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# Girls Kingdom

Author: Nayo

Illustrator: Shio Sakura



A manga-style illustration of two young women in a romantic pose. The woman on the left has brown hair in pigtails, wears a white headband with stars, and a white dress with a large bow. The woman on the right has long dark hair and wears a white dress. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background is a soft pink with falling petals. The cover is decorated with ornate gold corner designs.

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Author: Nayo

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# 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

- ◇ Aiming to be Kagura's Seraph
- ◇ Misaki's classmate and friend
- ◇ Has a rivalry with Sarah
- ◇ Wears star-shaped hair accessories



**Kirara Hoshino**

First-Year Domestic Arts



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

**Kagura Mikage**

Third-Year Societal Arts

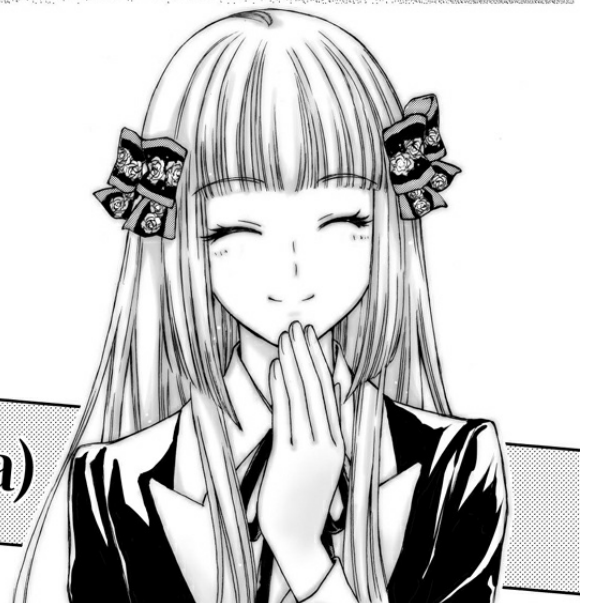
- ◆ Older twin; Kagura's Seraph
- ◆ Enjoys gathering information
- ◆ Wears a ribbon with a music note pattern
- ◆ Fond of tormenting younger students



**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 Nekoyashi**

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?

**Sarah**

First-Year Domestic Arts



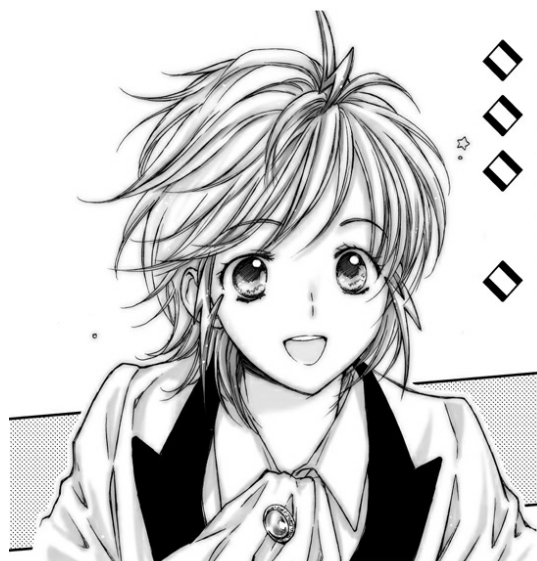
- ◆ Shining star of the volleyball club
- ◆ Skilled enough that she could compete internationally
- ◆ Kagura's favorite
- ◆ Popular across the academy with her beautiful ponytails

**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: Amanotsuka Academy for Girls

“Ugh, how annoying! I’m going to be so late!”

Cherry blossoms fluttered down around me as I ran along the footpath, my forehead sweating.

*How did this happen? I thought I left home early enough. I guess it was a mistake not to visit the school at least once beforehand, but I never expected it to be this far from the station.*

Today was the first day of the school year. Not only that, but I was starting at a brand-new school. I really didn’t want to be late on such an important day!

My two pigtails, tied with donut-shaped scrunchies, seemed to be hurrying me along as they slapped against my back. My crisp, new uniform was flapping wildly. I couldn’t have looked more disgraceful.

Thankfully, there was no one around to see me, let alone pay any attention to my undignified appearance. Sadly, the lack of anyone else nearby was enough to tell me that I was in a truly dire situation. Looking down, the carpet of blossoms on the footpath was undisturbed, making it especially clear how late I was. Like a pristine blanket of freshly fallen snow, the petals proved that it had been quite some time since anyone else had gone this way.

I was fairly sure it was at least 8:20 a.m., but I didn’t have a watch on, so I couldn’t be certain. The last time I’d looked at a clock was outside the station, and if I remembered correctly, it had been a little before eight o’clock then.

For a brief period, I’d walked along at a leisurely pace. I had been so sure I had time to spare. By now, however, neither the beautiful rows of cherry trees lining the street nor the warm and invigorating spring air held any meaning for me.

My destination, Amanotsuka Academy for Girls, was at the top of a small hill. From the station, it hadn’t looked too far away. Initially, I had taken my sweet time, humming a tune and imagining what kind of school life awaited me. After



ten minutes, though, I had begun to feel a cold sweat, and after another five or so, an alarm bell had started going off in my head.

It had said: *If you keep walking, you definitely won't make it on time!*

Amanotsuka Academy's imposing appearance—like a European castle—and its excessively vast grounds had interfered with my sense of distance, making it look closer than it really was.

I had started running to make up for lost time, but that was easier said than done. The path to the school was on a slight upward slope, so despite being fairly confident in my endurance, I found it pretty tough.

Still, I ignored this and ran flat out. Eventually, I reached level ground again. Now I had almost reached my goal—but sadly, a new problem presented itself.

Surrounding the academy was a six-foot-high fence.

It stretched to the left and right as far as the eye could see. I could not discern anything resembling a gate.

*Of course.*

Though a building towered in front of me, clearly part of the school, I was definitely looking at the *back* of it, not the front. This meant that the front gate would be on the opposite side, and to reach it, I'd have to follow this endless fence, running at full speed once again.

"Now I have to go all the way around?" I muttered to myself. I was fast approaching my limit already. My thighs were starting to cramp. Getting all the way to the other side would easily take ten minutes or more, and that was if I ran at full speed.

Fighting to keep myself from collapsing, I started looking around, hoping I might see a back entrance somewhere nearby. Thanks to that, I ended up falling anyway.

Unfortunately, I knew that no matter how much I lamented, the situation would not get any better. In fact, the longer I stayed there, the worse it would get.

Time would not stand still for me. I only had one choice.



I ran.

And I ran.

But somehow, the front entrance did not get any closer.

I couldn't stop myself from groaning, "Why does this have to be so long?! They could have at least put in more than one gate!"

Going in the opposite direction might have been quicker, but it was too late to turn back now.

*Anyway, I just have to keep running. There's nothing else I can do. It'll be fine! I just know it!* It was wishful thinking, but I was determined to hold onto it. It was all I had.

Eventually, my intense efforts bore some fruit, and I caught my first glimpse of the front of the school building. The clock tower entered my field of vision as well—with hands that were *almost* pointing to half past eight. More precisely, it was 8:27 a.m.

I had to be on the school grounds by 8:30, but it was crystal clear that I would never manage it in just three minutes. I still couldn't even see the front gate!

Unless I took drastic measures, I would definitely be late for the entrance ceremony. I was supposed to be taking the first step on the road toward my dream, but at this rate, I'd be losing my footing before even getting that far—and it was my own fault.

What if I became "the girl who was late to the entrance ceremony" and was blacklisted for it? That would be it for my dream of going to a good college—ideally based on a recommendation from the school—and then getting a job at a top-notch company.

Even if "blacklisted" might have been a bit of an exaggeration, I still didn't want to mess up the very first step toward my new life!

Which meant there was only one option left.

I stopped, took a deep breath, and gave myself a moment to recover.

Of course, I wasn't giving up. I turned to the side and looked at the fence head-on. I'm sure you've realized what I had in mind.



I took the bag I was holding, with the academy's logo on it, and swiftly threw it over the fence and onto the school grounds.

*If I try to run there normally, I won't make it in time. But if I climb over the fence...*

Yes, the other side of that fence definitely counted as "on school grounds." It was right next to a school building, in fact.

No one else appeared to be watching. With a silent prayer, I stretched and mentally prepared myself. *If I'm doing this, it's now or never!*

I ran up to the fence at full speed, then jumped and kicked off it about halfway up. I used the momentum to push myself further upward, then grabbed the very top of the fence with both hands. Finally, I put as much force into my hands as I could and threw my body over the fence.

That description might suggest I did it in a stylish, ninja-like fashion, but the reality was that I barely scrambled up and over, desperately clinging to the other side for dear life.

Still, no matter how clumsy it was, what counted was that I had successfully managed it in one try, especially given that I was pretty much out of stamina.

Anyway, now I would be able to sneak into the school.

As I hung from the top of the fence, jumping down didn't seem like a reasonable prospect, so I climbed down slowly and laboriously. Even so, when I reached the ground, I raised my hands in the air, posing like a gymnastics competitor.

*Yes, a perfect landing! Now I just have to get to the entrance ceremony and try to look like nothing's wrong.*

I wiped off the dust clinging to my uniform, picked up my bag, and turned around to go—but just then, my eyes met those of another girl.

For a moment, I was frozen in place.

"Goodness," said the girl. "A cute little thief has sneaked in."

My eyes widened as I choked back my urge to scream. *Oh no! There was no one around on the outside, so I completely let my guard down! Who would've*

*thought there would be someone right there on the other side?! If she was there all along, I wish she'd reacted when I threw my bag over the fence.*

“Are you a new student?” the girl asked. “You picked an interesting place to enter from.”

I had the impression that she was an older student. Her hair, which hung straight down to her waist, had a faint trace of purple in it. It gave her a mystical air and wavered in the gentle breeze, sparkling as it reflected the light. Above her left ear was a hair accessory that looked like a fluffy ball with two white feathers sticking out of it. She was perfectly dressed in a spotless white uniform and appeared very dignified indeed. I could tell without even asking that she was a young lady from a high-class background.





Her sapphire-blue eyes were staring at me, but not disapprovingly. Instead, they held a glint of curiosity, as if she had happened upon something highly interesting.

The ribbon on her chest had a red, jewel-like object embedded at the center of it, just as pretty as her eyes. It decorated her chest triumphantly.

Was this sense of refinement something all the older students would have, or was it unique to this girl because of her upbringing?

What intrigued me even more, though, was the color of her uniform.

The uniform I wore was black except for the cuffs and lapels, whereas hers was—in stark contrast—based entirely around the color white. The ribbon was also very different from my simple string tie. The frilly design was so elegant, it gave me an urge to ask what sort of noble family she was from.

I wondered if I was even at the right school. Without thinking, I asked for confirmation. “Um, this is definitely Amanotsuka Academy for Girls, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Little Miss Thief, you’re in the right place.” The girl in the white uniform gently put her right hand up to her lips and chuckled.

“Oh, no, I’m not a thief. I just climbed over the fence because I was going to be late otherwise.”

“Really now? Either way, you picked a very strange entry point. Did you deliberately walk all the way over here?”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, you must have taken the bus here, right? In which case, you’d have to have purposely walked all the way around here from the bus stop for some reason.”

*Yes, well, that does sound like a sensible conclusion. And yet...* “No, I didn’t have the money to ride the bus, so I ran here.”

“You *ran*?!” the girl blurted, clearly appalled.

Quite honestly, the current contents of my wallet were a little embarrassing. Due to various life circumstances, I was flat broke. If someone had told me to



jump up and down on the spot, it wouldn't have even made a clinking sound.

Timidly, I added, "I did think it would be a little closer, though."

I definitely should have come and checked it out in advance. Only, my financial situation hadn't even allowed for that, and I'd been far too busy. Incidentally, I had taken the entrance exam in my own district, so this was the first time I had ever actually come to the academy.

"It sounds like you've been through the wringer, and I understand that, but... if you're talking about the bus from the station, students can ride it for free."

"What? Really?"

Now that she mentioned it, I had seen quite a few girls waiting at the bus stop in the same uniform as me, and I didn't recall seeing anyone else lining up with them. *Darn it! Why didn't I look more carefully?*

"Also, whatever your reason, climbing over a fence is not exactly praiseworthy behavior."

*Yes, I can understand that. I accept it 100%.* "Well, I was just so caught up in how late I was, and how I wasn't going to make it, that—wait, now I *really* don't have any time left. Do you mind if I go?"

This wasn't the time to be chatting. Even as I stood there, time was ticking away.

"If you want to go, that's fine with me." The girl in the white uniform rolled up her sleeve a little way and looked down at her watch. "Although you're out of time."

*What? Is it 8:30 already?* I opened my mouth and said, "That's—"

But before I could add the words "not fair," I was interrupted by the loud ringing of a bell, signaling that my time was up.

*Ding, dong! Ding, dong!*

It was not an electronic sound, but that of a real bell. Looking at the clock tower, I could see the golden bell swaying violently within. It was an immensely powerful noise, but pleasant to listen to nonetheless.

At that moment, however, it was the very last thing I wanted to hear.

“How unfortunate. Getting expelled without even managing to attend the entrance ceremony. As far as I can recall, you’d be the very first case.”

“Excuse me? Did you just say ‘expelled’?”

“Yes, that’s what I said. After all, if a student is late for the entrance ceremony, obviously that would be taken as a lack of interest in joining the school, right?”

“But that’s—isn’t it going a little too far to expel someone just for being a few minutes late? At most, I’d expect to get a stern lecture, and for the teachers to keep an eye on me for a while.”

“That might be how things work at a normal school, but this is not a normal school. Besides, aren’t you in the Domestic Arts program? How could you not know that?”

“It’s news to me! Domestic Arts or not, why am I supposed to know about it?”

*Outrageous! This is simply outrageous!* Admittedly, it was my own fault for being late, but how did that justify being expelled?

“You really *don’t* know, do you? Tell me, why did you even come here?”

“Why? Well, to study.” *I’m a student. What else would I be here for?*

“To study? Just... study normally?”

“Of course!” I insisted. “I want to study as hard as I can and get into a good college.”

In response, the girl in the white uniform cocked her head to the side and stared at me as if she were looking at a rare creature. “Hmm. You really don’t know what kind of place this is, do you? How unusual. I never imagined I might find someone like you here.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“This school is—”

Just then, she closed her mouth and took a brief glance behind her. When I looked in the same direction, I could see someone in the distance, running



toward us in a flustered state.

It looked like a teacher. *She couldn't have come to look for me, could she?*

"How about this," said the girl. "I'll help you, if you're interested."

"Huh?"

"That teacher running over to us is in charge of discipline. There's a sensor at the top of the fence for security purposes. She must be running over because she got an alert about someone tripping the sensor. If she catches you, it won't even matter that you're late—you'll be expelled regardless. They would *never* let someone into the school who was caught doing anything as improper as climbing over a fence."

"What?!"

*Ugh. I should have known.* In this day and age, security devices like that were common enough. For a grand-looking place like this, it would be all the more important.

"So let's do a deal. If you answer in a way that satisfies me, I'll get you out of this mess."

"Huh?" I could still hardly follow what she meant.

"There's no time, so I'll get straight to my questions. First of all... yes, that's it. The reason you came to this school. It was just to study normally, right?"

"Yes, that's right," I replied hesitantly. Despite my confusion, I had no choice but to put my trust in this girl.

"Not to become a maid?" she asked.

"Excuse me?" *A maid? I'm a student; why would I want to be a maid?* It was such an unexpected question that I struggled to answer.

As if to call attention to the big question mark above my head, she pressed, "You passed the exam for the Domestic Arts program and came to this school, but you don't want to be a maid?"

"Look, I really don't know what you're getting at, but I have no intention of becoming a maid."

“I see.” She nodded as though she was happy with my answer. “And it’s clear that you don’t know who I am. Right?”

“Huh? I mean, I only just met you.” I looked at her, wondering if she was famous. “Are you some kind of celebrity?”

For someone as beautiful as her, it seemed well within the realm of possibility. Unfortunately I was not very well informed about that kind of thing. Even if she told me her name, I probably wouldn’t have known who she was.

“No, no, no.” She chuckled again. “Very well, though. I’ll help you.”

Regardless of everything else, that seemed like a plus. I still had no idea what she meant about maids, or why I would know who she was, but things were turning out all right.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

After a moment’s hesitation, I replied, “Misaki Hotaru.”

“I see! What a nice name.” She put her hands on her chest and grinned broadly. “Well then, Misaki... you’re going to be my Seraph.”

“Your what?”

*What in the world is a Seraph?* No matter how lovely her smile was, I had absolutely no clue what she meant. *Can someone please come and explain all this?*

“No time for that. You can ask your classmates about the details. I expect everyone but you should be pretty familiar with the concept.”

“Oh.” *I’m starting to think I might have ended up somewhere really weird...*

“For now, just put this on.” She held out a golden badge bearing the school’s emblem: a crown surrounded by feathers. “This connects you to me, Misaki. It’s proof that you are a Seraph.”

*This thing proves I’m a Seraph?*

The regular school badge was bronze-colored and looked very plain. In comparison, this golden badge came across as something far more special.

“Um, by the way,” I asked as I switched out my school badge for this new one,



“could I ask your name, maybe?”

It felt rude to keep thinking of her as “the girl in the white uniform” when I was asking for her help.

She began, “My name is—”

But at that moment, the teacher finally reached us. Panting, she interjected, “Miss Amanotsuka!”

I was suddenly on edge. If I didn’t get past this, I wouldn’t even be allowed to stand at the starting line.

*Also, did the teacher say “Amanotsuka”? Isn’t that the same name as the school?*

As if to answer my unspoken question, the girl whispered in my ear, “My name is Himeko Amanotsuka. Call me by my given name. Apart from that, just follow my lead. Got it?”

*Himeko Amanotsuka... Is it really okay to call her by her given name?*

“Yes. Got it, Himeko.”

“Excellent,” she replied. Then she turned around and put on a beaming smile. “Good morning, Ms. Minegishi,” she said, greeting the teacher with a calm and composed voice. The way she bowed her head slightly and lifted up her skirt just a touch was very graceful.

“Yes, good morning,” said the teacher. She looked at Himeko, giving me only a cursory glance. “Miss Amanotsuka, it seems that someone climbed over the fence near here. I don’t suppose you know anything about it?” After that, her eyes slid toward me again.

Breaking out in a cold sweat, I put every effort into not looking suspicious.

Himeko put a hand on my back and tugged me in gently. “Yes, my apologies. That was all because of Misaki here. Misaki Hotaru—she’s starting today.”

I lowered my head a little, leaving myself in Himeko’s hands as she drew my body close to hers.

“Miss Hotaru, you say?” asked the teacher, staring at me without reservation

now that we had been introduced. “You’re a new student, aren’t you? The new students are supposed to all be in the auditorium by now. Wait... That badge! Does it mean what I think it means?”

When the teacher noticed the badge fixed to my uniform, her eyes widened. *So it really is something special, I guess.*

“Yes, this girl is my Seraph,” Himeko replied. “We arranged to meet on the day of the entrance ceremony and enter into the contract, but then we noticed that a little kitten had climbed up onto the fence and couldn’t get down, so Misaki went up to save it. In the process, she tripped the sensor.”

“Oh, I see.” To me it sounded like a highly implausible story, but it sounded like she had taken it at face value.

“I’m so sorry to have caused all this trouble at such a busy time,” said Himeko, bowing her head deeply. I lowered mine to match.

“That’s fine, as long as nothing is amiss.”

“Thank you so much.”

“Incidentally, this must be the reason you didn’t have a Seraph with you. You were simply waiting for Miss Hotaru. Am I right, Miss Amanotsuka?”

“Yes, exactly. I probably should have told everyone, but it didn’t seem right to talk about it when we hadn’t even made the contract yet.”

“That’s a good point. The other girls seemed to be fretting about it quite a lot, but I think it was a very prudent decision on your part.”

“Thank you for saying so.” Himeko bowed her head again. This time, she gently grasped my hand as well, as if to say, *See? Everything’s fine!* One way or another, I could rest easy for now.

“Now, you two should get to the auditorium right away. The entrance ceremony is about to start.”

“Yes, we’ll be right there. Oh, that reminds me! It turns out that Misaki forgot to register. I guess she was just in such a hurry to meet me.”

*Oh, now that she mentions it, that is a whole other problem. It sounds way too suspicious, but maybe the power of this Seraph business, whatever it means, is*

*enough to overcome this as well.*

“No helping that now, I suppose,” Ms. Minegishi replied. “I’ll tell the teacher in charge of registration, so you just get a move on.”

And that was that. We had gotten off scot-free.

*What on earth is a Seraph? Why is it so important? And who exactly is Himeko?*

“Much appreciated. Anyway, Misaki, let’s go.” She took my hand and started walking.

“Um, thank you,” I said once we were safely away. “You saved me.”

“That’s fine. You are my Seraph, after all.” She seemed to be in an oddly cheerful mood as she dragged me along.

“What is a Seraph, anyway?” It was still bothering me.

“That’s a secret for now. But I can’t *wait* to see your reaction later on when you find out!”

“You’re so mean.”

“Goodness, what a thing to say after I just came to your rescue!”

I sighed. In the end, I couldn’t exactly deny that. Still, I was starting to worry about what I might have gotten myself into.



We ultimately reached the auditorium without her telling me a single thing.

“Here we are,” she said.

We had entered the castle-esque structure that I’d thought was the school building, but apparently, it wasn’t actually used for normal classes. Instead, it included this auditorium, a variety of special classrooms, and some other rooms. This meant that I’d been very close to the venue for the entrance ceremony, but the normal classrooms were somewhere else.

However, the building with the normal classrooms *also* looked like a castle, as if that was totally normal. *An academy with two towering castles?*



I sighed without meaning to.

Himeko opened the door to the auditorium and peered inside. “Looks like everyone’s there, but the ceremony hasn’t started yet. Oh, that reminds me. Tomorrow after school, I want you to come to the elevator hall on the top floor of this building.”

“There’s an elevator?”

“Yes. If you take it all the way up, there’s a nice little place for drinking tea. We often meet there, so I’ll introduce you to everyone.”

