”

“No, don’t worry. I understand it might be a bit bewildering to you, since the academy has all kinds of unique rules and systems, but I can assure you that Himeko wouldn’t just make that up. She is the deputy chairman of the board, after all. She’s a responsible person.”

“Fair enough. Thanks, it’s reassuring to hear that from you, Lady Sumire.”

I chuckled. *Himeko’s really made quick work of getting to that point, though. She must really like Misaki. Well, I suppose when they met purely due to a cosmic coincidence, time doesn’t really matter.*

Suddenly, Misaki looked in the direction Mihaya had run off and asked in a hushed tone, “Does Mihaya plan on becoming a professional singer, or is she going to work as your maid after graduating?”

She must have seen herself in some of the details she’s learned about Mihaya today. It makes sense that she’d be wondering about Mihaya’s future.

“I’ve never heard Mihaya say that she wants to be a singer. She likes singing, but I don’t think she wants to turn it into a career. It seems more likely that she’ll be my personal maid and live with me. You never know, though—people change their minds. Maybe she’ll want to be a professional singer after all.”

“What would you do in that case?”

“Good question.” I’d never thought about it before. “I want to support her in everything she does, of course, but there is a part of me that wishes I could keep her voice all to myself, so I might be a little upset. In the end, though, I think I’d accept whatever decision Mihaya made. If she did become a singer, I bet she’d be *really* successful. Maybe I’d end up being the one helping her out. Wouldn’t that be fun!”

“I see. Fair enough.”

“The future’s not something you decide on once and then it’s set in stone forever. You’ll come to all kinds of forks in the road, so if you see a path that looks more interesting, it’s fine to switch to that one, don’t you think?”

“Huh.”

It sounded like Misaki didn’t really understand what I was getting at. *I’m surprised, Misaki! I thought you were starting to have doubts about your own plans for the future, but it sounds like you’re not even aware of that yourself yet.*

I decided it was better not to pester her too much. “Anyway, if you ever need any help or advice, come to me whenever you like. It would make me happy to know that you trust me.”

“Thank you so much. I’ll keep that in mind if I run into trouble!”

After that, we engaged in some aimless small talk for a while. Then, at one point, Misaki suddenly gasped. “It sounds like Lady Himeko’s here. Do you mind if I go?”

“Oh, really?”

How does she know? I didn’t see or hear any sign of her arrival.

It seemed odd, but then I focused a little and I really could hear Himeko’s voice faintly off in the distance.

Her Seraph would be the one to notice first, I suppose! It must mean she’s really happy to know Himeko’s there.

“Yes, I hear her too. Of course, you’re free to go. It was good fun chatting with you today. I’m glad we got to spend this time together.”

“Me too. I hope I get to talk to Mihaya next time as well.”

“Hehe, indeed. Next time I might have to tie her down so she can’t run away.”

“I’m going, then. Goodbye!”

“Goodbye.”

Once Misaki was gone, having cheerfully headed back to her mistress’ side, I murmured to no one in particular, “Maybe I don’t even need to tie her down. Maybe she was listening all along.”

A lone stealthy figure appeared from behind me. “Yes, I was listening. I wish I could have talked to her as well, but I couldn’t after you said *that*.”

“Hehehe, I just wanted to boast about how close we are. It sounds like Himeko and Misaki are at that level as well, so it made me feel a little competitive, even though that isn’t normally my nature.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to think about *my* feelings if you’re using me as an example, you know.”

“Are you angry?”

“I wouldn’t say angry, but if you want to make up for it, maybe *you* could wash *my* hair tonight?”

Mihaya came and hugged me from behind. Her auburn hair flowed down over me. I wrapped a lock around my finger and gently pressed my lips to it.

“All right, I don’t mind. For today, you’re the mistress, Mihaya.”

“I’m a cruel mistress, so I hope you’re ready to face my wrath.”

“I know. Only, if I do a good job, I want to be properly rewarded. You even can pay me in advance if you want.”

I let go of the hair I’d scooped up and turned my head to look at her.

“What a hopeless servant you are,” she said in an exasperated tone.

Then, Mihaya slowly brought her face closer to mine.





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Girls Kingdom: Volume 2

by Nayo

Translated by Philip Reuben Edited by teiko

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