“Um, sure. All right.”

“You don’t seem happy.”

“It’s just one mystery after another, that’s all. But you seem pleased enough, so that’s a relief.”

I’d included a bit of a snide remark, but that didn’t seem to have any impact on her. She just giggled in amusement. “Yes, I’m having a lot of fun. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt this kind of excitement.”

“That doesn’t make it any clearer.”

“It’s fine if you don’t understand it yet. The more you get used to this school, the more it’ll all start to make sense. Until then, why not enjoy the sense of adventure?”

“I’ll try, I suppose.”

She giggled again. “What a great day this is. I’m so glad I got to meet a girl like you, Misaki.”

I was feeling utterly exasperated.

Himeko opened the door with so much enthusiasm I thought she might burst into song, then entered without the slightest hesitation. It was as if our lateness didn’t bother her at all.

I followed her in—and the moment I stepped inside, I forgot about all my indignation. Instead, I let out a gasp.

I’d expected the auditorium to be something like a large gymnasium, but if I

had to compare it to anything, it was more like a church or a concert hall. The rows of chairs were not the cheap folding kind, but rather expensive-looking ones with plush cushions.

At the front was an enormous pipe organ. I was overwhelmed by its sheer magnificence. In front of it were two girls in the same white uniform as Himeko. One was playing the organ while the other played the violin, together giving an exquisite performance of a song I had heard somewhere before. Was it *The Four Seasons* by Vivaldi? Yes, I was fairly sure it was the “Spring” section. It was a lively song, and I felt my spirits lifting. It made me think, *Now’s the time to really give it my all!*

“Stop looking so flabbergasted and come over here,” whispered Himeko, leading the way. “First, we need to find out what class you’re in.”

“Oh. Right.”

I followed her and looked around in the middle of the room. This was the entrance ceremony, so of course all the students here were new, like me. However, when I looked at the girls sitting in the rows of chairs ahead of us, something struck me. They were neatly divided into two groups. On one side sat students in black uniforms like mine, while on the other sat students in white uniforms like Himeko’s. The black-clad group appeared to be the larger one.

“Why are there two different uniforms?” I asked.

She stopped and turned back for a moment. “Oh, right. I guess you don’t know about that, either. In short, the Societal Arts students wear white, and the Domestic Arts students wear black.”

“Wow, I didn’t even know there was a program other than Domestic Arts. I didn’t see anything about Societal Arts when I took the exam.”

“Most of the Societal Arts students already came here for middle school. It’s pretty rare for any newcomers to be on that course.”

“So that means you’re a Societal Arts student as well? You must’ve come to the academy for middle school.”

“Yes, precisely.” With that, she turned back around and started walking again.

Clearly, she had no desire to explain *anything* in detail. “Now, who will I need to ask? Wait here a moment.”

“Sure.”

We stopped right behind the group of students in black uniforms, and Himeko went over to a group of teachers to check what class I was in.

It felt awkward to be left on my own. All the other students were already seated, patiently waiting for the ceremony to start. Meanwhile, I could do nothing but stand there. My feet began to squirm restlessly.

Just then, I happened to meet the eyes of another student. She must have noticed that I still wasn’t seated and wondered what was going on. Her gaze said, *What are you doing?*

At this point I couldn’t just ignore her, so I gave a slight bow—but suddenly, her expression changed from dubious to astonished. Even though she’d already been looking at me, her eyes turned into saucers, as if I’d done something to shock her. She stared at me fixedly.

*What? Is there something on my face?*

I couldn’t think what would make her look at me like that. I knew my uniform didn’t look sloppy. I’d taken care to wipe all the dust off after climbing over the fence. Nothing had gotten torn, either, as far as I could tell.

*Nope. Everything’s normal.*

But as soon as I thought that, I realized what *wasn’t* normal.

As if to confirm my suspicions, when I looked carefully, I could see that her gaze was focused on one particular spot. She was staring at it so hard, it felt like she might bore a hole in my body.

There was no denying it—she was looking at the golden badge.

*So it really is more than just a normal school badge. Ugh, this might end up being kind of annoying. I wish I could hide it.*

I tried readjusting my angle a bit to make it less visible to the other student, but it was too late.



“A Seraph?” the girl murmured—and those two words were enough to set other voices rustling, like a ripple spreading across the surface of once-still water. One after another, the students all turned and looked at each other, saying things like “What?” and “A Seraph?”

*Eek! This is not good at all.*

The crowd grew louder and louder, until this hall, which had previously been silent except for the gentle melodies of the violin and pipe organ, was a state of disorder. Students looked at me, whispering all sorts of things, their gazes filled with a mixture of curiosity and jealousy.

And yet, weirdly enough, the only ones who reacted that way were the students in black uniforms—the Domestic Arts students. A few of the ones in white uniforms, who were in the Societal Arts program, gave me inquisitive glances, but none of them started chattering.

Did that mean it was only something special to the Domestic Arts students?

Just as my face started twitching, Himeko returned, wearing a totally nonchalant expression. “Goodness, what a commotion. I wonder what happened?”

*It’s your fault. All of this is your fault, Himeko.*

But when I opened my mouth, ready to grumble at her, the crowd erupted in a way that made their whispering up to that point feel like nothing. The students broke into high-pitched screams.

“Lady Himeko!”

“It’s Lady Himeko!”

“Aaaaah!”

“Oh dear,” she said. “This might be because of me.”

Why was she being treated like a celebrity? It seemed crazy to think she was famous enough that even the new students knew who she was.

“There’s no ‘might’ about it,” I snapped. “*Obviously* it’s because of you. Even before that, everyone had a big reaction to this badge, too. What in the world’s going on?”

“How annoying,” replied Himeko, although she looked like she was thoroughly enjoying herself. “Anyway, you should get to your seat for now. Class two, seat number... well, there’s only one free seat, so that one.”

“Got it.” When Himeko put an arm around my shoulders and began pulling me along with her, I added, “Now that I know where I’m going, I can get there on my own.”

Goodness, the stares. All the stares were digging into me so hard that it hurt.

The screaming of Himeko’s name did not die down. Instead, voices filled with envy started filling the air as well.

“Who is that girl?”

“How does she know Lady Himeko?”

“Aaaaah!”

*This is scary! I hope it doesn’t mean I’m going to be bullied!* It felt like my late arrival might have completely rewritten my destiny.

Himeko appeared to be unmoved, as though she was used to this kind of thing. “Here, this is your seat.” Then, after sitting me down, she turned around and clapped her hands twice. “Everyone be quiet, please. The ceremony is about to start.”

That alone was enough to make the clamorous students fall silent.

*Wow.*

Those girls had been making so much noise, but they’d immediately listened to her, even though she wasn’t a teacher, but another student.

Who on earth was she?

After showing a charming face to all the girls nearby, Himeko flashed a devilish smile only at me. “Anyway, see you later, Misaki.”

Then, she walked toward the stage—and up onto it.

*Huh? Why is she on the stage?*

She went straight to one of the luxurious chairs positioned on either side and sat down with a perfectly composed expression.

*Aren't those seats meant for speakers and special guests?* I had an urge to poke fun at her for being such a scatterbrain, but then it hit me.

*Oh, I get it! Himeko must be the president of the student council!*

If so, her picture would have been included in the school's brochure, which was probably why the new students had recognized her. It would also make sense for her to be sitting on the stage, since of course the ceremony would include a speech from the student council president. It also matched up with her earlier show of leadership.

Perhaps this meant "Seraph" was some kind of jargon related to the student council, and the golden badge was proof that you were part of it. I still didn't understand all that business about maids, but maybe she was just making sure I had enough free time to join the council?

*Yes, it all makes sense.*

Still, forcing me to join with no warning wasn't exactly appreciated. I glared at her, but when she noticed, all she did was wave back at me.

As I scowled, deep creases appearing on my forehead, I heard a voice from the girl sitting next to me. "Is Lady Himeko an acquaintance of yours?"

I turned to look at her. "Huh?"

Her ponytail was secured with a star hair tie, and she had a slightly intense look in her eye. A lock of her bangs was also clipped to the side with a barrette that had stars on it.

*I guess she really likes stars.*

She'd phrased her question politely, but I had a feeling her words had a little bite to them. It was like she was harboring some sort of jealousy or distrust toward me, but she was doing her utmost not to let it show. Maybe she thought it would be unwise to say anything too negative if I really did know Himeko.

"Oh, well, I wouldn't go that far," I replied vaguely.

"Really? Then why do you have that badge? Did you not get it from Lady Himeko? If you did get it from her, you must have become her Seraph before the entrance ceremony. Does that mean it was all arranged in advance? Not to

mention that you arrived after everyone else and didn't get told off for it. Was that because Lady Himeko put in a good word for you? What's going on here? If Lady Himeko would help you despite not even knowing you, then who *are* you?"

"I, uh..."

As soon as she found out I didn't have a close relationship with Himeko, she had begun rattling off an endless stream of questions, as if she was fiercely determined to press me for information.

*Why did Himeko help me? That's exactly what I want to know!*

I couldn't answer a question if I didn't know the answer myself. I thought about making something up to get her off my case, but if she was sitting here, that presumably meant she was in my class. If I said anything too outlandish, she'd find out later, and that would only lead to trouble for me.

I looked around in the hope that someone might come to my rescue, but no such luck. Quite the opposite, in fact. Although everyone was looking straight ahead, I could tell that they were desperately straining to listen to every word I said. *Are they really that interested? Every single one of them?*

"Well," I began uncertainly, "if I started from the beginning, it would take a while, so maybe I can tell you later? The ceremony's about to start, right? Won't we get into trouble if we talk among ourselves?"

There. My most deadly weapon: the delaying tactic.

Not that it was especially deadly in the grand scheme of things. What it boiled down to was that I didn't really understand all this myself, so how could I explain it? Buying some time was the only option.

Besides, this girl seemed a little agitated. Even if I told her exactly what had happened, I wasn't sure she'd believe me. *"I was going to be late, so I climbed over a fence, and Himeko was there. When I told her I didn't want to be a maid, she gave me a golden badge."* Yes, clear as mud.

Before trying to explain it, I had to get the story straight and at least understand what a Seraph was. And, if it really did mean that I'd been selected to join the student council, I had to find out what my position was going to be.



Being forced into something like that was kind of awkward. I still wanted to turn it down if I could.

“All right,” said the girl at last. “But after this, I’m making you tell me everything. Actually, I... No, never mind.”

She seemed satisfied for now and ceased her interrogation, but I was painfully aware that she still *really* wanted to know.

As if to make up for it, she said, “Could I at least ask your name?” She faced forward and spoke quietly enough that only I could hear her.

*Just my name? I’ll tell her that as many times as she wants.* “I’m Misaki Hotaru. Today’s my first day at this school.”

“Well, obviously. Why else would you be here? More importantly, I guess that means you really are Misaki.” For some reason, she sighed when she said my name. It sounded like she knew something about me as well.

“Am I famous in some way?”

“You... could say that. You were the only one who didn’t move into the dorm.”

“Move in? Oh, right, everyone lives in dorms here. But, wait—can you move in before school even starts?”

“Of course you can! Didn’t it say that in the brochure? The official move-in date isn’t until today, but the early birds checked in two weeks ago, and even the latecomers arrived yesterday. You’re the only exception. I waited and waited, but you never showed up. I was convinced you’d given up on coming here at all.”

“Oh, you know, life got in the way.”

*Ugh, I REALLY should have come earlier. If I’d known all this, I could have cut down on expenses AND arrived on time.*

“Still, I’m surprised you remembered my name.”

“If you’re wondering why, it’s because I’m your roommate.”

“Fair enough.” *My roommate? But that means...*

“There’s no use trying to brush me off. There’ll be *plenty* of time to make you talk.”

She’d seen right through me. A dry laugh came from my throat. “Haha...”

Well, it wasn’t that I didn’t want to talk about it at all, just that I couldn’t explain it very well because I didn’t understand any of it. Once I’d made sense of things, there would be no problem.

*So I’ll be sharing a room with this girl for a year?*

“Um, nice to meet you. About the dorms... Is it two people to a room?”

“No, they’re four-person rooms.”

“I see. So there are two more.” That was a relief. If it had just been the two of us, that would’ve been a *lot* of pressure. “By the way, could I ask your name too?”

“Nah,” she replied.

“What?!”

“I’m kidding.”

It had sounded pretty serious to me. It was like she saw me as her enemy.

She added, “I’m Kirara Hoshino.”

“Miss Hoshino... Can I just call you Kirara?” I thought maybe we’d develop a closer bond if we called each other by our given names. And yet...

“Nah.”

My breath caught in my throat.

“I’m kidding! Do whatever you want.”

I sighed helplessly. Was it really such a crime to look like I was friends with Himeko?

*I bet it’s not just Kirara, either. The other girls must be thinking along the same lines.* Telling them the truth—that I wasn’t Himeko’s friend or acquaintance—was starting to feel a little more urgent.

I let out a quiet breath as the springtime melody softly drew to a close. It

seemed the ceremony was finally starting. Sitting up a little straighter, I applauded the two bowing musicians.

While I couldn't exactly say it had all gone smoothly so far, I had at least been able to reach the starting line, and that was good enough. *Now it all depends on good old hard work. I can do this!*



The entrance ceremony was the kind you'd expect to see at any other school. Amanotsuka Academy may have been slightly unusual, but even here, the ceremony started with an opening speech and then followed a completely normal program: the national anthem, an address from the principal, then some celebratory words from a guest speaker.

The solemn atmosphere made me keenly aware that I had taken the first step on the road to my new life. I could feel my heart beating out of my chest. Even Kirara, who had looked so tough before, watched with sparkling eyes.

Then it was announced that the next item on the agenda would be a greeting from the representative of the current students.

I cocked my head in thought. *Hmm. That has to be the student council president, right? I bet it'll be Himeko.*

But that was not the case. Instead, a girl sitting on the side opposite Himeko stood up and walked to the center of the stage. "Congratulations to all of the new students, and welcome to the academy! I'm Rika Yasuki, president of the student council. As the current student representative, I'm so glad to see you all here."

This was definitely the student council president, and it was clearly not Himeko.

Still, she seemed to be pretty popular and well-known herself. Soft cheers broke out, with voices crying, "Lady Angelica!"

Incidentally, the cheers were once again coming only from the Domestic Arts students. Not one of the Societal Arts students was making the slightest fuss.

The student council president was wearing a white uniform, so I could

surmise that she was a Societal Arts student as well. It seemed like maybe all the Societal Arts students held some special significance for the Domestic Arts students.

I'd only just arrived, but already I had the feeling that there were a lot of students in the Societal Arts program who were particularly elegant and refined. It was like wherever they stood, they shone as brightly as their white uniforms.

But why "Angelica"? Hadn't she just introduced herself as Rika Yasuki?

Unable to hold that question in, I turned to ask Kirara. "Hey, why are they calling her Angelica?"

"If you write her name in kanji, it's like this." She drew in the air with her finger. "And if you read the kanji differently, it could be pronounced 'Angelica,' right?"

"Right, right. I was wondering if she was from another country or something."

"There are rumors about that as well, but I don't actually know. It's not like I've checked. Her features don't seem wholly Japanese, though."

"Yeah, I can see that. Her soft, silvery hair, her high-bridged nose... and she's just a little *too* beautiful."

In terms of looks, she gave Himeko a run for her money. I could see why she was so popular. Still, something bothered me. As I listened to the student council president's words, I whispered another question to Kirara. "Everyone seems to know the current students really well. Why is that? Normally you wouldn't know anyone at a school before you start going there."

"I mean, why *wouldn't* you do that level of research before arriving? Isn't that the bare minimum?"

"The... bare minimum?"

"You're so weird. You walked in here with Lady Himeko but you hardly even know her. You haven't moved into the dorm yet. You don't seem to have the slightest clue about this school. Why did you even come here?"

I suppressed another sigh. I was pretty sure Himeko had asked me the exact



same question. Timidly, I asked, “Is this not a normal school?”

Kirara gaped at me as if I were spouting nonsense. “You really don’t know anything, do you? And someone like *you* went and beat me to the punch. How humiliating.”

A wall had gone up between me and Kirara; that much was clear. I thought we’d been starting to get along, but now it felt like we’d taken a step backward.

I wasn’t sure how to respond. “Um...”

“It’s fine, you don’t have to say anything,” Kirara replied, sighing and pointedly looking away. “You’re going to tell me everything later anyway, right?”

“Right,” I muttered. “I’ll tell you everything, so... could you tell me a few things, too?” I was starting to feel like things could go very wrong for me if I spent too long at this school without knowing anything about it.

After a moment, she said, “Fine. You’ve got some connection to Lady Himeko, so I suppose getting along with you could be good for me, too.” With calculating eyes, she smiled, the corners of her mouth twisting.

The next part of the ceremony was a pledge delivered by a representative of the new students. This role was also filled by a Societal Arts student. Every single one of her movements was graceful, and just looking at her made me enamored with her beauty.

I wondered if everyone knew this girl as well, but I decided not to ask Kirara because I didn’t want her to look at me exasperatedly again and say, “How could you not know that?!”

Then, when the ceremony was on the verge of ending, a lingering question that I’d almost forgotten about was finally resolved: the mystery of why Himeko was sitting on the stage. She had been sitting so perfectly still, it had completely slipped my mind.

“Next we have the address from the chairman of the board,” said the emcee. “However, due to various circumstances, today’s address will be delivered by the deputy chairman.”

In response, Himeko stood for some reason. I couldn't keep myself from thinking, *Absolutely not. There is no way.* And yet, as if it was nothing out of the ordinary, she walked over to the middle of the stage.

Nevertheless, she abruptly began her speech. "Congratulations to all the new students on your arrival at the academy. On a day like today, with the cherry blossoms in full bloom, I am overjoyed to be able to greet so many new schoolmates."

My jaw dropped of its own accord.

Why was a mere student the deputy chairman? That was *obviously* weird, wasn't it? I half expected someone to stand up and shout, "Objection!"

But no one seemed to think it was strange except me. Everyone was listening to her speak with earnest expressions on their faces. The Domestic Arts students were practically spellbound.

*Deputy chairman? Really?*

That would *definitely* explain why she was so famous. It also meant I'd been right to think it was odd that her surname was the same as the school's name. Himeko Amanotsuka. Amanotsuka Academy. *Her family must own the school, I guess.*

"Whew." I unconsciously let out a sound that was both a sigh and an expression of wonder.

## Chapter Two: The Golden Contract

*Gosh, what a shock.* I still couldn't quite believe that Himeko was the deputy chairman of the board.

Once the entrance ceremony came to an end, the new students all filed out to the classrooms where they'd be spending the rest of the year. Just like in the ceremony, I found myself sitting next to Kirara.

The other students in my class were all on the Domestic Arts program, of course, so I was surrounded by a sea of black uniforms.

Setting the revelation about Himeko aside, I thought about my own predicament. The teacher was watching for now, so all the girls were being quiet and obedient, but I could acutely feel the jabbing of their invisible stares.

I knew that the very second homeroom ended, they were going to swarm me and bombard me with questions. My stomach started to ache horribly.

As much as I wished I could run away, that definitely wasn't an option. I felt like a juicy morsel placed in front of a dog who had been told to sit still. I was just waiting to be eaten.

"I suppose we'll call it a day there," said the teacher. "Let's make tomorrow the start of a great year filled with hard work!"

There it was.

The instant she finished speaking, all of the students turned to look at me. Their eyes glinted as if they were scoping out their prey. *Eek!*

Then, the teacher left the room—and in a flash, they all clustered around my desk and started freely assaulting me with questions and complaints.

"Misaki, whose Seraph are you?!"

"Is it really Lady Himeko?!"

"You were already wearing the badge at the entrance ceremony—does that mean it's been arranged for ages?"

“No fair!”

“Gaaah!”

And so on.

“No, well, you see,” I began, but I couldn’t hope to answer all their questions at once.

“Did you already have your debut?”

“What’s the Sky Salon like?”

“What shampoo does Lady Himeko use?”

“Have you met Lady Kagura yet?”

“Gaaah!”

My head was spinning. I never thought this one little badge would cause such an uproar. I’d only agreed to this to avoid getting expelled. Maybe I’d been a little too hasty?

Honestly, I didn’t even know if I’d really have been expelled for arriving late. There was a chance that Himeko had just used that as a pretext to give me the golden badge. *Why did she even want me to take it in the first place?*

As I sat there at the end of my rope, Kirara offered a helping hand. “Come on, settle down. Misaki can’t answer all those questions at once.”

“Thanks, Kirara!” I said gratefully. Even though we had only just met at the entrance ceremony, there she was, coming to my aid. *And I was so sure she’d have been at the front of the pack, hounding me for answers!* It seemed that at some point, a bond of friendship had formed between me and Kirara. I was slightly moved.

“I understand why you want answers,” she continued, “but how about you leave it to me? I’ll take my sweet time and make her tell me absolutely everything. Just you wait.”

*I take it all back.*

Kirara was fully fired up. She was glaring at me intently, determined to shine a light on all my secrets.



“Oh, that’s right!” piped one of the girls. “You’re Kirara’s roommate, aren’t you?”

“Then maybe it is better to leave it to you,” said another.

Everyone exchanged glances and nodded as if to say, *Yep, sounds good. Let’s do that.*

I didn’t know which was worse: facing a torrent of questions here, or being subjected to Kirara’s inquisition. In any case, it seemed I no longer had a choice.



“Why don’t you have some tea and relax?” With an experienced manner, Kirara poured hot water into a cup and placed it before me.

It did look delicious, but there was no way a cup of tea was going to help me relax.

Aside from Kirara, my two other roommates were there as well, all of us sitting on cushions around the table.

This was Chambord House, the dormitory that would be home to us and all of the Domestic Arts students. It had the appearance of a Western-style guesthouse on a mountain plateau somewhere.

Honestly, for a dorm, it was pretty fancy. It had a good reputation among the students as well, and most of them had gone through all the procedures for moving in as soon as they were allowed to.

Inside that building, I was on house arrest, confined to a single room.

Admittedly, it was the room I was sharing with Kirara, so “house arrest” might not have been entirely accurate. The point was, I couldn’t leave of my own accord.

Our room actually consisted of two spaces: a living room area with a kitchen, and a bedroom that we would also use for studying. It was unexpectedly spacious even for four people to share, and the living room would still have been just as comfortable with twice as many.

“Well, that’s fine,” said Kirara, seeing that I didn’t touch my cup of tea. She took a sip of her own. “If you’d rather just talk, I won’t complain. Well? You’re

going to tell us the exact circumstances that led to you becoming a Seraph, right?”

“W-Well, yes, I’ll tell you. But first, I’d like you to tell me what a Seraph is.”

All I knew was that it was something that meant a lot to the Domestic Arts students. Apart from that, the details were still a mystery to me. Even my guess about it being a role on the student council couldn’t have been correct, since Himeko wasn’t the student council president after all.

“Fine!” said Kirara, standing up and vigorously sweeping her hand to the side. “You’re so ignorant that it’s actually revolting, but I’ll tell you. Honestly, I can’t believe you came here in the first place when you don’t know the first thing about Seraphs, or about the academy itself! Tell me, Misaki—why did you even apply to this school?”



“Why? Well, because it doesn’t cost anything, of course.”

Surprisingly enough, tuition at Amanotsuka Academy was free of charge. On top of that, the uniform and textbooks were free, as were the costs of room and board. For everyday life, you didn’t need to spend a thing. It was a dream come true for a financially challenged student like myself.

“That was the *only* reason you applied here?” said Kirara.

“Um, yes.”

I nodded earnestly, and Kirara let out an ostentatiously large sigh. “You can’t have expected it to be that simple, can you? That it was a totally free ride and you didn’t have to do anything in return?”

“Huh? Are they going to demand I pay them back afterward or something? Or make me do forced labor?”

“The second one’s... *kind* of accurate. Try thinking about why we’re Domestic Arts students and Lady Himeko and the others are Societal Arts students.”

“However long I think about it, I don’t think I’ll figure it out.”

After a pause, she said, “True. You wouldn’t, knowing you. Now, listen up. Really listen carefully. The Domestic Arts students are all here to become maids.”

“Maids?” I blurted.

“You must at least know what those are.”

“I mean, yes.”

Maids took care of a household’s cleaning, laundry, and cooking, or otherwise took care of their masters’ needs.

Some time ago, it had become common practice for normal households to employ maids, just like in the Victorian era. By now it was widely accepted. It was possible that this stemmed from women who were already doing a lot of housework deciding that if they were doing so anyway, they might as well be maids and earn a little money for it.

“I see,” I said thoughtfully. “So *that’s* why the program is called ‘Domestic



Arts.’”

“Exactly. And we’re not aiming to be just any old maids. Our goal is to be the best of the best—maids who can serve in upper-class households. The young ladies in the Societal Arts program are exactly the kinds of people we want to serve. We’ll be studying hard every day to learn how to take care of those ladies.”

“Aah, I get it!” No wonder the Societal Arts students had all come across as so polished and refined.

“So, you know why we’re here, and you know that it’s free of charge. Maybe you can figure out *why* it’s all free.”

I put two and two together. “Is it because of the Societal Arts students?”

“That’s right. Our tuition and living costs are all covered by donations from the Societal Arts students’ families. That’s why we have to treat those ladies with the utmost respect and gratitude.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Now that you’re at this school, you need to accept that with every fiber of your being, right down to your last drop of blood. We belong to the young ladies!” She spoke those last words as a proud declaration, as if her excitement had reached its zenith.

“We belong to them?”

“Of course! All the students here feel that way aside from you.”

*Is that so?* I looked at our other two roommates. They put on forced smiles and looked slightly awkward. *Hmm. I think Kirara might feel a bit more strongly about this than everyone else.*

Admittedly, though, it seemed I needed to be grateful to those girls—err, those young ladies—from the Societal Arts course.

“Anyway,” Kirara continued, “now that you know why we’re here, I’ll tell you about one of the most crucial points of all: the Seraphs.”

“Yes, please do!”

“A Seraph is someone who has an exclusive contract, known as the Golden Contract, with one of the Social Arts students.”

“Uh-huh.”

Kirara eyed me dubiously. “Clearly you don’t understand how significant that is.”

Indeed, I had no idea. I shook my head firmly.

“Here’s how it is. All of us have the ambition of one day serving people like them, but obviously not everyone will be able to. Not only do your skills have to be good enough, but the ladies have to take a liking to you or they won’t employ you. Does that make sense so far?”

“Yeah.”

“The good news is that we get to live and study in the same place as the Societal Arts students, which naturally gives us plenty of opportunities to serve them. If you’re lucky, one of them might come to like you, and then say, ‘I want you to work for me after graduation.’ That’s why we have to spend three years working our fingers to the bone. Think about it—just because they’re from the upper crust doesn’t mean everything is easy for them. Employing good servants can be quite an ordeal. If they hire someone who does a bad job, it puts their own reputations in jeopardy, so they have to be careful.”

“Yes, that makes sense.”

“That’s what makes it such an honor to be promised a job while you’re still at the academy. Some people are that lucky, but it’s not in the cards for everyone. And yet... *you*, Misaki! You got handed the prize on the day of the entrance ceremony, when everyone else was barely getting started!”

“So being a Seraph’s a pretty big deal, huh?”

“Yes! If a young lady makes you her Seraph, that’s the proof of your guaranteed employment. It’s an exclusive contract, meaning that you serve them as their personal maid while you’re at the academy, and they will definitely hire you after you graduate. To show everyone that you’re in that enviable position, they give you a golden school badge to wear.”

“Oh, so that’s what the badge is for.” I’d never have guessed that I’d been given something so significant. No wonder everyone’s eyes had practically bulged out of their sockets.

But it still left some questions. Why had Himeko made me her Seraph without knowing a single thing about me? I had known nothing about the academy, and I had even expressed that I had no intention of becoming a maid. Why would she want someone like that to be her Seraph? Wasn’t that kind of weird? I couldn’t imagine what Himeko had been thinking.

“So,” said Kirara, “by this point, you more or less understand what the academy is for and what a Seraph is, right?”

“Right,” I replied hesitantly.

“Great. Now you have to answer *my* questions. How, why, when, where, and with whom did you enter into a contract to become a Seraph?! Was it really with Lady Himeko? Spit it out! All of it! Right now!”

She drew her face close to mine and wore a bloodcurdling expression. If at this point I’d said something like, “It’s a secret! Teehee!” she would have certainly murdered me.

Thus, I decided to tell the full story of how I met Lady Himeko and how she made me her Seraph. “Um, well, the truth is…”



“But that’s INSANE!”

When I finished my explanation, Kirara reacted a little exaggeratedly, putting a hand on her forehead and tilting her head back to look at the ceiling.

“Let me get this straight. You were going to be late, so you climbed over the fence, and Lady Himeko was there. You said you didn’t want to be a maid, and she made you her Seraph anyway?! I don’t understand!”

“Now you know how I feel,” I muttered.

Kirara leaned forward and gripped the front of my uniform roughly. “Are you cruising for a bruising?”

“No, I’m not! I’m not!” I frantically shook my head.

She released me and let out a weary sigh. “It really is insane, though. How can that happen when you haven’t even met her before? She hasn’t made anyone else into her Seraph so far either. In fact, she hasn’t even made anyone into an Exousia!”

Another word I’d never heard before. This time I decided to just stay quiet and let Kirara carry on ranting. It felt like a common sense approach that I’d thank myself for later.

“How the two of you met for the first time... Well, that just about makes sense. But why would she enter into the Golden Contract with someone who doesn’t even know what a Seraph is? I could understand if your family had served Lady Himeko’s for generations, so it was decided before you even came here that you’d be her Seraph. That would also have explained why she didn’t have a Seraph until now. But why would she decide based on pure happenstance like that?”

By now, Kirara had now gone from looking at the ceiling to hanging her head with her hands and knees planted on the floor. She appeared to have undergone quite a shock.

“You know,” she continued, “before coming to this school, I did all kinds of things to prepare to be a first-rate maid. I researched everything I could about the academy and the young ladies. I was determined to show everyone up and to become a Seraph before anyone else. Then *this* crazy nonsense happens and tears all my dreams to shreds.”

“Oh, um...”

I thought I’d try saying something to soothe her, but nothing came to mind. Besides, I was worried that whatever I said right now, Kirara would take it as some kind of jab at her.

*Wow, she’s taking this so seriously. No wonder she was so annoyed about me not knowing anything.*

“So, when are you going to have your debut?” she asked.

“My debut?”

“Yes. To announce to everyone that they have a new Seraph, a young lady

always gathers up friends, acquaintances, and public relations staff for a special event. That's the Seraph's debut. Becoming a Seraph is just that special."

"Hmm. I haven't heard anything about that yet. Wait, now that I think about it, Himeko *did* say to go to the elevator hall tomorrow. She said something about a place for drinking tea on the top floor, and that she'd introduce me to everyone there."

"Wh-What?!" Out of nowhere, Kirara took three steps back and started trembling all over. "To think you've been invited to go to the Sky Salon on your second day here! But I guess that's no surprise if you're Lady Himeko's Seraph. It might not actually be your debut, though. It hasn't been widely announced, so she's probably just introducing you to her friends."

By now I'd built up more of a tolerance to the endless swathes of new information. I wasn't shocked by every little thing anymore. It was even starting to feel kind of nice to have Kirara there as a walking encyclopedia of the school who knew everything I didn't.

Thankfully, she explained this one without me even having to ask. "The Sky Salon is the students' nickname for the cafe on the top floor of the former school building. It's the very highest point on the school grounds. It's essentially sacred territory, where no one can enter except for a chosen few. The people who are allowed to visit the Sky Salon are known as 'celestials.' Naturally, Lady Himeko is one of the elite celestials who are permitted to go inside. And, since you're her Seraph, I guess *you'll* be a celestial as well." Kirara's eyes turned so bloodshot, I feared she might burst a blood vessel. She hatefully spat out these words through gritted teeth.

"Me? No way! No one'll call me a grandiose name like that."

"Of course they will! Ugh, how frustrating. Just because you were running late and you climbed over a fence, suddenly you're a celestial. That is *definitely* weird, isn't it?"

*It really is. I agree with you 100%.*

I couldn't believe it, though. Did becoming a Seraph really make me so important? Just thinking about being called a lofty name like "celestial" made me feel a little dizzy.



*I guess I'll have to spend a lot of time at this Sky Salon. But then... what about my dream?!*

“Anyway, now I’ve told you everything about how I became Himeko’s Seraph.”

“Yes. The story gave me a headache, but I heard you loud and clear.” Kirara was massaging her temples very hard indeed.

I knew that Kirara would have to share the results of her questioning with the rest of the class. She had made herself their representative, after all. However, if the unvarnished truth was spread around, things would definitely not go well for me. I was pretty sure it would only antagonize everyone.

It seemed that Kirara had come to the same conclusion. “I guess it’s probably better not to tell everyone the whole truth.” That came as a relief. For now, Kirara seemed to be acting as my ally. After a moment’s thought, she continued, “The best solution would probably be to pretend you and Lady Himeko had an agreement in place before you arrived here. You would need Lady Himeko to play along with that.”

“Yes, that sounds like a good idea. I’ll try asking her tomorrow.”

“I don’t mind doing it. I can explain it all clearly enough.”

“Really? Thanks, Kirara!”

“In return, you have to tell me all about the young ladies at the Sky Salon. My dream of becoming a Seraph before anyone else may have been a bust, but I still have my dream of serving a wonderful lady. If anyone at the Sky Salon is looking for a Seraph, you have to tell me right away, got it?”

“Sure thing. If that’s all you need, I’m more than happy to help.”

Thanks to Kirara’s efforts, no one in my class pressed me for answers the next day. The most they said were things like, “I’m so jealous of you! I wish I had an arrangement with Lady Himeko.”

Though I did put a hand on my chest and breathe a sigh of relief, I was left with a sense of unease that even greater trouble awaited me. After all, my goal wasn’t to be a maid, but to go through school normally and get a job at a good

company.

I didn't know what Himeko was thinking or what her intentions were, but one way or another, I had to find out.

## Chapter Three: The Sky Salon

Since Kirara had explained all kinds of details about the academy, I felt a little more prepared to face it. Still, I wasn't quite ready for how different Amanotsuka Academy was from other schools.

The Domestic Arts students were aiming to become maids, and this meant we'd hardly be taking any normal classes at all. Apparently, we'd have three hours of general education in the morning, like English and math, but the rest of the day would be dedicated to honing our service skills.

I learned that although "maid" is a pretty all-encompassing term, it can be divided into all kinds of different fields. Kitchen maids, nursemaids, parlormaids, laundry maids, housemaids... The list goes on.

Here, being a lady's maid was seemingly the most desirable. This particular profession involved attending to the everyday needs of a fine noble lady. In particular, I had a lot of classmates who were eager to serve one of the young ladies from the Societal Arts program.

Being a Seraph truly meant something to them; they all longed desperately to become one. In turn, this made them pretty envious of me.

*At this point, the title honestly just feels like a weight around my neck.* I sighed just as the bell rang to announce that fourth period was over.

Today was our first day of class, so it ended before lunch. We hadn't had any real classes anyway. It was all just introductory stuff—a tour of the campus, an explanation of how the course was structured, and so on.

After that, the plan would have been to go back to the dorm, eat lunch, and get to know my roommates better, but I had somewhere else to be. Himeko had told me to go to the elevator hall. That wasn't such a bad thing, anyway; I had a lot of questions for her, and I still needed to thank her properly for helping me.

Before heading out, I said to Kirara, "Well, see you later!"

“Yup. I can’t wait to hear *all* about it!”

Kirara saw me off with a wave, and I went on my way.



“Is this the right place?”

After climbing up a chilly stone staircase near the entrance of the auditorium, I had reached a room two floors up that looked to be the right place. On the polished marble floor sat an antique sofa with a red back, and in front of that was an elevator that looked just as old. With a door that looked almost like a portcullis, it was an imposing sight.

It wasn’t out of place in this castle-like building, but it didn’t feel like it belonged to the modern day. I began to feel strangely as if I’d stumbled back in time to the Middle Ages.

*This is such a weird school.*

“I guess it’s okay if I sit down, right?” I said to myself. It didn’t look like Himeko was there yet, so I decided to take a seat on the expensive-looking sofa.

*Not that I can really relax.*

Across from me was a half-moon window next to the elevator, and through that I could see the main school building. Calling it that made it sound like an ordinary square structure, but like the building I was in now, it more so resembled a castle.

I stood up from the sofa and walked over to the window. *Seeing it from here really does make it look like something out of the Middle Ages.*

I’d been told that the building with the auditorium used to be the main school building, but about ten years ago, when the Domestic Arts program was founded, there had been such a huge increase in students that they had had to build a new one.

To be honest, it didn’t come across as something they’d been forced to build because they had a hundred extra students to accommodate.

Apparently, the auditorium building had been modeled after St. Vitus Cathedral. In any case, it was huge. It seemed like a waste that they only used it

for special events, like the entrance ceremony, and for a few specialized classrooms.

The new building, meanwhile, had been modeled after the Château de Chambord, and was an even more ridiculous size.

Along with it, the dorms that housed both the Societal Arts and Domestic Arts students had been newly built as well. The costs of all this had been covered by donations from the Societal Arts students' families.

It all made me want to shout, "Three cheers for the class divide!"

I could easily believe what Kirara had told me about the Societal Arts students being so high up on the totem pole of society that they basically lived in another world.

"And Himeko is the deputy chairman of a school filled with people like that," I mused. I was reminded once again of just what a remarkable person she was.

I heaved a sigh and stared idly into the distance for a moment.

Just then...

"Oh, fancy seeing a lost little kitten here!" came two voices at once.

The exact same words from both sides of me, as though played through stereo headphones. I was suddenly grabbed from behind.

"Huh?!" It didn't sound like Himeko. "Who are you?"

In a mild panic, I tried to turn around, but I was held in place by the hands grabbing me from the left and right. *Two of them?!*

As I struggled in vain, the stereo voices spoke again. "Teeheehee! You look so cute when you're desperate!"

"Um, who are you? Tell me!"

I used all my strength to wriggle out of their grip, and finally, they let go.

"It's tough to wrangle a stray cat," said one.

"Oh, but she can't be a stray. Look, she has a collar."

*Wha?* I found myself looking back and forth between the two girls. *They're*

*twins!*

There before me were two people who looked identical down to the last detail, apart from the ribbons they wore in their hair. They both had long, straight hair with shorter sidelocks, but one had a ribbon on top of her head with a music-note pattern, while the other wore a ribbon above each ear with a pattern depicting white roses.

Their uniforms were black, just like mine, which meant they had to be Domestic Arts students, but I had a feeling there was something a little different about the design. *The ribbons on their chests are red, which tells me they're second years. Is that all, though?*

It felt like more than that. They had an air about them that was somehow distinct from all the other Domestic Arts students. You'd never look at them and think they'd be anyone's servant. If not for the uniforms, I'd have guessed they belonged to the Societal Arts program.

*Those are definitely Domestic Arts uniforms, though. How strange!*

Looking closely, I could see that both of them wore shining golden school badges just like mine. They were Seraphs too.

Either way, they were older students, so I had to be polite. I chose my words carefully. "Um, what can I do for you?"

They turned to one another.

"That's a good question," said one of the twins. "Maybe we can do something for her instead."

"This must be her," said the other. "Looks like she doesn't know how to work the elevator, though. We'd better take her with us!"

"You're so right! If it really is her, she'll have to come with us!"

After coming to some agreement about something, they both turned to me and nodded. "You're Misaki Hotaru, right?" they asked, their voices in perfect harmony.

*Wow. Their synchronization is really impressive.*

"That's me. I have to stay here, though. I'm supposed to be meeting



someone.” It sounded like they were going to drag me away somewhere if I didn’t speak up.

My attempt to thwart them was futile, however.

“We thought so. We’d better get going, then!” They grabbed me from both sides and forcibly pushed me onto the elevator with them.

“I told you, I’m meeting someone here!” *Why won’t they listen?*

“It’s all right! No need to be scared,” said one of the sisters.

“We’ll take good care of you, lost little kitten.”

“I’m not lost!”

All my protests fell on deaf ears. I didn’t even have time to ask how they knew my name before the elevator started to quietly ascend.



“Is Misaki here by any chance?”

When I finally heard that familiar voice, now speaking in a faintly panicked tone, I’d been the twins’ captive for around ten minutes.

“Himeko!”

When Himeko arrived at last, I rushed over to her. *I’m saved!*

They’d taken me to what appeared to be the “Sky Salon” I’d heard all about from Kirara. The twins reacted to my escape as if I were a toy they couldn’t play with anymore.

“Oh, what a pity!”

“She ran away!”

The room wasn’t all that big, but all the assorted plants gave it a comfortable, relaxing atmosphere. There was a large table in the center, with a few smaller tables peppered around it, half hidden by greenery.

It had sort of a mystical quality about it. I’d heard it was sometimes described as a garden in the sky, and I could see why.

There were a number of other students in the Sky Salon. All of them had

smiled pleasantly after the twins dragged me in, but they had kept their distance and shown no sign of stepping in to lend a hand. *Maybe they were worried they'd be the next victims if they didn't tread carefully. What's with these twins? I know they're Domestic Arts students, but they really don't come across that way.*

"Thank goodness," said Himeko. "You weren't in the elevator hall, so I thought I'd been stood up."

"I wouldn't be that cold. I had to come and thank you for helping me."

"Hehe, that is true. I made you my Seraph, didn't I?" She smiled gleefully.

"Oh, about that! I've been thinking about it a lot. But first of all—what's up with these two?! They had their hands all over my body! That's sexual harassment, you know!"

I had to say it. Even if they did seem different from the others, they were still Domestic Arts students, right? If they got a stern lecture from a Societal Arts student like Himeko, they'd surely rethink their behavior.

Or not!

"Oh, really? It looks to me like the Ayakas helped you out quite a bit. How nice of them!"

That was *not* the reaction I'd expected from Himeko. She wasn't angry in the slightest.

"That's absurd! Why're you making it sound like they've done me a favor?!"

"What do you think of my little Misaki, then? Don't you think she seems promising?"

Now she was treating me like some adorable pet. *My little Misakikins is my pride and joy!*

"She's just like you said, Lady Himeko. She acts kind of like a stray cat."

"She kept glaring at us and being all cold and aloof. It was pretty refreshing!"

In response to the twins, Himeko clapped her hands in front of her chest. She beamed with joy. "Right? That's just what I like about her."

It sounded like Himeko had told a lot of people about me in the space of a single day.

“Come on, Himeko! Don’t just act all buddy-buddy with them! They sexually harassed me! That shouldn’t get a free pass!”

“How regrettable that you see it that way,” said both twins at once, cocking their heads to the side in perfect unison.

“We just wanted to take care of a lost little kitten,” said one.

“All we did was give you food and milk so you would be comfortable until your owner turned up,” said the other.

“Comfortable?! You were *groping* me! You even tried to take my clothes off. If I took you to court, I’d win for sure!”

I didn’t even want to know what would have happened if Himeko hadn’t arrived when she did.

“Honestly, it’s not that big of a deal,” said Himeko. “Those two just enjoy bonding with other girls. That just happens to involve physical intimacy!”

It seemed like she was going to take the twins’ side no matter what. *She did only meet me yesterday, I guess. I’m at a disadvantage compared to these two, whom she’s probably known for a long time.*

“More importantly, I wanted to introduce you to everyone, but it looks like Kagura’s not here yet, right?”

Himeko looked around the room.

“I’m here!”

The elevator opened and a student came out. Based on her white uniform, she was another Societal Arts student. She walked with graceful steps, brushing her fingers through her soft blonde curls. Her bangs were a little long and tended to cover her left eye in a way that made her seem quite mysterious. On her head was a sparkling tiara. She was absolutely gorgeous, like a rose in full bloom. The ribbon on her chest was purple, marking her as a third year.

After she and Himeko said hello to each other, she came over and stood in front of me. “So, is this the one?”

“That’s right. She’s my Seraph.”

At first she replied to Himeko with nothing but a vague sound of curiosity. Then, she inspected me all over. “Yes, I see,” she said last. Then she clapped her hands together quite forcefully. “Gather ’round, everyone. Himeko would like to introduce the girl we’ve all heard so much about.”

On her signal, the girls who had been scattered about the room enjoying tea and chitchat all gathered around the large table in the middle. There were a dozen or so students there in total, with roughly half in black uniforms and half in white. All the Domestic Arts students were wearing gold badges, so each of them must have been someone’s Seraph.

One more thing stood out: all the Domestic Arts students were wearing white aprons and ruffled headpieces. They looked like proper maids. *Right, I get it now. When you add an apron over top, the Domestic Arts uniform turns into a maid’s outfit.* I’d actually been given an apron as part of my school uniform, but I hadn’t worn it yet. I decided I’d have to try it on as soon as I got back to the dorm.

As I mulled over this, Himeko and I sat down at the head of the table, where you’d expect the guests of honor to sit.

“Feel free to start, Himeko,” urged the girl with the long blonde hair.

Himeko stood with a proud smile. “Thank you all for taking time out of your busy schedules to be here. Today, I’d like you all to meet Misaki, the girl I’ve been telling you about.”

She gently put her hand on my back. *Does she want me to stand up?*

Himeko continued, “I know I’ve made you all worry because I went so long without a Seraph, but I finally found a girl who meets all my needs. I hope you’ll all welcome her as a new member of this salon.”

She bowed her head, so I did the same. A quiet yet warm round of applause broke out, and several of the Societal Arts students expressed their thoughts.

“I’m so happy for you, Himeko. It must have been pretty tough. You wouldn’t even let anyone in to clean your room!”

“I was starting to think no one would turn up who satisfied you, but you found someone after all!”

“Now you don’t have to sneak into the salon, afraid of what people think when they see you!”

The Domestic Arts students, meanwhile, kept completely silent and maintained gracious smiles. *Maybe they’re not allowed to interrupt their mistresses.*

I remembered what Kirara had said—that the Sky Salon was sacred territory, where no one could enter except for a chosen few.

The ladies here were a rung or two above even the other Societal Arts students at the academy. They were probably at the very top of the food chain. Naturally, the Seraphs serving them would all be the best of the best as well.

This made me feel *very* out of place, of course. I had the feeling that a person with no intention of being a maid really didn’t belong here.

But Himeko just continued chatting pleasantly with the others, looking very happy indeed.



After talking to the others for a while, Himeko brought the conversation to a close.

“Misaki, let’s move to a different table.” She took my hand and stood up. “I’m so glad you all got to meet Misaki. I hope you’ll all be kind to her!”

*Isn’t she getting a little ahead of herself? It’s one thing to help out someone in need, but for a major choice like this, shouldn’t she put more thought into it?* Now that I knew what a Seraph was, it was pretty clear that you weren’t supposed to casually choose someone you had just met.

“Misaki, this way.” Totally oblivious to my unease, Himeko took me by the hand and led me over to a table by a window. It was separated from the rest of the room by a wooden lattice with pink roses climbing through it. “This is where you get the best view.”

“Wow!”

Standing and looking at the scene beyond the glass, I felt blown away. The view that stretched out before me really was like looking down from the heavens. I could see the whole academy.

The red brick path that led to the entrance of the main school building reached all the way down to the front gate, with well-tended gardens expanding out on both sides. If I squinted, I could see students sprinkled throughout the gardens, drinking tea just like us.

*Man, the front gate's really far away. If I'd just kept running, it would have taken me ages to get there. At least another twenty minutes.*

When I looked to the left, I could see my dorm, along with three other buildings that were probably the Societal Arts students' dorms. There were some other large buildings as well, presumably for the middle school.

It was highlighted for me again just how vast the academy's grounds were. The top of the hill was covered with Amanotsuka Academy buildings.

If the girls here had exclusive access to this view, I could see why they were called "celestials."

As I stared out the window, I suddenly heard the twins' voices again.

"You don't have to look all dopey like that."

"Your upbringing is showing!"

I turned to look. They placed two cups of tea on the table along with a box that looked like it probably contained some tasty treats.

"Today you're being treated like a guest, but don't get used to it."

"Starting tomorrow, you're going to learn how to serve!"

*I guess these two really do want to be maids, no matter how frivolous they seem.*

"Thank you very much," I murmured.

"Thanks," said Himeko, her calmness striking a contrast to my flustered reply. It hardly came as a surprise, though; given Himeko's position, she was probably used to being waited on.



“You’re welcome,” they said in unison.

When they were gone, Himeko said, “Go on, sit down.”

I did so, following the twins with my eyes as they walked off. I decided to ask Himeko about them. “Um, about those two sisters. Are they really Seraphs?”

“Absolutely. They’re Kagura’s Seraphs.”

“And Kagura is...?”

“The third-year student who arrived just after I did.”

“The one with long blonde hair who looks really glamorous?”

“That’s the one. Her name is Kagura Mikage. Her grandfather is the head of the Mikage Group. As for the twins, they’re both named Ayaka Kokonoe.”

“They have the same name?”

“Yes, but written with different kanji.” She drew in the air as she explained. “The one with music notes on her hair ribbon is spelled with the kanji for ‘song,’ and the one with flowers on her hair ribbons is spelled with the kanji for ‘flower.’ Given their backgrounds, they’d actually fit in better in the Societal Arts program, but for a number of reasons, they’re in the Domestic Arts program and attending to Kagura.”

*I knew they were no ordinary Seraphs.*

“Oh, also, the Sky Salon is under Kagura’s control right now. That’s what the tiara signifies.”

“Right, that shiny thing on her head.”

“Exactly. There are plenty of other salons, and the people in charge of them all have tiaras. It shows they’re the queen of that particular salon.”

“So you’re not in charge of the Sky Salon?”

“Nope. I’m just here as a freeloader.” Her smile held a vague hint of sadness. “Anyway, let’s have some tea. Oh, and I ordered these especially for you.” She gestured to the box on the table.

“I’m glad you thought of me, but before that, there’s something I want to ask you. Is that okay?”

“Whatever could it be?” She took a single sip of her tea, then set down the cup again.

“About all this Seraph business... When we first met, I told you I had no intention of becoming a maid.”

“You did, indeed.”

“So why did you make me your Seraph?”

“I made you my Seraph *because* you don’t want to be a maid.”

“You’ve lost me. Is this some kind of bullying tactic?”

“Not at all. The truth is, I don’t really want a Seraph.”

“Huh?” This made even *less* sense.

“I don’t want one, but not having one causes all kinds of problems for someone in my position. Not having a Seraph means I get endless, and I mean *endless* demands from Domestic Arts students who want to be my Seraph. I hardly have to say two words to them before they start to think I might actually agree to it.”

“Why don’t you just tell them you don’t want a Seraph at all?”

“If I do that, they’ll inevitably ask why, right? And I really don’t want to tell anyone the reason.”

“Oh. What might that be?”

“I’m not telling you.” Himeko grinned as she firmly shut down my question. “Anyway, you’re effectively a kind of stand-in.”

“A stand-in?”

“You don’t actually want to be my maid, so it’s fine if I don’t hire you after you graduate. We can have a temporary contract that only lasts while we’re at the academy.”

*In other words, she just wants me to pretend to be a Seraph.* I paused to consider my next words. “Himeko, I understand you’re in a pretty tough position, but so am I. I told you why I came to this school, right? My plans haven’t changed.”

“Study as hard as you can, get into a good college, and get a job at a good company. It was along those lines, right?”

“That’s right. I’m afraid I don’t have time to be attending to your needs. Given how little time they spend on normal classes here, I’ll have to make extra-good use of all my time after school.”

“True, the Domestic Arts classes alone aren’t going to cut it. Either way, though, being a Domestic Arts student isn’t going to leave you with all that much free time.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Domestic Arts students are responsible for keeping the Societal Arts students’ rooms in order. After school, you’ll be told to clean people’s rooms, help out with their shopping, and so on.”

“I’ll just say no.”

“You can’t. It’s part of how the school is set up—for the students’ own benefit. The students from the two courses are paired together differently for room duties every single month. That way, both sets of students get plenty of chances to see new faces and potentially meet someone they get along well with.”

“Oh. I see.”

“It must be pretty tough having to take care of a different person every month. You have to change your approach to suit their individual preferences and personality quirks. It means you get to meet more of the young ladies, but in your case, I think it would only increase your burden. It’s a little different for Seraphs and Exousias, though. They have an exclusive contract, so naturally, they only ever have to serve their own mistress. Once you get used to it, that’s got to be way easier.”

I was momentarily lost for words.

“I’ll do absolutely everything I can to keep your situation in mind. Doesn’t that sound good?” She smiled and tilted her head to the side in a cutesy fashion.

I couldn’t exactly deny what she was saying. Having to clean up after a

different person each month sounded like a real pain. “By the way, what’s an Exousia?”

Kirara had used that word as well, but she still hadn’t told me what it meant. I could surmise that it was something along the lines of a Seraph, but that was about it.

“Exousias are maids who enter into a contract one level lower than the Golden Contract, known as the Silver Contract. If a Societal Arts student isn’t sure yet if they really want to hire someone after graduation, they can give them a silver school badge to show that they want that maid to serve them exclusively while they’re still at the academy. Then the maid is their Exousia. Although, to be honest, it’s pretty common for Exousias to get hired after graduation anyway.”

“Huh. That doesn’t sound any easier than being a Seraph.”

“Nope.”

*Ugh. Seems like there’s really no escape for me.*

With me lost and defeated, Himeko was ready to deliver the finishing blow. “By the way, Misaki, why is it that you want to get a job at a good company? Is it to earn money by any chance?”

“That’s it in a nutshell.”

“Then why wouldn’t you want to earn money while you’re still at school?”

“Well, I’d love to if I could. I was thinking of getting a part-time job.” If I didn’t, I’d never be able to buy any daily necessities.

A devilish smile appeared on Himeko’s face. “Is that right? Then you’re *definitely* better off being my Seraph than not.”

“Why’s that?”

“Reason number one is that Seraphs get a special allowance.”

“What? Really?”

“Yup. The Domestic Arts students’ role is halfway between a student and an employee, so they all get paid a small amount. Seraphs and Exousias receive an

extra allowance on top of that due to the nature of their exclusive contracts. You'll earn roughly double what a normal student gets."

"Wow!" It was my first time hearing about this, but it was music to my ears.

"Reason number two is that being my Seraph grants you entry to the Sky Salon. That's something you can really use to your advantage."

"I can?"

"Even you must have a rough idea of the special status this place holds. The Sky Salon is highly exclusive even compared to the academy as a whole."

"True, it does seem like even being a Societal Arts student isn't enough to be allowed in."

"Exactly. It might be a bit uncomfortable to say it myself, but the only ones who can come here are a chosen few—and any guests they invite, of course. It shouldn't come as a big surprise, but that also includes some young ladies whose families own the kinds of "good companies" you want to work for. If you show them your hospitality, they'll remember your face and you'll be making connections. If you like, I can even introduce you to them with helpful oblique hints. If you work at the Sky Salon, they'll see you as the cream of the crop. That'll come in very handy for your future, don't you think?"

"You're talking about networking?"

"I don't like that word, but yes, basically. Whatever you call it, I don't think there's anything wrong with taking full advantage of the chances and circumstances you're given."

"I suppose."

Her tone didn't leave any room for opposition. In her mind, it was all decided. *Admittedly, it pretty much sounds like it all works in my favor.*

She opened the box, took out something from inside and put it on her own plate. "By the way, I thought you might like these."

When I saw what it was, I jumped in my seat. "Yes! I love them!"

The pleasant aroma tickled my nostrils. The faint scent of chocolate and strawberry immediately transported me into a world of pleasure.

I hadn't had lunch yet, so seeing it with an empty stomach had me drooling. I couldn't even help myself.

"Oh, good. I got the idea from your scrunchies. I figured you'd like them. It seems I made the right choice."

Yep, what Himeko produced from the box was, unmistakably, a donut. *My absolute favorite food!*

The mouthwatering treat that I could never buy unless they were on sale. The special dessert that I always wanted to get my hands on after persevering through the main course! I loved donuts a little *too* much, maybe! That was why I had a collection of donut-shaped scrunchies.

*Wow. It looks so incredible.*

"Hehe, looks like you want some."

Himeko picked up a knife and fork and cut the chocolate donut neatly into pieces as if she were eating fine French cuisine.

I was in awe of her. *Now that's a ladylike way to eat a donut. I never knew there was another method besides just grabbing them with your hands.*

"If you're my Seraph, you'll be able to eat high-quality donuts like these every single day." After going to all the effort of cutting it with a knife and fork, for some reason she then just grabbed a piece with her hands and held it up in front of my face. "Here. Take a bite."

I let out a moan. Himeko waved the donut from side to side before my eyes.

*If I eat this, that means I've agreed to become her Seraph.*

"Are you feeding me scraps from the table like an animal?"

"What a scandalous thing to say! I'm generously serving food to a hungry first-year student with my own hands." She brought the piece of donut closer to my mouth. "How about this. Taking your circumstances into account, what if we say you'll be my Seraph for one year?"

"A year? That's all?"

"Yes. After a year's gone by, the situation might have changed. I might not

even need a Seraph anymore. And for you, a year's not going to make that big a difference to your studies, right? Besides, I saved you from being expelled. I think you owe me for that."

That cinched it. I owed Himeko a *massive* debt; I couldn't just turn her down. I should have realized that from the start.

I steeled my nerves and opened my mouth. "Fair enough. I'll be your—  
mmph!"

The sweet sensation filled my whole mouth. The donut Himeko fed me was the most delicious thing I had ever tasted in my life.

## Chapter Four: A Seraph's Job

After I agreed to be Himeko's Seraph, she promptly took me to her room.

"Well then, what shall I ask you to do first?"

We were in François House, the dorm that housed the second-year Societal Arts students. Unlike the Domestic Arts students, who all shared a single dormitory, they had one for each year group. However, the size of each building was not that different from ours. In fact, Himeko's room was even larger than the one I was sharing with three other students; she had a kitchen, a living room, and a bedroom all to herself.

I started wondering at the excess of it all, but I quickly stopped myself. *This is all paid for by donations from the Societal Arts students' families, after all. I can't exactly complain.* Besides, our rooms were more than spacious enough. If I had all this to myself, I wouldn't have known what to do with it.

After a few moments' careful thought in the living room area, Himeko turned to me with a charming smile and said, "Oh, I know! First, you can help me get changed."

However, I couldn't agree to her request.

It wasn't that I had a particular aversion to helping her get changed. Just that there was a bigger problem to deal with first. A *much* bigger problem.

I decided I had to address the elephant in the room. "Um, can I ask you something?"

"By all means," she replied, apparently unconcerned by the horror of it all.

I spun all the way around to take in the whole room, then threw up my hands in despair. "Himeko, what the *hell* is up with all this *garbage*?!"

"Hmm?"

Unlike me, Himeko apparently had no trouble at all filling all this vast amount of space. It was like she was some kind of hoarder. There were mountains of



cardboard boxes and paper bags piled up all over the room.

At least half of this 400-square-foot room was crammed full. There was barely any room to walk. The boxes and paper bags looked like the kinds that clothes and books might have come in.

“How did your room end up this messy? Don’t you Societal Arts students get your rooms cleaned on a regular basis? What is your maid doing?” This bothered me enough that I couldn’t help hounding her for answers.

“I don’t let anyone come in here for cleaning. The Domestic Arts students are forced to do it, but we’re allowed to refuse.” She shrank back a little when she replied. It was possible I had come across as a little threatening.

“Why, because they might mistake it for you wanting to make them your Seraph?”

“Yes.”

“Even so, you could at least have someone in here to tidy up! Or, you know, if you really don’t want anyone coming in, you could clean up after yourself.”

“I don’t think it’s that bad.”

“Are you *kidding* me?!”

There was something *very* odd about her if she didn’t think there was anything wrong with the state of her room.

“Forget about that. I said I want to get changed! You’re going to help me! It’s an order from your mistress!”

“An order?”

“Come on, hurry up.”

She held her arms out wide and urged me to take her clothes off.

*Well, it’s not like I have to live here, I guess. If she’s okay with it, maybe it’s not that bad... Uh, nope. I can’t. It really is that bad.*

As Himeko’s Seraph, I was sure I’d have to come here pretty frequently. I didn’t want to have to keep dealing with a room in such terrible shape. It absolutely, definitely needed to be cleaned up.

“All right, then. You got it.” I pretended to obey for the moment and began stripping Himeko of her school uniform. “You’re the deputy chairman, and people call you a celestial. I’d never have expected you to be this lazy.”

“It’s hard work always being perfect in front of everyone. Can’t I at least do what I want in my own room?”

“Yeah, sure. Wait, is this a corset?”

After taking off her jacket, I figured her skirt would be next, but when I untucked her blouse, I noticed an unfamiliar sight. She appeared to be wearing a garment made up of a skirt and corset in one. Below that, she was wearing a hoop skirt.

“Is this the uniform all the Societal Arts students wear?”

“That’s right. Your uniform is designed for ease of movement, but for us, appearance is everything.”

*Hmm, I see.* It drew in her waist and made it look very slim, but it looked quite constricting. My uniform’s skirt was kind of plain, but I was sure it was far more comfortable.

Above all, putting this on in the morning probably took a lot of time.

“So, uh, how do I get this off?”

“Loosen the strings at the front, then undo the zipper in the back.”

“Aah, got it. So that’s how it works.”

“It’s designed to be put on without anyone else’s help.”

*I can see how it would be a problem if she couldn’t get dressed on her own. No matter how much regular maid service your room is getting, they can’t come by every morning.*

I removed it from her just as she explained, revealing her pure white panties and her seductive thighs.

*Her legs are so toned and slender. They’re beautiful.*

When I really thought about it, it was quite incredible to be undressing a gorgeous girl like this with my own two hands.

“Great! Now take off my blouse,” she said with a cheerful air, putting her arms out again. It seemed she didn’t care one bit about me seeing her underwear.

I was a little nervous as I untied the ribbon on her chest and reached for the buttons on her blouse.

*You know, undressing someone else is harder than I expected. It doesn’t work the same way as taking off my own clothes. It might take me a while to get the hang of it.*

After a bit of fumbling, I successfully unfastened all the buttons and removed her blouse.

“There. All done.”

“Teehee. Thank you.”

Now stripped to her underwear both above and below, Himeko began to spin around joyously in the center of the living room. Her long hair fanned out as she rotated. It was quite amusing to look at.

“Having a Seraph’s pretty great!”

“It sounds like you kind of wanted it after all.”

“A little bit. I mean, all my friends have lovely little maids taking care of their every whim. I try not to be jealous, but I can’t help it.”

“I can see why. It must be really nice.” It sounded like she’d had to struggle quite a bit in her own way.

“It *is* nice! Oh, now you need to dress me in something comfortable. Hmm, what shall I go for today?”

*Now’s my chance!*

Watching her buoyant sentiment, I decided it was time to execute my dastardly plan.

“Um, if you don’t mind, I could choose an outfit for you.”

“Oh, you want to do that?”

“Absolutely! Just leave it to me,” I replied cheerfully, careful to ensure she

could see nothing of my true intentions.

“Then I’ll let you take care of it, I guess. My clothes are all in the bedroom.”

“Got it. I’ll go and look.”

I left the living room area and went into the bedroom. It was filled to the brim as well, of course—no surprise there. Honestly, it seemed like a huge waste for all these clothes to be piled up unworn like yesterday’s trash.

*I bet there are a ton of things in here that she’s never even worn!*

Everywhere I looked, I saw expensive-looking designer clothes. But none of it fit the bill at this present moment. I was looking for something very specific.

I chuckled to myself. “Found it!”

I didn’t have to look far to find what I was looking for piled haphazardly on top of a rack with a bunch of other clothes. It appeared to be made of finer fabric, but otherwise it was basically identical to the one I normally wore.

With the garment in hand, I returned to the living room. I couldn’t *wait* to see Himeko’s reaction.

“Why don’t you put this on, Himeko?” With a smile of self-satisfaction, I showed her what I held in my hands.

She let out a tiny shriek. “Why on earth did you pick *that* out? There must have been tons of better options!”

“Right now, nothing’ll suit you better.” I held up the school’s designated tracksuit in front of her and steadily drew closer.

“No, I’m not putting that on. We’re celebrating your first day as a Seraph. I want to put on a casual dress or something and have a nice chat over tea!”

“We already talked and drank tea *and* had tasty donuts back at the Sky Salon. What we need to do now is clean up your room. I can’t treat you like a proper lady until that’s over and done with.”

“I don’t wanna! We can clean up some other time. Please, at least for today, I want you to do what I tell you.”

“No way. If you keep putting it off until later, it’ll never get done. Come on, I’ll

help you. We can do it together.”

I wasn't going to budge on this no matter what Himeko said. She looked absolutely repulsed, but she ended up wearing that tracksuit.



Still unwilling to give in, Himeko clung tightly to the sofa, shaking her head from side to side.

“Seriously? I went to all that trouble to help you. I expected gratitude, not revenge!”

“What do you mean? Helping you clean up your room is my way of thanking you. Look, all you have to do is pick up all the paper bags and put them in a garbage bag. I'll flatten all the boxes. A lot of them are empty, right?”

“Yes, but not all of them.” As she replied, she reluctantly began to move at last.

*So I have to check inside every single one? Ugh, what a pain.*

“My father sends me new clothes every month. Opening them all takes forever, and after a while I ran out of places to put them all, so I started just leaving them in the boxes.”

“Right, fair enough.”

It was a setback, but not a devastating one. For now, I opened each box and just tucked the non-empty ones away into a corner. The ones that were empty, I flattened with my feet.

Himeko spent a while absorbed in her own task, then she suddenly shot up. “Misaki! I just remembered I have some things to give you.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. An apron and a headpiece. Now, where did I put them?” She started looking around the room.

“The school already gave me an apron.” I hadn't had a chance to use it in class yet, but a brand-new apron was ready and waiting in my room.

“That's for normal students. Sky Salon maids get a special kind of apron. Every

salon has its own design, in fact. That way everyone knows what salon you belong to.”

“Wow, I had no idea.” *So I’ll get one of those aprons the other maids at the Sky Salon were wearing?*

“Found it! Here, give them a try.”

“All right.”

I took the apron and headpiece, then unwrapped them and quickly put them on.

The apron looked similar to mine—both were embroidered with the school logo—but it hung down lower at the front and had larger frills. The lacy, ruffled headpiece had triangular points with stars at the tips.

I laughed awkwardly. This was my first time fully dressed up as a maid, so I was a little embarrassed. “How do I look?”

“Positively adorable! They really suit you. Hey, wouldn’t it be such a waste if you got your brand-new apron dirty? Why don’t we call it a day for now?”

“The whole point is that this gets dirty instead of my uniform. Let’s stay focused and get your room clean!”

“Oh, fine.”

Himeko’s momentary hopes of slacking off were quickly dashed. She resigned herself with a sigh and carried on picking up the paper bags.

Not long afterward, when we were finally about halfway done, the bell rang to signal that it was six o’clock.

“I guess we can stop here for today. I have to get back to my dorm at some point.”

Himeko sighed with exhaustion. “It’s certainly much tidier than it was. I’m totally fine with leaving it like this forever.”

“Well, I’m not! We’re going to pick it back up tomorrow. I have class in the afternoon from now on, so I won’t really have time until after that. That means we’ll have to work even harder. No time to sit around and drink tea at the Sky

Salon.” I had to head off Himeko’s other plans so she couldn’t wheedle her way out of this.

In a fed-up tone, she grumbled, “How’d I end up with a Seraph who’s so mean to her mistress? It’s like I have a demon maid!”

“If your room’s a mess, I can’t take proper care of you. As soon as we’re done cleaning, I’ll do whatever you want, so let’s give it our all and get it finished.”

“Really? Whatever I want?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Then I’ll work as hard as I can. In the meantime, I’ll start writing a list of everything I want you to do when we’re done.”

“Sure, whatever works.”

*Looks like Himeko’s pretty excited about finally getting a Seraph. She’s more into the idea than I thought. I guess she has had to deal with everything on her own so far.*

I was going to get paid for being her Seraph, so I didn’t have any objection to being nice and helping her out. It would just have to come after we got her room cleaned up.

“Anyway, since I’m leaving, I’ll take the trash out.” I hoisted up the four garbage bags full of paper and cardboard.

I knew I couldn’t give the trash to Himeko and make her carry it outside. Rumors would start spreading that I was a terrible maid who was forcing my mistress to do all the work. Then I’d probably get expelled. Besides, it was all just paper at the end of the day. The bags weren’t so heavy that I couldn’t lift them on my own.

Himeko opened the door for me. After taking one step through, I turned around. *I suppose I should say something. It wouldn’t hurt to try to sound a little bit like a maid, right?*

“Uhm, I realize I’m leaving kind of early.” When I was done with that preamble, I smiled at Himeko as charmingly as I could manage. “But I hope you have a good evening, milady.”

Remembering Himeko's reaction afterward made me grin to myself. Her whole face lit up with a smile so broad that I felt a little bashful looking at her.



Wearily, I opened the door and called out a greeting to my roommates. The day's events hadn't been physically exhausting, but they had still taken a toll on me.

I knew Kirara would want to hear all about the Sky Salon. What I didn't anticipate was locking eyes with her the moment I stepped inside. She had just seemingly come out of the bathroom.

"Oh! Kirara!"

I didn't have time to fit in another word before she ran over to me with such intensity that I thought she was going to grab me. "I see what you're wearing! Ugh, I'm so jealous!"

Then, she really *did* grab me.

"Hey! Wait! Stop!"

"Those are the special apron and headpiece that only Sky Salon maids get to wear, right? I knew it! I knew you'd get them!"

I realized I should have taken them off before I got home. *No wonder people were staring at me when I arrived back at the dorm.* I replied with a vague agreement, and she held me by the scruff of the neck and shook me back and forth.

"What was the Sky Salon like? Did you meet Lady Kagura? Is anyone looking for a new Seraph?"

"Look, calm down, okay?" If she kept shaking me, I wasn't sure I'd stay conscious.

"I am calm! Now, spit out everything you know about the Sky Salon and everyone in it! Have you been there this whole time?"

There was nothing I could do to get Kirara's burning curiosity under control. I was reduced to a human bobblehead until one of our other roommates heard the noise and came to my rescue.





“But that’s INSANE!”

When I told Kirara about my visits to the Sky Salon and Himeko’s dorm room, she practically exploded. I had a vague sense of déjà vu.

“Not only did you get treated to tea and donuts at the Sky Salon, but Lady Himeko invited you to her room afterward?!”

“Um, yeah. That’s right.”

Kirara was trembling all over. She seemed more than a little jealous.

I decided not to tell her that I made Himeko clean up her own room. I had the feeling she’d slap me, then slap me again for good measure.

“It was tough to believe, but I guess you really are a celestial now, Misaki.” She stared into the distance. “My best friend, a celestial.”

*I’m her best friend now?*

“That still makes me sound way more important than I am. It sounds like I’m basically just going to be serving tea up there.”

“It doesn’t matter what you’re doing there. If you’re allowed in, you’re a celestial.”

“Fair enough,” I said, thinking better of disagreeing any further. This whole subject seemed to make Kirara *very* agitated. The thought of becoming a Seraph, especially to the kind of high-class lady I was now the servant of, really got her fired up.

“Now you’ll be hanging out in the Sky Salon every day after school, right?”

“Maybe. I dunno. It looks like I’ll mostly be going to Himeko’s room this week.”

“Huh? What are you doing in there?”

“Oh, uh, well...”

*I can’t tell her that I’m helping Himeko clean up her pigsty of a room. If she finds out what a slob Himeko is, it’ll shatter all her illusions.*

“You know, chatting. Getting to know each other better. I have to learn all the little details about Himeko’s lifestyle.”

I’d just said the first thing that came into my head, but Kirara looked back with a very serious expression. “Hmm, yeah. That’s really important. Sounds like you’re taking the job pretty seriously considering you had no interest in being a maid to begin with.”

“Yeah, I suppose. You know what they say—when in Rome, do as the Romans do. I’ve been given the honor of being Himeko’s Seraph, so I’m going to give it my all.”

“That’s the spirit! You should be ready to work your fingers to the bone to make your mistress happy!”

After a pause, I said, “Sure!”

“Gah, it still makes me so jealous, though. You’re the first girl in our year to get a special apron! It’s so unfair!”

Until we went to bed, Kirara spent the rest of the evening looking at me and occasionally muttering, “It’s so unfair.”



After class the next day, I returned to Himeko’s room as promised.

“Do I really have to wear this again?” She looked up at me with puppy dog eyes.

“Of course. I told you, we’re going to keep working at this until your room’s all clean. That’s what you agreed to.”

“Fine. I get it.” Himeko pouted, but she acquiesced.

After helping her get changed a second time, I felt like I was getting a little more used to it. *Maybe a tracksuit’s easier than other clothes, though.* I tried to imagine what it would be like putting her in a dress—which I was sure I’d have a chance to do soon. Despite myself, I hoped I’d get a chance to dress up my mistress in something really stunning. *I bet being dressed to the nines would really suit her.*

“Now, let’s see if we can get it all done today.”

“Sounds good!”

Himeko worked a lot more actively this time, so our progress was much quicker. Soon enough, all the boxes and paper bags were cleared out of the living room, which was restored to the wide-open space it was supposed to be. “Today” was a bit ambitious, but it definitely wasn’t going to take all week.

“By the way, is there anyone else from the Sky Salon who’s looking for a Seraph?”

“Huh? You’re bored with being mine already?”

“No, no, no. It’s about my roommate. She *really* wants to be a Seraph. It’s basically all she lives for. Last night, she kept staring at me and muttering about how unfair it is that I’m a Seraph and she isn’t.” *It was like she was cursing me under her breath.*

“I see. Well, that’s the same goal all the Domestic Arts students have.” Teasingly, she added, “Except you, I guess.”

“Look, uh, let’s focus on my roommate, all right? She especially wants to serve one of the young ladies from the Sky Salon. I have to at least ask.”

“Fair enough. Hmm, I think she might be out of luck, though. They all have Seraphs already. It is possible Kagura will let some new members join, and they would then need Seraphs. That’s probably your friend’s only hope.”

“Oh.” *Kirara’s going to be disappointed.*

“I mean, it’s not like there’s a rule that you can only have one Seraph. There might be someone who’s thinking of choosing another one.”

“Now that I think about it, Kagura has two, right? The Ayakas are both her Seraphs.”

“Yeah. Some people have even been known to have five Seraphs. No one in the Sky Salon, though.”

“Wow, that’s a lot.”

“That way, they can have all kinds of different maids lined up. A housemaid, a kitchen maid, and so on.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Maybe all hope wasn't lost for Kirara after all. *It would be nice to have her there at the Sky Salon too. It's kind of daunting to be the only first-year student. Plus, it would make her get over this crazy jealous streak. Hopefully.*



On the third day, the end of our quest was in sight at last. We had already thrown out all the garbage the day before, so it was just a matter of cleaning the floor.

I didn't need Himeko to help with this part. It wasn't a particularly time-consuming task, and I had a plan in mind that required Himeko to be out of the room. With an upbeat “Don't worry, I'll handle the rest!” I sent Himeko out to have dinner while I stayed behind.

*It should be about thirty minutes to an hour before she gets back.*

I cleaned the floor in a few minutes and walked over to the kitchen area. It didn't have much of a lived-in feel. Most likely, she'd hardly ever used it. Still, it had all the necessary equipment.

The dorm was outfitted with cafes and restaurants, so there wasn't really any need for the students to do their own cooking. The thing I was about to make was readily available to buy, as well. You could easily get tastier ones than mine.

Nevertheless, I had to show Himeko my gratitude. She'd really helped me out. Kirara had said so as well. Not only had Himeko prevented me from being expelled, but making me into her Seraph had given me all kinds of special advantages. Originally, it had seemed like more trouble than it was worth, but now I was pretty content. Not that many people would have been as considerate as she was.

That was why I wanted to show my gratitude by making her some homemade donuts.

*I just hope she likes them.*

I opened the refrigerator and took out the batter I'd sneakily stowed there. I'd

done all the prep work in my room beforehand.

The ingredients had come from a little supermarket on campus. I didn't have any money to pay for them, of course, so I'd borrowed some from Kirara.

*She said I could repay her by introducing her to young ladies looking for new Seraphs, but that's not looking all that likely, so I'd better pay her back as soon as I can.*

"Right!"

I had to get them fried before Himeko came back, so I got started right away. *I'll shape the donuts while the oil is heating.*

I couldn't make the kinds of elaborate donuts you'd get in a store—they were going to be old-fashioned donuts that were more like cookies—but I was confident in myself. I knew they'd be delicious.

Once I'd fried them to a beautiful golden brown, I covered them in a warmed-up chocolate sauce. Then I arranged them neatly on a plate and put them on the table just as I heard the door opening.

*She's back!*

"Welcome home," I said, hurrying over to greet her.

She looked at me with a measure of surprise. "Oh. Thanks."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm just not used to having someone here when I get back. It's been a long time since I heard someone say 'welcome home.'"

She smiled as she spoke. I hadn't realized that something so small would make her so happy. Her reaction made me feel all warm and fuzzy as well.

"Something smells nice."

"Oh, right! Um, I made you some donuts. You're not too full from dinner, are you?"

"You made them for me? Don't worry, I never stuff myself too much. Besides, there's always room for dessert." Himeko gave a lighthearted wink.

"Thank goodness! I'll make tea, so go ahead and sit down."

“Sure thing.” She took one step through the door, then suddenly said, “That reminds me! Now that the cleaning’s finished, that means you’re going to start treating me like your mistress, right?”

“Yup.”

That was what I’d promised her. Himeko had also said she’d write a list of things she wanted me to do, so I was going to do my best to fulfill her wishes.

“In that case, there’s one thing I’d *really* like you to do.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, basically...” Even though we were alone in her room, Himeko leaned forward and whispered it into my ear.

“Gosh! I never took you for that kind of person. I guess you really like being treated like a queen.”

“No! It’s not like that! It’s just the new in thing, so I hear. They call it the ‘sacred vow.’ Supposedly, it strengthens the bond between a mistress and her Seraph.” She turned bright red as she fought to justify her request.

“I don’t mind. We can’t do it right in front of the door, though. It won’t have the right atmosphere. Let’s go into the living room.”

“Good idea.”

We went inside and I turned to face her. *I’m starting to blush already. It’s a special request from Himeko, though. I have to do it.*

I looked directly into her eyes. This was our true beginning. I was going to serve her for a year. She would be my one and only mistress.

She had given me the golden badge that showed I was her Seraph, and this was my repayment for that. The proof of my sworn allegiance to her.

I kneeled and lowered my head.

“Misaki Hotaru, do you acknowledge me as your mistress and swear to accompany me through life at the academy?”

“Yes. I swear.”

Himeko offered her right hand. I respectfully took it in both of mine and

brought it up to my lips.





Now I had sworn to her. I had officially accepted becoming Himeko's Seraph.

"I am at your command, milady."

"Excellent." She smiled like a true lady and nodded in a satisfied manner.

*Himeko's like a queen—and the academy is a kingdom of girls.*

## Chapter Five: A Very Dramatic Monday

“Please! Let me be your Seraph!”

It was about two weeks after I started at Amanotsuka Academy. The Domestic Arts students were helping to lay the tables and serve lunch in the dining hall, all of them rushing back and forth as the young ladies of the Societal Arts program arrived to be led to their seats.

That was when it happened. One of the Societal Arts students—the academy’s high-class young noblewomen—was approached by one of the Domestic Arts students, the girls training to serve them as maids.

We Domestic Arts students were here learning all the ins and outs of being a maid while also serving the young ladies at the academy. We were being trained in cooking, cleaning, laundry, and every other skill that would help us take care of their every need.

Certain students, if they were very lucky, would find that one of the ladies took a fancy to them and offered them an exclusive contract. A maid who entered into the so-called “Golden Contract” was known as a Seraph, while one who entered into the “Silver Contract” was known as an Exousia. Either way, it meant they’d be serving only that one mistress during their time at school.

This was a special honor for the Domestic Arts students. It was a sign that they were recognized as particularly skilled maids, which in turn led to better grades and special perks like higher pay.

Seraphs had an additional benefit over Exousias: they were guaranteed a job after graduation. They’d be able to carry on working for their mistress in her household. There were exceptions, of course, but in general, being a Seraph gave a student a very special status at the academy.

Now, one of the Domestic Arts students was begging one of the Societal Arts students to let her be her Seraph. The former was there in front of the latter, bowing so deeply that her head was practically touching the floor.

In an instant, the room grew so quiet that you could have heard a pin drop.

The Domestic Arts students, who had been rushing all over the place, froze on the spot. The Societal Arts students filtering into the dining hall also began to stare, wondering what was going on.

Tension hung in the air. A cold sweat reached my temples. I'd only just joined the school, but even I knew what a terrible mistake this student was making.

She should really have known better, since she was the same student who had told me all the ins and outs of the academy: my roommate, Kirara.

The students in the Social Arts program all came from wealthy families who were able to make substantial donations to the academy. Typically, their parents or grandparents ran major companies or hospitals. In some cases they were related to famous artists or other celebrities. They were the kinds of girls you would normally only see in movies or on TV.

By contrast, the students enrolled in the Domestic Arts program were all like me. They came from the most normal families you could imagine. Unlike me, however, they generally had the ambition of working as maids in the households of young ladies like the Societal Arts students.

Maids and mistresses. The servants and the served. That was our relationship.

On top of that, the Domestic Arts students' tuition and living costs were all paid for by donations from the Societal Arts students' families, so we owed them a lot.

*Which is why Kirara really, really shouldn't be interrupting one of them when she just wants to eat her lunch.*

Kirara herself had told me that you couldn't just go around asking the ladies to let you be their Seraph. They had to choose us, not the other way around. Kind of obvious when you thought about it. Doing it anyway was considered rude, ungrateful, and generally pretty unforgivable.

*Kirara's the one who told me that! So why is she doing this?!*

I did my best to keep my sudden dizziness in check as I gazed at the girl Kirara had prostrated herself before. It was Kagura Mikage, who had a

stratospherically high status even among the other Societal Arts students.

The money donated by Lady Kagura's family apparently amounted to an absurdly high sum. As a result, she had control over the highly popular Sky Salon, whose members were honored with the name "celestials" even by other Societal Arts students.

Being Kagura's Seraph would guarantee anyone a rosy future. It would probably be more secure than getting hired by a company on the stock market. It was the kind of thing anyone would have on their wish list. The problem was, Lady Kagura already had two Seraphs: a pair of twin sisters both named Ayaka Kokonoe, though their names were written with different kanji.

The twins were a little different from the average Domestic Arts student, but putting that aside for now, the chances of Lady Kagura wanting or needing another Seraph were pretty slim. She already had two.

*I mean, there's nothing stopping her from taking on as many Seraphs as she wants. I bet a family like hers could easily have ten or twenty servants. I just haven't heard anything about her wanting a new Seraph.*

Why might I have heard such rumors? Well, fate had led me down a strange path, and I was now the Seraph of another Sky Salon member, Himeko Amanotsuka. It was no coincidence that Himeko's unusual surname matched the name of the academy. She belonged to the Amanotsuka family, who had founded the school. She was a cut above the rest, for sure.

Now that I was Himeko's Seraph, I visited the Sky Salon every day. There, I served tea not only to Himeko, but to the other celestials as well, so I inevitably picked up on bits of gossip—none of which in any way suggested Lady Kagura was looking for another Seraph right now.

*I kind of have the feeling it's not completely impossible, though.*

Lady Kagura had a regal bearing, as you'd expect from the head of the Sky Salon. I still didn't know her all that well, but I didn't see her as a person who would just give the cold shoulder to someone making a serious request. I was sure she'd listen to what Kirara had to say, then answer accordingly.

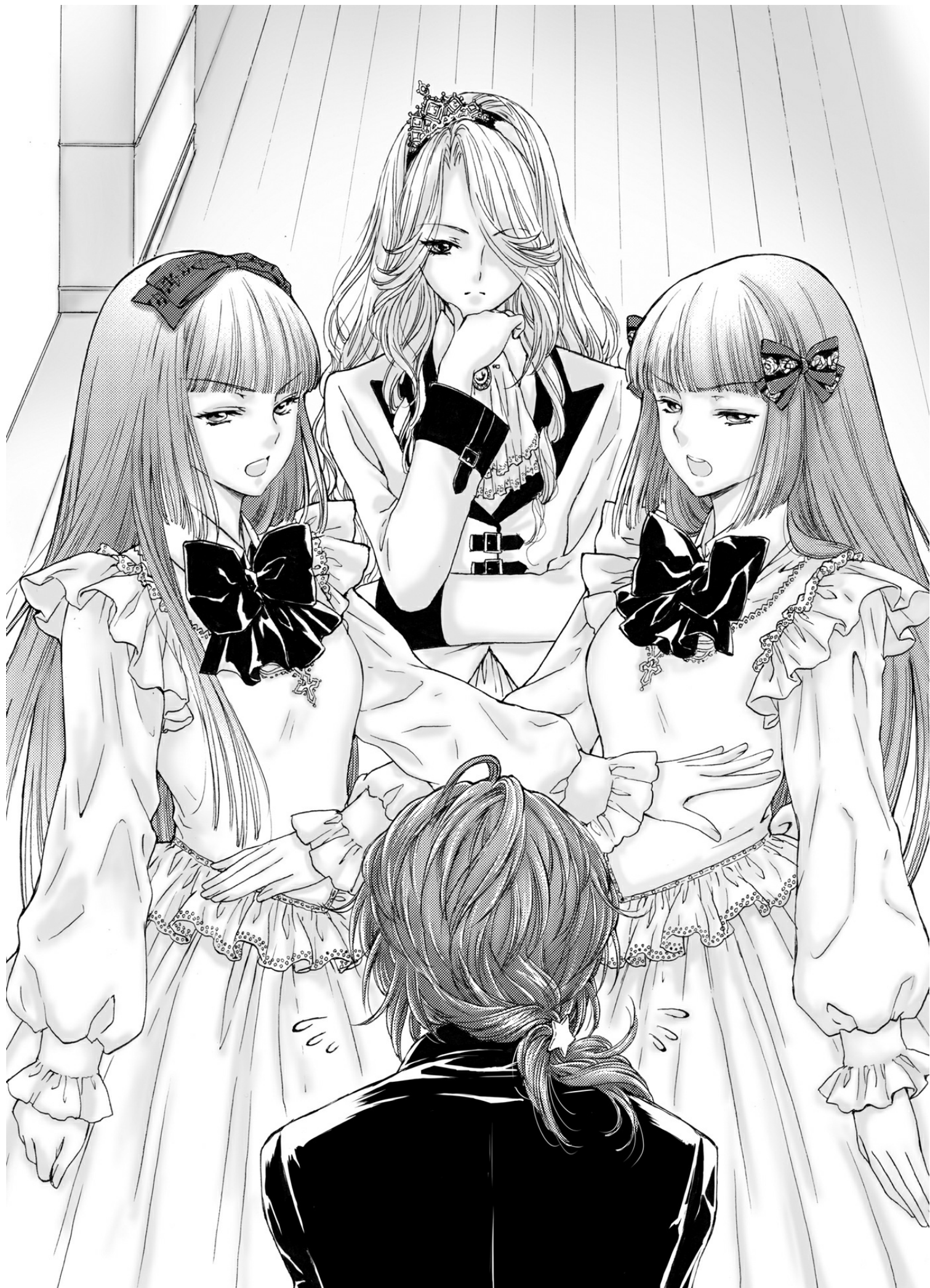
*Maybe she'll be swayed by Kirara's earnest enthusiasm and agree to it after*

*all.*

Kirara lowered her head again. “Please!”

The number of students gathered around them only kept growing. Everyone wanted to see where this was going—what Lady Kagura would do.

However, it wasn’t Lady Kagura that reacted first, but the girls on either side of her, the Kokonoe sisters. They took a step forward and formed a cross with their arms, blocking access to Lady Kagura like royal guards.



“Get out of here. Where are your manners?”

“You think you can just *ask* to be made a Seraph? Learn your place!”

They were only speaking the truth, but the sisters’ tone was a little harsh. Still, as Lady Kagura’s Seraphs, and as students from the year above, if they didn’t take Kirara to task, there was potential for this to lead to a breakdown in discipline. It was too great an outrage to go unchecked.

Even I knew that. Kirara *definitely* should have known. For some reason, she’d decided to go ahead and do it anyway.

Kirara made absolutely no secret of how eager she was to become a Seraph. She practically burned with desire. She was working twice as hard as everyone else to become a truly first-rate maid.

If Lady Kagura had responded at this stage with the same kind of strict rebuff as the Kokonoe sisters, all her efforts would have been wasted. *No one will want Kirara as their Seraph if Lady Kagura brands her as a waste of space.*

Kirara was the first friend I had made after arriving at the academy. If I could, I wanted to help her out.

*Lady Kagura knows me, more or less. Maybe if I ask as well, it’ll at least let her sidestep the worst-case scenario. Should I, though? I bet Kirara wouldn’t want me to step in. If she did, she’d have asked me beforehand. She must have wanted to do this all by herself.*

It was hard to just stand by and watch, though, knowing what I knew about Kirara and Lady Kagura. Lost in indecision, I stood frozen until I suddenly felt a hand on my shoulder.

“What’s wrong, Misaki?”

The voice in my ear was a familiar one. It was my mistress, Himeko Amanotsuka. *Maybe she’ll be able to smooth things over.*

I turned my head and begged for her help. “Himeko, do something! Kirara asked Lady Kagura to let her be her Seraph, and now the Ayakas are standing in the way, and Lady Kagura’s not even saying anything!”

“Try to calm down, Misaki. That’s too much all at once.”

She gently massaged my shoulders. I felt the tension drain out of me.

With a slightly more level head, I thought it all through a bit more and explained the situation to Himeko a little more clearly.

She replied, "Right, okay. So the first-year student bending down on the floor over there is your friend?"

"Yeah. Her name's Kirara Hoshino."

Despite being admonished by the Kokonoe sisters, Kirara showed no sign of backing down. She stayed where she was and kept repeating her entreaty to Lady Kagura. The longer this went on, the worse her position was.

Himeko sighed into my ear. "No matter how badly she wants to be Kagura's Seraph, this is a pretty reckless course of action. I admire her bravery, but it wasn't a good idea."

"Yeah, and Kirara should know better. She's the one who told me how everything works around here."

"I see." She looked over at Lady Kagura and Kirara, but after a moment, she took her hands off my shoulders and said, "It doesn't look like a situation I can stick my nose into. Better to just leave it to Kagura."

"What? You're not going to help?"

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not just coldly brushing her aside. I just don't think my help is really needed."

"But...!"

I couldn't imagine how she could look at this situation and decide her help wasn't needed. Clearly, Kirara was up a creek without a paddle.

When I pouted, Himeko chuckled and pointed toward Kirara and Lady Kagura. "See? Kagura's making the Ayakas stand down."

I looked over. After what felt like an eternity, Lady Kagura had raised both her hands to call off the Kokonoe sisters. "Ayakas, return to preparing my lunch, if you would. Everyone else, please go about your day. You don't need to worry about me."



She raised her voice for the latter parts to ensure that all the onlookers heard. Not once did she look in Kirara's direction.

"Understood," said the twins in perfect unison. They walked off and continued with their tasks.

Kirara stayed in place with her head lowered, but Lady Kagura showed no sign of saying anything to her. The Societal Arts students started moving again with nonchalant expressions, while the other Domestic Arts students nervously returned to their posts.

"Does that mean it's over?" I asked.

"For now, I guess," Himeko replied. She didn't sound all that convinced, and it didn't look like things had been wrapped up neatly or anything.

"What do you think'll happen to Kirara?"

"Nothing, probably. Kagura's decided not to do anything, so that should be the end of it."

"Huh? Really?" I couldn't follow at all. What did that mean?

"Now, come on. Show me to my seat and get my lunch ready. Yours too, of course."

"Sure, I guess," I replied hesitantly, feeling a cold sweat on my temples again.

In theory, there were no assigned seats in the dining hall. Everyone could sit wherever they wanted. However, there were a lot of unspoken rules, with plenty of seats essentially reserved for members of specific salons. This included Himeko and Lady Kagura—and as Himeko's Seraph, I was a member of the Sky Salon too, and had to attend to her needs during lunch. That of course meant I had to sit and eat lunch with her.

Part of me wished I could eat with my classmates instead, but it wasn't that big of a deal. I had to prioritize Himeko.

Since Himeko always sat by Lady Kagura, leading her to her table would mean going right over to where Kirara was still bowing down on the floor. It felt very, very awkward. I didn't know what I would say to her, or whether I should say anything at all.

When I didn't start moving, Himeko took my hand and pulled me along. "Let's go."

"But what are we going to do about Kirara?"

"I told you, we don't have to do a thing. It's up to Kagura, and she's clearly decided she isn't all that bothered. We don't need to start worrying on her behalf."

"You really think we can just leave her like that?"

"Yup, I do."

Himeko walked over to Lady Kagura and said hello, then sat down in the seat right across from her—the same seat she always took.

"Now, Misaki, bring me my lunch."

"Oh. Right."

As I set about doing so, I couldn't help wondering if it was really okay to just leave Kirara on the floor like that. It felt kind of mean. I glanced over at her a few times, but she stayed in the exact same position and didn't look at me once.

*Is she going to stay like that all through lunch?*

I really, *really* wanted to comment on it, but Himeko had said not to step in. She was my mistress, so I had to listen to her.

My one consolation was that Kirara never lifted her head and met my gaze. If she'd looked right at me, I was sure I'd have ended up saying something.

After lunch that day, I had absolutely no memory of what the food had tasted like.



When I got back to the classroom after lunch, I made a beeline straight for Kirara.

"Kirara, have you got a sec?"

"Sure. What is it?"

In the end, she hadn't even eaten. She'd just stayed there with her head on the floor until Lady Kagura left. As much as I admired her courage and determination, it didn't seem like her plan was all that effective. Lady Kagura hadn't said a single word to her. Nor had any of the other Sky Salon members sitting at the same table; they'd all followed Lady Kagura's lead and eaten quietly.

I had sat among them, the lone first year at the table and the only one getting worked up. As Kirara's friend, I was starting to think I should have tried a bit harder to convince Himeko to step in.

"Uhm, I'm sorry," I said, trying to express my regret for not doing more.

"What do you have to apologize for?" Kirara bluntly replied.

"I mean, I know you didn't exactly ask for my help, but I still feel like I should have at least asked Himeko to say something, even if it did get me in her bad books."

"Hey, like you said, I didn't ask for any help. This is something I chose to do all on my own. I know it's a little crazy, but that's how eager I am to be Lady Kagura's Seraph. There's no other way to get her attention." All the while, Kirara kept her gaze fixed straight ahead. Her eyes betrayed no hint of regret or self-doubt.

"If you like, I could try talking to Lady Kagura directly. Put in a good word for you, maybe."

"I told you, I don't need your help. You just keep living your life, Misaki. Act the same tomorrow as you did today. This is my battle to fight."

*Tomorrow? What's happening tomorrow?*

"Are you saying you're gonna do it again?"

"You bet I am. Until Lady Kagura herself tells me to stop, I'm never giving up."

I groaned softly. Her ability to stay positive despite being ignored so completely was kind of impressive, but all that tension in the air had been too much for me to handle. "But why? Don't you think it's a little reckless?"

Kirara raised one eyebrow and glared at me with loathing. "Why? Ha! You're

one to talk.” She jabbed me with a finger to punctuate this.

“Me? What did I do?”

“Of course, perfect little Misaki could never hurt a fly. Why, you have no idea about your own wicked ways.”

“Wicked ways? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t try to deny it. Think back on what happened after you became Lady Himeko’s Seraph—and what you said to me.”

*Huh? What’s she talking about?*

I furrowed my brow and thought as hard as I could.

*Oh, right. I know.*



It was the first weekend after Himeko made me her Seraph. After drinking some tea at the Sky Salon, we both went back to her room like always.

“Misaki, why don’t you stay the night?”

“Huh?”

I’d been spending time in Himeko’s room almost every day. This was largely because Himeko had gotten very into the spirit of having a Seraph and was eagerly giving me orders to do stuff for her, like cleaning up and helping her get changed.

When I suggested that if she’d wanted a Seraph that badly, she should have picked someone a little more qualified, all she would say in response was “I have my reasons.” It sounded like she didn’t want to talk about it, so I didn’t press the matter, but it was definitely puzzling.

It was up to her, at the end of the day. I’d agreed to serve her for one whole year, and I was basically equivalent to a contractual employee. If she didn’t want to say anything, that was her right.

There was some give and take involved in our relationship, but we were coexisting pretty comfortably, all things considered.

Still, I hadn’t expected this new proposal. It came when I’d just taken her

clothes off after she asked me to help her change into something more comfortable.

“Stay the night? In your room, you mean?”

“Where else?” she said with a grin, slipping her arms into the sleeves of the frilly blouse I was holding up.

“I’m fine with it, but is that kind of thing allowed?”

It was early spring, so there was still a slight chill in the air. For warmth, I added a purple poncho over the blouse, with a lacy pattern at the hem. The skirt I’d picked out was a gray flared one with a low-key feel.

All of these were gifts from her parents. They looked like the same kinds of things you could buy anywhere, but I could tell from touching them that there was a big difference in quality. They had probably cost quite a lot.

*What a waste that she left them all untouched.*

“Not for normal students, obviously. Seraphs are the only ones permitted to stay in anyone else’s dorm. Even Exousias aren’t allowed.”

I wasn’t sure about staying the night. It would mean I’d be with Himeko right up till bedtime, so I’d have to spend longer taking care of her.

Noticing my uncertainty, Himeko asked, “Are you worried you won’t have any time to study?”

“Yeah, kind of.”

The reason I’d come to this school was because not only the tuition, but also the room and board were totally free. What I hadn’t expected was that to make up for it, I’d be forced to train to be a maid. We hardly had any normal classes, so if I wanted to keep pace with students from other schools, I’d have to put in a lot of extra effort on my own. A great deal of my free time was going to be taken up by studying.

“I don’t mind, though. I’ll stay the night if you want me to.”

“Really?”

After thinking it over a little, I’d changed my mind. It wasn’t that working as a

maid was completely unenjoyable, after all. I was used to doing all the chores on my own to begin with, so I didn't hate housework or anything. Plus, I was earning good money from being Himeko's Seraph.

*I can put off some of that studying until next year and figure it out then. In the meantime, I might as well immerse myself in this strange new environment and enjoy it as much as I can.*

"Sure, I'll stay here. I am a little worried that you'll start giving me weird orders, though."

It seemed like Himeko had been dreaming of finally experiencing life with a Seraph, which meant her invitation to stay was all part of that.

Himeko pouted, puffing her cheeks out. "How rude. When have I ever asked you to do anything weird? Everything's been well within the realms of normal maid duties. Besides, staying the night will earn you a ton of overtime pay, so it's for your benefit, too."

"I was only kidding."

Just like I was trying to take Himeko's needs into consideration, she was thinking a lot about my circumstances as well. She was the best mistress I could've hoped for.

I continued, "But if I am staying the night, I'll have to go back and grab a few things."

*At the very least, I'll need fresh underwear for tomorrow and pajamas for tonight. I'll also need a toothbrush and a towel. Maybe I can just borrow one of Himeko's towels, though.*

I wasn't sure what to do about bathing, and I wanted a complete change of clothes for the next morning. Going back to my own room first felt like a requirement.

"Nah, we can just buy everything you need," she replied with a proud smile.

"We can?"

"You've seen the stores on the first floor of the dorm, right? You can buy all kinds of things there, from delicious treats to daily necessities."

Just as she said, the Societal Arts students' dormitory, François House, had a range of trendy-looking stores that reminded me of hotel shops. I'd only peeked in from the outside, but all the artfully displayed goods looked very expensive. For me, stores like that were a different world.

There was even a gift shop. It made me want to be like, "Are high school students really going to use that?"

Still, when I thought about it, the Societal Arts students were well-to-do young ladies. There were probably all kinds of reasons they'd need to buy stuff at particular stores. Reasons a commoner like me could never even imagine.

The one store I'd seen that looked like it might actually be relevant to me was similar to a convenience store, but far more spectacular. It certainly did sell both treats and necessities, as Himeko had said.

There was one slight problem, though. "You do realize I'm flat broke?"

Tragic as that was, it was the truth. Technically I did have a tiny bit of cash, but that didn't mean I could waste it. My wages weren't going to arrive until the end of the month. I had to be frugal until then.

Himeko sighed in frustration. "When did I suggest you'd have to pay for anything? This is all my idea, so obviously I'll take care of it."

"Oh."

"Is that it? 'Oh'? Let's just get going." Exasperatedly, she took my hand and pulled me toward the door.

"Take care of it? You mean, you'll pay for it all?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

"I can't let you do that." Even if she was the deputy chairman and had money to spare, that didn't mean she should be using it to spoil me.

"What's the problem? I'm the one who asked you to stay the night out of nowhere. I went in expecting this."

"But I could just go back to my room and get all the things I need."

The more I insisted, the more annoyed she became. She turned to face me.

“Could you please learn to read the room just a little? I’m telling you I want to go shopping with you. I want to buy you what you need for an overnight stay.”

This stopped me in my tracks. *Basically, she’s saying she really wants to buy me new things, so I should go along with it. I kind of wish she’d just said that in the first place.*

“I see where you’re coming from, but I still think I should pay for it myself. I’m the one who’s going to use it all.”

“How? Aren’t you broke?”

“On credit, maybe?”

“They don’t offer that.” She gave a self-satisfied snort of laughter at defeating my plan so easily. “Misaki, you can be really stubborn sometimes, but you really don’t need to combat me on this one. I want to spoil you a little, so just accept it. As if I’d make my Seraph spend her own money. People would start gossiping about me. They’d say I was a good-for-nothing wretch who can’t even take proper care of one Seraph.”

“Really? That’s crazy!”

“That’s how it is. Actually, even if you did have cash, you still wouldn’t be able to use it in these stores. You need a special card.”

She reached into her wallet and pulled out a small black card. It didn’t appear to be a credit card, but it had an aura of celebrity chic about it.

“I guess you must be able to use cash in your dorm, but in ours, you have to pay for everything with one of these.”

“Gosh.”

Himeko explained that they had a certain amount of points added every month, and within that they were able to buy as much as they wanted. It sounded sort of like an allowance. *I imagine it’s so they don’t have to carry around large amounts of cash, and to prevent them spending far too much.*

When I asked how much the monthly allowance let her buy, she indifferently replied, “Who knows? I’ve never used it all up, so I don’t know what the limit is. It’s all calculated in points, anyway. I don’t even think about the real prices.”



“I see.” I wondered if that was because Himeko didn’t go shopping all that much or because the amount of points was so large that using it all up was unrealistic.

“Anyway, you understand now, right? Let’s just go. If it makes you so uncomfortable to have any money spent on you, you can think of your work for me as repayment.”

That was enough to clinch it. I was able to convince myself that this was okay. “Fair enough.”

And so, we finally headed to the shops.



“Maybe we should start with your underwear.”

The first store Himeko brought me to was filled with basic commodities. Just seeing the window display, with its obviously expensive items such as elaborately designed tea sets and aromatherapy pots made me sigh. I instinctively looked for the price tags and only barely caught sight of them; they were so small that they could easily be overlooked.

“Hmm... Aromatherapy pot, twelve hundred points. Tea set, four thousand points.”

*Of course it’s all labeled in points. Could one point be equivalent to one yen? It would be pretty normal for the goods they sell at a school to be cheaper than the ones you’d get in the outside world. School and office cafeterias tend to cost about half as much as eating anywhere else, and it’s the same principle, right? If so, these are pretty good deals considering they’re targeted toward wealthy young ladies. Maybe it’s meant to be educational and give them some sense of how the other half lives?*

“Misaki, why are you dawdling back there?”

“Oh, sorry! Coming!”

Putting a hand on my chest in relief at this shop apparently not being as pricey as feared, I followed Himeko inside.

Immediately, I was met with a vast array of goods: cutlery and dishware like

the tea set in the window, along with furniture, stationery, and interior decorations. At the far end, a partition bearing the store's logo separated the rest of the store from what appeared to be a stylish boutique.

When we stepped into that section, we entered a world of opulence. In the center hung dresses of every color imaginable—not mere dresses, in fact, but full-blown ball gowns.

*Is there really a market for these here? I suppose if they're selling them, there must be demand. They definitely don't sell anything like this in the Domestic Arts dorm!*

As I gazed at them, fascinated, Himeko asked gleefully, "Would you like one?"

I shook my head. "I'd never even have a chance to wear it."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that. You can't go to a ball without a gown."

"So? I'm not planning on going to any balls." And yet, the serious tone with which she'd said that made me wonder if there really were balls held on campus.

"If you're interested, I can take you to any number of them."

"I respectfully decline." Far, *far* too embarrassing.

"What a shame. I think going to a ball with you would be good fun."

Slowly but surely, I was realizing that the Societal Arts students lived in a whole other dimension. "Weren't we here to buy underwear?"

"I suppose. Oh well, I can buy you a dress some other time."

I couldn't imagine when or why she would need to.

Himeko ushered me over to a booth with underwear on display. I reluctantly obeyed and found that the items were decadent enough to give the dresses a run for their money. Lingerie shops were always like a beautiful flower garden, but this was a step beyond that. All kinds of designs, from cute to sexy, were exhibited in glass cases like precious jewels.

"Can I help you at all?" As we browsed, a woman whom I assumed was a sales clerk rushed over. "Oh, Lady Himeko! I didn't realize it was you!"

She appeared rather flustered. I'd have expected an employee here to be used to dealing with the Societal Arts students, but Himeko was a cut above the rest. With her long, silky hair, her hair clip that looked like angel feathers, and her almost supernaturally good looks, she drew the eye in a way that the other students couldn't.

On top of that, she was the academy's deputy chairman of the board. No wonder that she was treated a little differently.

The sales clerk, who didn't look much older than me, pressed her hands together and bowed deeply. "What are you looking for today?"

It looked as though she had snuck a glance at me to appraise me, but that might have been my imagination.

Himeko put an arm around my shoulders and pushed me forward slightly. "I'd like you to pick out some underwear for Misaki here. A few matching sets of bras and panties."

"Coming right up. Shall I measure her?"

I shook my head in a panic. "No, there's no need for that." My measurements were something I could just tell them. "I'm 30A."

It was embarrassing to say it out loud, because I really wasn't exactly gifted in the bosom department—which was especially obvious standing next to Himeko.

As if to underline this, Himeko grabbed my breasts from behind and started fondling them. "Goodness, they are small!"

"Hey! What are you doing?" I exclaimed in a frenzied tone.



As if this was perfectly normal behavior, she said, “I really thought they were a little bigger. Still, they’re nicely shaped.”

She carried on touching me without any restraint, speaking in a manner as if she were judging the ripeness of fruit.

After trying to regain my composure, I said glumly, “I put a lot of effort into pushing them up.”

The reason I didn’t freak out even more about this was that I was getting used to this treatment. The Kokonoe twins had been very hands-on as well.

“I guess you don’t need to do anything like that.” The feel of Himeko’s voluptuous chest on my back made it clear that there was a huge difference in volume between mine and hers.

She took her hands off me and appeared to seriously consider the thought. “Yes, I’ve never really needed to think about it. Maybe I’ll give it a try, though. It would be interesting to see how mine would look if I pushed them up like yours.”

*“I really don’t think you need to.”*

*What would be the point in making them look even bigger?!*

Seeing a gap in our conversation, the employee took the opportunity to jump in with some sales talk. “If you’re looking to enhance the shapeliness of your bust, how about these?”

She pointed toward some bras arranged in one of the glass cases and began to explain all the details to Himeko.

“They don’t look bad at all, but I wonder if Misaki likes them. Misaki?”

The bras the sales clerk had suggested were all elegant and luxurious pieces, finely decorated with things like large embroidered roses. They looked very expensive, and I couldn’t imagine ever wearing them. Himeko looked great in whatever underwear she wore, no matter how elaborate, but I could guarantee I wouldn’t look right in anything like this. A commoner like me was meant to stick to plain white underwear, or a check pattern at most.

It didn’t look like I’d have much luck finding anything like that in here,

however. *I suppose it is a shop for the young ladies from the Societal Arts program. It's only natural that they'd sell products geared toward them.*

"I'd prefer something a little more plain," I replied.

"Come on, no need to hold back."

"I've just never worn anything this extravagant before."

For me, all that really mattered was the size, so I'd never paid more than 1,000 or 2,000 yen for a bra. I'd never had enough spare cash to spend any more than that on underwear alone. Even the ones from the 100 yen shop were good enough for me.

"Looks like I'll just have to choose for you." She peered through the glass and pointed out three different designs to the clerk. "I'll take this one, this one, and this one. With panties to match, please."

I looked over to see what they were like. One of them had a relatively simple design, as though she had taken my opinion into account. It was white with cute little pink flowers. The other two were the exact opposite. The embroidery on them was so ornate that I was a little taken aback. One was pale blue with roses on it, and the other was light gray with tiny ribbons. They both had frills on the straps and at the bottom of the cups.

These bras had a vaguely adult feel to them. I imagined they'd really suit Himeko, but I'd just find myself weirdly outshone by my underwear, especially in combination with the matching panties.

They say "clothes make the man," but I really don't think they'd make the girl in this case. Quite the opposite—they'd just make me look silly.

"Are these enough, or do you want more?" asked Himeko.

"No! Three sets is plenty. I'm only staying over for a single night, so really one is all I need."

"This won't be a one-off, though, so isn't it better for you to have a few pairs of fresh underwear you can leave with me?"

"You want me to stay the night more often?"

"Aah, you should probably have your own toothbrush and chopsticks at my

place, too. Let's buy a matching set of cups for the bathroom, too!"

*She's acting like I'm moving in with her!* I didn't say anything, but I was sure my glare at her conveyed this thought. "If you tell me in advance, I can just bring over everything I need."

"In that case, you should prepare yourself for staying over every weekend."

"Every weekend?"

Himeko's eyes glimmered as she offered me an impish smile. "You don't want to?"

"I wouldn't say that. I just don't quite get what it involves. What do you plan on making me do? It's quite a few hours until bedtime."

"Good question." She put a finger on her chin and mused over this. "We can eat dinner together, then stay up late having a lively chat. Things like that."

"Is that all part of a Seraph's job too?"

"Absolutely. Waiting on your mistress is a big part of it, of course, but keeping her entertained in her leisure time is also pretty important. One of the key parts of being a Seraph is just being with your mistress, whatever you're doing together."

*That feels less like a being a maid and more like being a friend, or even a little sister. Maybe that's what Himeko's been hoping for all along.*

"Then, in the morning, you can make me some tea and gently wake me up. Doesn't that sound like a wonderful start to the day?"

"Sure." *I bet it is for the one being woken up.* "I'll do what I can to meet your expectations, so please, *please* try to keep those expectations in check."

As a maid, I was still a total newbie. It made me a little uncomfortable for Himeko to have it all planned out when I still didn't know if I could do a good job.

"Don't worry. I don't expect you to do it all perfectly on the first try. I hear that watching your Seraph grow and improve is one of the joys of being a mistress." She smiled with narrowed eyes. "Now, let's pay for the underwear and move on to the other things. After that, let's get something to eat."

“Whatever you want. I’ll leave it all in your hands.”

“How lovely! Then I’ll go and settle up. But first...” Himeko turned to the sales clerk, who was taking the chosen items out of the glass case. “I’d like all the same ones, please, but in size 32C.”

*She’s a C cup? That sounds about right. Not that I didn’t know this already, but man, she has such a great figure.* Reflexively, I put my hands on my own breasts and felt their size. *If only they were a tiny bit bigger. Maybe then I wouldn’t look so ridiculous in fancy bras.*

“Whatever are you fondling your own breasts for?”

Himeko had apparently finished paying for the goods. She tilted her head and looked at me quizzically.

I hurriedly dropped my hands down to my sides. “No reason! Hey, let me carry the bag.”

“Are you sure? Then I’ll gladly take you up on that offer.” She handed me the paper bag filled with underwear for two.

“Great!”

She had handed me the receipt as well, which gave me a chance to peek at it. The total printed on there was 13,000 points, meaning each set, consisting of one bra and one pair of panties, cost around 2,000 points. That sounded like a fairly low price, but that made sense to me.

*After all, even if the clientele consists of wealthy young ladies, they are still students, so their allowances can’t be that big. Or maybe one of the girls here is related to the owner of the company that makes them, so they have a special deal in place.*

In any case, the fact that you could buy such nice things for such a good price here was pretty intriguing. I started to scheme about asking Himeko to bring me here again once I’d gotten my paycheck.

Himeko eagerly bought me a toothbrush and rinsing cups, along with matching ones for her. The prices were in the region of 100 to 200 points, which also felt very reasonable. Overall, I was pleased that none of it was costing



Himeko too much.

It wasn't until we went to get a snack that I started to have my doubts.

Himeko led me to the food court, which had an array of vendors selling the same kinds of Japanese and Western sweets you'd see in convenience stores. They all seemed fairly popular, with Societal Arts students swarming the area and scrutinizing the offerings with serious expressions. When it came down to it, even they were teenage girls like any others. They weren't all that different from the Domestic Arts students.

Some of them had come on their own, while others had brought maids with them. *If the maids are in here, does that mean they're Seraphs like me, planning to stay the night with their mistresses?* It looked like there was some truth to what Himeko had said earlier about how just being with your mistress was one of the key parts of being a Seraph.

All that aside, I was a teenage girl with a sweet tooth, just like them. Donuts were my particular predilection. Fortunately, there was a store here selling handmade donuts, so I begged Himeko to go there.

"That's exactly where I planned to take you," she said with a smile before leading me over to the store's display counter.

There I saw something slightly odd.

The donuts themselves, arranged in rows of all different varieties, looked so delicious that I almost started to drool. I was pretty sure that the donuts Himeko had given me the first time I went to the Sky Salon had come from here.

Donuts of that caliber had to come with a hefty price tag, I was sure—so why were the prices in the region of 10 to 30 points?

*That seems insanely cheap. These flavors would normally cost around 100 yen for one donut, so if one point equals one yen, I'd expect them to be 100 points at the very least. No matter how much they've scrambled to bring the prices down, there's no way they can turn a profit like this. It's impossible!*

"Uh, Himeko?"

Too unnerved by this to avoid asking about it, I tried talking to Himeko. When

I looked up, however, she was now surrounded by a number of other students and was engrossed in a friendly chat with them. As I watched, the lineup kept changing, as every girl nearby who noticed Himeko came over and took their turn to say hello.

Himeko greeted them all with a smile. It looked like it might take a while.

Left to my own devices, I picked up a number of the boxes nearby and checked the price tags on them. All of these ones cost either 10 points or 20 points.

I didn't know much about the prices of luxury underwear and tea sets, but even a commoner like me knew how much snacks were supposed to cost.

I gulped hard. It seemed I'd been laboring under a false assumption.

*One point equals one yen? There's no way. It would make all of these snacks far too cheap.*

The truth slowly dawned on me. I looked down at the shopping bag.

*If a donut that should cost 100 yen is 10 points, maybe one point is actually 10 yen. A bra and a pair of panties came to 2,000 points, right? I see now. That would be 20,000 yen.*

Which meant the three sets Himeko had bought me came to 60,000 yen.

I let out a faint shriek. The hand I was gripping the bag with began to tremble. This was too expensive a gift. Each set was more than ten times the price of the underwear I normally wore, and she'd bought me *three* sets! It was enough money to pay for a month's groceries!

"Himeko! *Himeko!*"

So dizzy that I was on the verge of fainting, I latched onto her arm. It was rude of me to interrupt her chat with the other ladies, but I couldn't even think about that. Tears welled in my eyes.

"Misaki? What's wrong?" Her eyes widened in surprise at my sudden state of panic. "Is there a problem with the donuts?"

Obviously, she had no way of knowing that I was reacting to the price of the underwear, but all I could do was repeatedly open and close my mouth in vain.

She stroked my head and said, "Give me one moment." Then she turned to the girls she'd been conversing with and bowed her head. "I'm sorry, everyone, but I've just remembered an important errand I need to attend to. I hope you don't mind me taking care of that first."

"My apologies for distracting you," said one of the other girls.

Another said, "It was just such a rare pleasure seeing you here, Lady Himeko, that I forgot you must be busy."

"No need to feel guilty. I hope you all enjoy the rest of your shopping trip!"

Himeko's graceful way of taking her leave calmed me down a little bit.

"Now, over here," she said, taking me to a far corner away from prying eyes.

I pushed the bag of underwear toward her. "These are really, *really* expensive."

A question mark appeared above her head. "Hmm? What are you talking about?"

"The underwear you bought me earlier. I thought it was cheap, but it's actually insanely pricey, isn't it? I can't accept it!"

"What are you talking about? It's not expensive enough to start freaking out about."

"Yes, it is! Those three sets came to sixty thousand yen!"

*Himeko's just so used to seeing the prices in points that she doesn't even realize how the conversion works anymore. She thinks everything's way cheaper than it is. That has to be it!*

Or not.

"That sounds about right to me. Today we had to buy things off the shelf because that's all we had time for, but if you order them made to measure, the quality's much better. That can end up costing two or three times as much, so actually, I think I got off easy."

"How can you possibly think that?!" The more I experienced of Himeko's world, the further removed it felt from my own. *60,000 yen? Cheap?!*

“Let me tell you, I’m not going to take these back. They were a present for you, so if you don’t accept them, it’s my name you’ll be dragging through the mud. There’ll be vicious rumors about me. ‘Himeko Amanotsuka is such a pathetic excuse for a mistress that her Seraph doesn’t even like her presents!’ That’s what they’ll say.”

“But—”

A devilish grin appeared on her face. She was enjoying my reaction. “Honestly, what’s the big deal? I didn’t pay cash for it anyway. If I don’t use up the points, they’ll just keep rolling over, unspent. Consider it a perk of the job—a little reward for working as my Seraph. Just take it.”

I felt myself being dragged deeper and deeper into the quagmire. I was only meant to be a standin Seraph. Why was she treating me so much like a real one?

Racking up a debt I could never repay went against my principles, but now my back was against the wall.

“If you’re going to start sobbing over the price of underwear of all things, it’ll start reflecting on me, making it look like I’m a cheapskate. You can’t do this every time I buy you something nice. People will think I have no class.”

“I can see what you mean, I guess.”

“Look at it this way. Right now, you’re the equivalent of a lady’s maid, and the duties of a lady’s maid include managing her mistress’ jewelry, accompanying her mistress to social events, and going shopping with her mistress, just like this. I’m sure there are a lot of ways in which your values are different from mine, but you have to keep a straight face and avoid going crazy every single time it comes up.”

“Fair enough,” I said. My voice wavered, but in the end, it sounded like this was a situation I couldn’t avoid if I was going to live life at this school as Himeko’s Seraph.

“In that case, let’s carry on shopping. When we get back to my room, we can have a little postmortem session to reflect on all this. It seems like you still need to get to know me better.”

“All right.”

“See? I knew having you stay over would be worthwhile!”

Himeko smiled in a way that suggested she was incredibly happy for some reason.



Recalling those events, I sighed and said, “Don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful that she bought me new underwear, but she can be surprisingly pushy. I still don’t think I’m used to how different our views on money are.”

“What?!” Kirara’s eyes widened and she began to grind her teeth. “For her to take you shopping and buy you things like that means that she really, *really* trusts you! It’s only been two weeks and she’s already letting you into her world!”

“I don’t know if I’d say she’s letting me in.” *For example, she still hasn’t told me why she never wanted to have a Seraph before.*

“Huh? What do you mean? Whichever way you slice it, you and Lady Himeko have an amazing master-servant relationship, at least from where I’m standing.”

“I guess.”

“I mean it! Your mistress letting you stay and serve her overnight isn’t something to take for granted. Even for a Seraph, it takes time to win that level of trust. It means she’s comfortable showing you her private life. No wonder you were so proud of yourself.”

“Proud of myself? I don’t remember, like, boasting or anything.”

“Listen, I remember what you said. If that wasn’t boasting, I don’t know what is.”

“All I did was explain what we did together.” I tried to think back. What had happened when I returned to Himeko’s room after our shopping trip? “We went back to Himeko’s room and drank some tea, then had a bath together. After that, we tried on all the underwear we’d bought. Speaking of which, the really fancy ones didn’t suit me at all, just as I expected. Himeko had a bit of a

forced smile when she saw me in them. They were *so* comfortable though! The way they felt on my skin was totally different from the ones I normally wear. You get what you pay for, I suppose. Hey!”

I was brought back to my senses by a sharp gaze jabbing into me. Kirara was bathed in an aura that suggested she might attack me at any moment.

“There you go again, running your mouth about it.”

I giggled awkwardly. “I suppose that did sound a little like boasting.”

“A little?!”

“All right, fine. After much deliberation, I agree that it’s definitely boasting.” Agreeing with her felt like the safest option.

“Ugh, I’m so jealous. *So* jealous! What else has happened since you became Lady Himeko’s Seraph?”

“What else? Hmm.”

I’d already told her about staying in the Societal Arts dorm, visiting their exclusive stores, and spending time at the Sky Salon. What else was there?

“Well, she’s helped out with my studies, she’s let me have some clothes she didn’t need anymore... Oh, that’s right! Did you know there’s a French restaurant in the big forest behind the Societal Arts dorm? Himeko seems to be quite a fan of it. She sometimes takes me there for dinner.”

That was a place where a Domestic Arts student would only be able to eat if they were a Seraph accompanying their mistress.

“I think that’s everything. It has only been two weeks, you know. She did say that when I’m a bit more familiar with the academy and how it all works, she’ll take me to visit another salon. Apparently there’s someone she wants to introduce me to?”

Kirara exploded. “I can’t stand it! It’s so unfair that you’re living such a charmed life! Now that you’ve reaped all these benefits, do you at least understand how much it means to be a Seraph? Before you came here, you didn’t even know what a Seraph *was*, but then you became one before anyone else and now you’re living it up with your mistress.”

“That was pure coincidence. Fate, even. You know I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

“But a Seraph’s supposed to be about more than that! It shouldn’t just happen by a twist of fate! It’s an honor given only to the very best maids in recognition of their first-rate skills! The most distinguished lady at the academy shouldn’t be picking someone like you, who knows nothing about being a good maid and barely even knows what a Seraph is. There *has* to be some kind of mistake.”

“You’ll have to tell Lady Himeko that, I’m afraid.”

“Shut up, shut up, *shut up!* I can’t take it anymore! After all the hard work I’ve put into becoming a maid, all the time I’ve spent honing my techniques, why can’t I be a Seraph too?!”

“Like I said, it’s only been two weeks. I’m sure if you have a little patience you’ll meet a lady who’s a good fit for you. It won’t be long now until the room-cleaning rotation starts, right? You’ll get a chance to serve lots of different Societal Arts students.”

“I can’t wait that long. I’m going to carve out a path for myself! Hear this, Misaki Hotaru—I will not lose to you!”

Fire blazed in her eyes. Clearly, no matter what I said, it would fall on deaf ears.

*I guess all I can do now is watch and see what happens, just like she said.*

## Chapter Six: Fighting for a Dream

“Please! Let me be your Seraph!”

It was lunchtime on a bright and sunny Tuesday. Just as she’d warned me, Kirara was bowing down before Lady Kagura. I felt my stomach tighten.

All eyes in the room fell on Kirara. Even though it theoretically had nothing to do with me, I couldn’t hold back my growing sense of unease.

*She told me to act the same as I did yesterday, but that was already pretty tough!* I was sweating profusely and couldn’t even look at her. The urge to run was overpowering, but I was Himeko’s Seraph, so I had no choice but to stay.

Lady Kagura continued to steadfastly ignore her, as did the other Sky Salon members and the rest of the Societal Arts students. Even the teachers present didn’t say a word to her.

*Is it really okay for a Domestic Arts student to be doing this? It feels like it could spiral into a bigger problem.*

Himeko, too, acted as if Kirara weren’t even there. Instead, she started suggesting plans for that afternoon while gracefully eating her lunch. “Misaki, why don’t we go shopping again after school?”

I screamed internally. *Don’t you realize Kirara’s going to take that suggestion as a personal affront?!* Himeko couldn’t have known, but letting Kirara see us having a nice cordial master-servant relationship was only going to rile her up even more.

Still, I couldn’t exactly turn down her invitation. “Uh, yes, sure. Let’s do that.”

Cold sweat enveloped me as I joylessly crammed food into my mouth. What was probably a very delicious meal somehow tasted of absolutely nothing. I was certain I was the most tense and agitated student out of everyone in the whole dining hall.

*Something has to happen soon, right? This’ll have to be resolved somehow.*



Unfortunately for me, things carried on in this same vein the next day and the day after.



“Please!”

On Wednesday and Thursday, Kirara bowed before Lady Kagura again. Both times, Lady Kagura neither spoke to her nor even looked in her direction.

Not to be deterred, Kirara continued her pleading. I sort of admired her willpower and the honesty of her approach. If I’d been so thoroughly ignored, I’d have backed down pretty quickly.

*Actually, I’d never have been able to do anything this over-the-top in the first place.*

Even though this was a daily occurrence now and I was slowly getting used to it, the extreme stress I felt in the pit of my stomach never abated.

*Today I can hardly even swallow my food. If it keeps going like this, I feel like I’m going to get a stomach ulcer.*

For Kirara’s sake and mine, there needed to be some kind of progress, and soon. Despite Kirara telling me not to get involved, I was quickly reaching my limit. *Kirara might get angry with me if I take action, but I have to prioritize my own health!*

Thus, I decided that after school that day, I’d talk to Lady Kagura at the Sky Salon and find out what she was really thinking.

“Uhm, Lady Kagura, do you have a minute?”

“Certainly. What is it?” After taking a sip of the tea I had served her, she turned to me, brushing her hand through her loose golden curls.

*Phew.* I’d been worried she might give me the silent treatment just like Kirara, even if that was an entirely baseless fear.

This was the first time I’d ever spoken to Lady Kagura directly. Not only was she a third-year student, but she was a young lady in the Societal Arts program, and the head of the Sky Salon. All of that made her a little intimidating.

Her bangs covered her left eye in a way that came across as quite ethereal, and her right eye, vivid green, pierced through me. I felt my nerves grow more frayed than ever.

Still, there was no turning back. The only way to change the situation was to act. No more standing on the sidelines and watching.

Lucky for me, the Kokonoe sisters were nowhere in sight. The other salon members were also elsewhere, since everyone had their own favorite places to sit. It was a golden opportunity to talk to Lady Kagura one-on-one.

*Here goes nothing!* I gathered up all my courage. “It’s about Kirara. I’m wondering if I could ask you what you intend to do.”

“Kirara?”

*She doesn’t even know her name? No, that doesn’t matter! I have to keep going!* “You know, the girl who’s been asking you to let her be your Seraph every day in the dining hall.” I imitated Kirara’s gestures in a fervent effort to make her remember.

“Aha,” said Lady Kagura, nodding. “Yes, I know who you mean.”

*That’s a relief. At least she acknowledges Kirara’s existence.*

“What about her?” she asked.

“Well, that’s sort of my question. You’re not going to just keep ignoring her forever, are you? I think Kirara’s going to keep going until you respond.”

“Yes, she’s very dedicated to her cause. I respect that. I’m actually quite intrigued to see how long she can keep it up for.”

*“What?!” If that’s the way it goes, I’ll get an ulcer for sure!*

“I’m only kidding,” said Lady Kagura with a chuckle. “Do you happen to know her?”

“Uh, yes, that’s right. She’s in my class, and we’re roommates. That means I know her pretty well—and trust me, she’s an excellent student! Her grades are good, she knows everything about the school, and she’s way, way better at domestic work than I am!”

Lady Kagura had shown some kind of interest, so I took the opportunity to sing Kirara's praises.

"She's also the one who told me all about Seraphs and the customs of the academy."

"I see. I can't help wondering, then, why she'd do a thing like this."

"Urk." This entirely accurate comment made the words catch in my throat. *Is it better to tell her the truth? I don't want to say the wrong thing and make things worse for Kirara, but I can't start lying either.* My mind whirled at full speed as I tried to find a way to improve Lady Kagura's impression, even if only slightly. "Well, you see, Kirara is—"

But I was interrupted.

"Kirara Hoshino, first-year Domestic Arts."

"Her grades are among the best in her year. Her practical skills are excellent as well."

Behind me, I heard two voices so identical it was like I was hearing in stereo. They were voices I knew well. I immediately put myself on guard.

Lady Kagura spoke to the pair behind me. "Oh, have you finished with your research?"

"Yes," they said in unison, one voice by my left ear and one by my right.

I knew without even turning around that the Kokonoe sisters were there. An ominous feeling came over me.

"For someone behaving so outrageously, she's actually pretty normal." Again their voices were perfectly aligned, with not a single syllable out of sync. They were so close, I could feel their breath on my cheeks.

"Uhm, excuse me, Ayakas?"

The two sisters were both called Ayaka. Since they were twins, their appearances were almost identical as well. The only way to tell them apart was by the different ribbons they wore. I couldn't decide if it was convenient or just plain confusing that you could address both of them at the same time just by saying "Ayakas."

“Yes?” they replied.

I felt a weight on my shoulders as they put their arms around me and leaned on me. It was as though I was about to be crushed, but I held out. I had to ask them about the information they’d just reported to Lady Kagura. “You’ve been researching Kirara?”

Instead of answering my question, they gave a snort of laughter and said, “Is that how you greet students who’re older than you?”

“Eek!” A chill ran down my spine. What was I supposed to say? “Uh, good day?”

“Exactly,” replied one of the sisters. “Good day, Misaki.”

“Well done!” said the other.

*I know manners are important, but this is a bit much.* “I’m not a little kid. Just because I said ‘good day’ doesn’t mean you have to literally stroke my head!”

“Oh my. Would you rather we stroked your bottom?”

“Or your meager little bosom?”

“No! None of the above, if you don’t mind!”

*And do you have to be so rude? My bosom may be meager compared to yours, but it’s still within the realms of normality!*

Their hands began to fondle me all over just as they’d said. In a panic, I shook them off and got away from their fiendish fingers.

This was why it always set alarm bells ringing in my head as soon as the Kokonoe twins were anywhere nearby.

“What a shame,” they said in unison.

“Honestly! If you don’t cut this out, I’m telling Himeko!”

“So what? She’d allow it for sure.”

I groaned. They were probably right, so there wasn’t much I could say to that. “Let’s get back to the point, okay? Have you been researching Kirara?”

“We have, indeed.” They both nodded at the same time.

Lady Kagura set down her now empty teacup and slid it to one side along with its saucer. “On my orders.”

*Does that mean she’s developed an interest in Kirara?*

The sisters held out some pieces of paper in front of them. Lady Kagura glanced over them, nodding. “Kirara Hoshino, first-year Domestic Arts. Both her parents are caregivers, and after watching them work from a young age, Kirara decided she wanted to do a job that involves helping people. She was very good at helping out with the cooking, cleaning, and laundry, and in middle school she learned about domestic service when she did job shadowing. Since then, becoming a maid has been her dream.”

She paused for a moment.

“I suppose being a lady’s maid must have appealed to her since it looked more glamorous than being a caregiver. After that, she set her sights on attending Amanotsuka Academy and focused hard on studying to pass the exam. She has a highly earnest personality and is hard on both herself and others. Her hope was to become a Seraph before anyone else, so Misaki Hotaru beating her to it made her intensely jealous.” She looked at me and giggled. “It’s all starting to make sense.”

*When did they manage to find out all that?*

“She must have found it simply outrageous that you were chosen to be a Seraph purely based on Himeko’s whim rather than earning it with your skills.”

I pouted. “Well, excuse me for being so unskilled.” I’d never had any intention of becoming a maid in the first place, so obviously I didn’t have any of the requisite training.

“I’m not suggesting it was a good thing or a bad thing. It was Himeko’s decision, so it’s her business. She must have seen something in you that she needed. Knowing what I know about the circumstances, it does come across as an odd sort of master-servant relationship, but—oh, Kirara Hoshino must also know about the details of how you were offered the Golden Contract, right? She’s not like the other students who think it was arranged before you joined the school.”

“Yeah. When I got to the dorm, she hounded me for answers, so I told her everything. That was before I’d had any chance to get my story straight with Himeko.”

“Right. And her jealousy and impatience are what led her to act out like this.”

“I suppose so.”

“She doesn’t want you to leave her behind. That’s why being my Seraph is so important to her.”

Lady Kagura smoothly flipped through the remaining pages of the report. When she was done, she put it down on the table.

“Does that mean you’re going to make her your Seraph after all?” I asked. Her tone was more positive than I’d expected, so I couldn’t help saying something.

My hopes were quickly dashed, however, as she took on a strict tone. “I’m afraid not. As it stands, I definitely can’t make her my Seraph.”

*I knew it couldn’t be that easy.*

The twins cut in with some criticism.

“It’s clear that she has a lot of faith in her own abilities...”

“...but begging to be a Seraph is going too far.”

Desperately, I tried to defend her. “You’ve got it all wrong. Kirara’s not being arrogant. She knows she’s not supposed to be doing this, but she’s so determined to be Lady Kagura’s Seraph that she feels she has no other choice.”

*I can tell that Lady Kagura has some interest in Kirara. That much is certain. There must be something I can do to nudge her feelings just a little bit further in that direction.*

Lady Kagura looked straight at me. “I can’t say I have anything against recruiting a new Seraph, especially one who’s such an outstanding individual. I’m also impressed with her sheer determination in staying the course even though I’ve completely ignored her. I tend to like that kind of person.”

“Really? You do?”

“The fact remains, though, that I can’t accept her request.”

“Why?”

Lady Kagura definitely had a positive view of Kirara, so why couldn't she accept her as a Seraph?

The Kokonoe twins answered instead of their mistress.

“That's easy.”

“It's because she broke an unwritten rule.”

“An unwritten rule? You mean that the maids aren't supposed to ask to be made a Seraph? It's always meant to come from the mistress' side?”

“Exactly. *Asking* to be made a Seraph is utterly shameless behavior.”

“How could anyone who acts that disgracefully in front of so many people ever be a Seraph?”

I looked down. “Oh no. Is there really no way around that?”

“Not at present,” said Lady Kagura coldly. “The rule itself isn't set in stone, so I don't blame her for breaking it. In fact, I admire her audacity. Even so, I definitely can't make that girl my Seraph. Have you figured out why?”

“No, not really.” *She's made it clear that the rule breaking itself isn't the problem. What other problem could there be?*

“What do you think will happen if someone begs and pleads like that, and I accept their request? If it becomes widely known that getting on your hands and knees before me is enough to become my Seraph?”

Suddenly it hit me. I clapped my hands together. “There'll be copycats!”

She nodded. “There will, indeed. Even if I don't mind, just setting this one example will lead to someone doing the same thing down the line, with someone else as the target. I won't be able to pretend that's not my fault.”

*I get it now. She's thinking about the future. What I don't understand is why she's just ignoring Kirara. If she really wants to make sure no one else ever does this again, wouldn't it better give a clear rejection? The fact that she hasn't done that suggests that Kirara might still be in with a chance.*

“Uhm, so you're saying you want to try and do it in a way that puts off any

potential copycats?”

“Hehe, that’s right. Instead of just accepting her, I have to give her some sort of test to see if she’s worthy of being my Seraph.”

*Of course.*

“Do you have any suggestions, Misaki? It would have to be a way of proving that she’s good enough that everyone would accept without anyone wanting to follow in her footsteps.”

“Oh, I’m not sure. You’ve kind of put me on the spot.”

Everyone in the whole school knew what Kirara had done. Unless the plan was *really* good, it was basically guaranteed that other students would try doing the same thing.

She turned to look at the twins, who were clearing away her tea. “What about you, Ayakas? Any ideas?”

They both looked at her and put a hand on their cheeks in an identical motion. “Let’s see.”

After a moment, one of them said, “Maybe we could attach really harsh conditions to it.”

“Make an all-or-nothing challenge,” said the other.

“Yes, then everyone would accept it, whether she passed or failed.”

I gulped. A chance was a chance, but it sounded like they were about to put up some really high hurdles in front of poor Kirara.

The twins faced one another and grinned menacingly.

“And we know just how we can test her.”

“Yes, there’s a perfect opportunity coming up.”

*Eek, I don’t like the look on their faces. Whatever they’re thinking of, it’s going to be really mean.*

Lady Kagura appeared to be used to them taking on this tone; her face showed no reaction to it at all as she continued. “Now that is intriguing.”



“According to our information, *she’ll* be coming today.”

“Yes, and that little pipsqueak is planning on throwing down the gauntlet.”

*Pipsqueak? Gauntlet?*

“That makes sense. The waiting period must be over by now. She can finally try again.”

I didn’t know what Lady Kagura and the twins were talking about, but it seemed to be someone or something that they could use to test Kirara.

Even if I didn’t grasp what was going on, Lady Kagura certainly did. With a nod, she said, “Very well. Making use of her next attempt sounds ideal.”

“We have a plan in mind for what kind of test it should be and what kind of conditions it should have.”

“It’ll let you judge Kirara Hoshino in full detail and prove to everyone that she’s worthy—or unworthy.”

The Kokonoe sisters pressed their palms together as if they were each resting their hands on a mirror. Both of them murmured, “How exciting!”

Meanwhile, I was still totally lost. Whatever they were talking about, it sounded like quite a big deal. “What is it? Who’s throwing down what gauntlet?”

The twins looked out through the window and smiled as if they had spotted someone.

“You won’t have to wait too long.”

“The pipsqueak is already on her way.”

I went over to the window as well and gazed out. A group of girls was just entering the former school building.

“There’s Himeko, and... that’s the student council president, right?” Those were the only ones I recognized. Behind them were two more I’d never seen before. “Are those other two girls going to come and do something?”

Lady Kagura closed her eyes and sighed quietly. “They certainly are. Now, let’s just wait for them to make their way up here.”



The elevator that went up to the Sky Salon stopped with a *ding*, and the doors slowly opened. The four girls I'd just seen stepped out—two girls I knew and two I still didn't, no matter how hard I racked my brain.

One of them was a Societal Arts student. As per the twins' unflattering nickname, she was not very tall. I wouldn't have batted an eyelid if someone had told me she was in elementary school. However, her red ribbon told me she was a second year, just like Himeko, although it looked so large on her that it almost covered her entire chest. Her hair was the color of an orange tabby cat, with curled locks hanging down at front and frilly ribbons tying it into pigtails.

What stood out most of all, though, was the tiara on her head.

Kirara had told me that tiaras had a special significance here. They could only be worn by the head of a salon. With its charming design of interlinked hearts, the tiara shone brilliantly at a 45-degree angle on her head.

The remaining girl was a Domestic Arts student. In contrast to the petite young lady, she was so statuesque that she could have been a model. There was a distinct air of dignity in the way she stood behind the lady with eyes cast down at the floor. Her bangs were partially clipped to the side with a hairpin, while her long hair was neatly braided at the back.

The design of the apron and headpiece she wore was different from mine. I assumed it was the specific design for a different salon. A purple ribbon on her chest marked her out as a third-year student, and a shining golden badge showed that she was a Seraph. I didn't even need to ask to know that she was in the service of the shorter girl.

It was the first time I'd ever seen the head of another salon, but she had the same kind of aura about her as Lady Kagura. I started to feel nervous. *What is she planning to do?*

Himeko peeled off from the group and walked over to me. Smiling, she gently stroked my pigtails. "Sorry I'm late, Misaki."

"Who are these other people you came with?"

"Allow me to explain," came a reply from the student council president, Rika

Yasuki—or as she was better known, Lady Angelica. I'd intended to ask in a whisper, but apparently she'd heard anyway. "Kagura, could you please gather everyone together?"

"Certainly. Ayakas, if you don't mind."

On her command, the Kokonoe twins started approaching the various members of the Sky Salon and asking them to come over.

"Should I help as well?" I asked Himeko.

"No need for that. You can just stay next to me."

"All right."

At times like these, I still didn't know what the protocol was. All I really knew was that I was Himeko's Seraph, even if only in a standin sense, and that I was the Sky Salon's newest member. Based on that, my understanding was that I was meant to put even more work in than the older students. In this instance, though, it seemed I didn't need to do a thing.

Before the twins even managed to ask everyone, the other members all saw something was happening and gathered of their own accord.

"It looks like everyone's here," said Angelica, sweeping her eyes across the assembled group. "Then I'll begin. I'm sure you've realized already, but I'll give an introduction, as is customary." She coughed to clear her throat. "On this day, April 24th, the Sky Salon has been challenged to a Salon Struggle."

*A Salon Struggle? What's that?*

Gesturing to the petite young lady behind her, Angelica said, "The challenger is Asuka Nekoyashi, head of the Paradise Palace."



Lady Asuka stepped forward, puffed up with pride. “Prepare yourself, Kagura Mikage! This time I swear to you, I *will* take over the Sky Salon!” She pointed a finger at Lady Kagura to accompany this declaration of war.

In response, Lady Kagura smiled boldly. “Heh. You never learn, do you? No matter how many times you challenge me, the Sky Salon will never, ever be yours. I hope you’re looking forward to being put firmly in your place.”

The Kokonoe sisters joined in with their mistress.

“That’s right. Why don’t you get on your knees now before you start crying?”

“This is the third time now. What kind of a masochist keeps doing the same thing over and over when they know it results in them getting soundly beaten?”

*Wow, all three of them are laying it on a little thick. Even the twins, and they’re supposed to be maids!*

I couldn’t help asking Himeko, “Is it all right for them to act like that?”

Even though they had strong personalities to say the least, I’d assumed they could only behave the way they did within the confines of the Sky Salon. I thought it was an exception because they were among friends, essentially.

For Seraphs to behave this way to a member of another salon—a lady of the Societal Arts program, no less—felt like playing with fire.

*And they think they have a right to criticize Kirara?*

But apparently this *was* fine. Offhandedly, Himeko replied, “The Ayakas are a special case.”

*A special case? What does that mean? I’ve thought all along that the way they carry themselves feels totally different from the other Domestic Arts students, but why are they allowed to be this aggressive?*

Lady Angelica stepped in with a mildly reproachful comment. “I’d prefer it if the two of you toned your inflammatory remarks.” At last, the sparks that were flying started to dissipate. “Anyway, that’s the situation. Please check and sign the application form on behalf of the Sky Salon, then decide on a date and time and a suitable format for the contest.”

“Certainly,” said Lady Kagura. She took the piece of paper presented to her, glanced over it, and signed. “We’ll send word about the format tomorrow.”

“Excellent,” replied Lady Angelica, checking the signature and stowing the form away.

With that, it seemed the “Salon Struggle,” whatever that was, had been confirmed.

Lady Asuka took on a belligerent tone again. “This time the Sky Salon is definitely, *definitely* going to be mine! Do you hear me?! Mine!” She looked at her Seraph and started walking back to the elevator. “Let’s go, Mei.”

*So that girl is named Mei,* I noted.

“Thank you for having us,” said Mei with all the decorum I’d expect of a maid. Her cool temperament was refreshing after her mistress’ fiery outburst.

I wondered where the ladylike aura I’d sensed from Lady Asuka had disappeared to. Mei was the one who seemed more like a lady.

When both of them were gone, the Sky Salon members convened around the table in the center.

Looking at the twins, Lady Kagura began, “Now then, this is an entirely expected development, but it sounded as though you two had a plan for how to use the Salon Struggle to test Kirara Hoshino. Isn’t that right?”

The malicious smile appeared on both their faces again. Together they said, “We certainly do. A very, very good plan!”

The look in their eyes made me decidedly uneasy. *I hope whatever they have in mind isn’t too horrible. What even is a “Salon Struggle,” anyway?*

Unable to contain myself any longer, I put my hand up. “Uhm, I don’t suppose I could ask a quick question?”

In a teacher-like fashion, Lady Kagura gestured to me and said, “Go right ahead.”

This was a relief. “Would you mind telling me what a Salon Struggle is?”

“Of course, you wouldn’t know. We use the word ‘struggle’ in the sense of a

contest, or a battle for supremacy.”

“A battle for supremacy?”

“Yes. The way the salons work is that the members pay a fee for access, but the amount isn’t predetermined. Whoever pays the most earns the right to use the salon. Sounds simple, right? The problem is, that leads to a small number of people having a monopoly over the salons. To ensure everyone has a fair chance to get access to the salon they want, there’s a system in place that provides some balance. We call that the Salon Struggle.”

“Oh, that is interesting.”

“Of course, it’s only for people who can’t get in by normal means, so there are a lot of limitations. First of all, you can only initiate a Salon Struggle once every three months—and, if you lose, it’ll be six months before you can challenge the same salon again. Also, the date, time, and type of contest are all decided by the current owners of the salon being challenged.”

“Really? Doesn’t that mean you can rig the odds in your favor?”

“More or less. Like I said, it’s for people who can’t get into the salon through normal means, so there’s no need to give them *too* much of an advantage. The end result is that not too many people go around challenging salons to Salon Struggles.”

She continued and explained a few other specific rules, but my main takeaway was that for the person issuing the challenge, the chances of success were pretty low. Still, for the Societal Arts students, membership of a famous salon seemed to have a great deal of prestige attached to it. I could see why someone would try their luck even if it was a losing battle.

“Do you understand now?” she concluded.

“Yes. Thank you very much.”

“Then let’s get down to business. As mentioned, I’d like to use this contest as an opportunity to test Kirara Hoshino. Does anyone have any objections?”

The ladies all confirmed that they did not. With that out of the way, she continued.

“As far as the contest itself goes, the Ayakas have an idea in mind, so I’d like them to explain it to everyone. Ayakas?”

“Certainly,” said the Kokonoe twins, standing up. Then they began, taking turns to speak.

“Allow us to explain.”

“You see, it’s essentially a battle of table manners.”

“We’ll give a set number of points to each participant and deduct points for every mistake.”

“By observing their table manners, we’ll easily be able to judge each participant’s level of skill.”

“Based on that, we can find out for sure whether the girl is worthy of being Lady Kagura’s Seraph.”

As always, their words flowed in such harmony with one another that it was impressive to watch.

Lady Kagura nodded in approval. “I see what you mean. Eating dinner at the same table is always a good way to judge someone’s character.”

The twins went on.

“And, instead of just giving Kirara Hoshino a chance to prove herself, we’ll put the entire fate of the Sky Salon on her shoulders.”

“Furthermore, if she’s deemed unworthy of being a Seraph, her own neck will be on the chopping block. She’ll have to leave the school.”

I shot up. “What?! That’s not fair!”

*That’s far too high a price to pay. Just because she dared to ask to be a Seraph doesn’t mean you have to drive her into a corner like that!*

The twins glared at me coldly and said, “Sit down, Misaki.”

“It obviously has to be this way,” added one.

“It’s the only way to put off any copycats for good,” insisted the other.

Feebly, I muttered, “I suppose.” Unable to object, I sat down.



“Now, to represent the Paradise Palace, we’ll have Lady Asuka and Mei take part.”

“And for the Sky Salon, we’ll send Lady Kagura, Kirara Hoshino, and...”

For some reason, both of the twins looked at me. *No, they can’t be serious.*

“Misaki!” they finished in perfect unison.

“Why me?!”

“You’re the one who said you wanted to do something to help your friend,” said one of the sisters.

“It’s time to walk the walk,” said the other.

“Oh, yeah, I suppose you’re right.”

*Have I just made things ten times worse? All I wanted was to help Kirara become a Seraph so we could do it together. The idea of us both working in the Sky Salon sounded like so much fun. How did it end up with the fate of the salon hanging in the balance, with me taking the blame if it all goes wrong?*

“Can’t I just pretend that never happened?”

“Certainly not,” they replied.

“I didn’t think so.” I hung my head.

Himeko turned to me. “Don’t give up, Misaki. I’ll help you prepare for it.”

I clung to her, beginning to sob. “Himeko, what am I going to do?!”

“There there.”

The one saving grace was that I knew Lady Kagura and the Kokonoe twins had no desire to lose the Sky Salon. They’d be the ones suffering if this went badly, so they had to believe we had a strong chance of winning.

Lady Kagura addressed Lady Angelica and said, “Anyway, tomorrow we’ll inform you and Asuka about the precise details of the contest. As for Kirara Hoshino, I’ll tell her about this myself.”



Then came Friday lunchtime. As soon as Lady Kagura sat down, Kirara made a

beeline for her, ready to beg her once again.

Even though everyone was getting used to this sight by now, they all stared anyway. The Domestic Arts students eyed Kirara and held their breath.

It was still stressful for me to watch, but this time my stomach wasn't aching from the tension as it had yesterday. I knew this would be the very last time before a whole new reason to panic reared its head.

I stood at attention next to Himeko and waited for Kirara to get there. Sitting down was unthinkable at this key moment where both my life and Kirara's were about to be turned upside-down.

Kirara stopped in front of Lady Kagura and their eyes met for a moment. Although she seemed momentarily surprised at the latter's slightly different attitude than usual, she quickly lowered her gaze. She no doubt intended to bow down as far as she could go, just as she had yesterday and the day before that—but this time Lady Kagura made the first move.

"Kirara Hoshino."

Kirara jumped at the sound of her name. Clearly she hadn't expected to get a response.

Ignoring this, Lady Kagura continued, "I'm going to give you a chance."

In an instant, the air was abuzz with whispers from the students.

"Has Lady Kagura taken mercy on her?"

"No way! Lady Kagura of all people would never forgive this kind of outrage!"

"Maybe she's going to make some impossible demand and force her to back down?"

Everyone watched with bated breath to see what would happen.

Her eyes glistening, Kirara replied, "Are you serious?"

*Figures she'd ask that first. The shock of Lady Kagura finally speaking to her, and giving her good news to boot, must be a lot to deal with.*

"You might have heard that the Sky Salon was challenged to a Salon Struggle by the Paradise Palace yesterday."

“Yes, I have,” she replied nervously.

The news about the Salon Struggle had spread like wildfire. It seemed all the students living on campus were desperate for any excitement in their lives, regardless of which program they belonged to. The fact that the one being challenged was the Sky Salon, which every single student longed to be a part of, only made it a bigger source of gossip.

“I’d like you to participate in the Salon Struggle.”

“Me?”

“Yes. I’ll use this to determine whether you’re worthy of becoming my Seraph or not.”

The murmurings all around us grew even louder.

“If you want to be my Seraph, you must at least have the skills required to defend my relaxation spot. Are you strong enough to carry the fate of the Sky Salon on your shoulders?”

Kirara looked straight ahead and answered without hesitation, “I am.” Nothing filled her voice now but fierce determination.

“Excellent. In that case, there’s just one more thing.”

I gulped. She was about to reveal the most crucial detail of all. This would require Kirara to be fully committed—no half-measures.

“If I deem you unworthy of becoming my Seraph, you will leave the academy.”

Kirara’s breath caught in her throat. Even for her, this was too much for an immediate reply. It was too high a price to pay if she lost. At least, that would’ve been the normal way to look at it.

But Kirara quickly brushed all her doubt aside and plainly declared, “All right. I accept the conditions.”

Hearing this, Lady Kagura nodded with satisfaction. “Just the answer I was hoping for. In that case, please come to the Sky Salon after school today for a full explanation of the contest itself. Misaki, show her the way.”

“Okay,” I replied.

With Kirara plowing on ahead, I had to mentally prepare myself as well. The stress that had threatened to give me a stomach ulcer may have dissipated, but now my stomach ached for a whole different reason.



After school, I brought Kirara to the Sky Salon with me as promised and found Himeko and Lady Kagura already seated at the table in the middle, with the Kokonoe sisters standing in position behind Lady Kagura as usual. Also present were Lady Angelica, Lady Asuka, and Mei.

“You made it!” chirped Himeko.

“Good to see you,” said Lady Kagura. “I look forward to competing alongside you in the Salon Struggle.”

Being greeted by these illustrious figures made Kirara visibly tense. I was used to spending time in the Sky Salon by now, and I’d come to the school not even knowing or caring about it, but Kirara’s reaction was actually the more expected one. After all, Himeko was Amanotsuka Academy’s deputy chairman, and Lady Kagura was the head of the Sky Salon, the most esteemed of the school’s many salons. To the Domestic Arts students, these two girls were practically gods.

“Erm, thank you for showing me such a warm welcome. I’ll do everything I can to meet your expectations and put all my effort into winning the contest.”

She deeply bowed in a manner so awkward that you could practically hear a creaking sound, as if she were a robot in need of an oil change.

Lady Kagura smiled wryly at this. “You don’t need to be so stiff. Anyway, sit down.”

“Uh, yes, certainly. Sorry.”

*Who is this meek little kitten and what has she done with Kirara?!*

“You too, Misaki.”

“Right! Sitting!”

*Not that I’m in any position to judge her.* Just thinking about having to take

part in the Salon Struggle made me seize up. I sat down next to Kirara and let out a soft sigh.

Seeing that everyone was present, the Kokonoe twins produced a whiteboard out of who knows where. In unison, they said, “Now that all the participants are here, we’ll start the presentation.”

It looked as though the older sister, the one with the music notes on her ribbons, was going to lead the proceedings, while the younger sister with the flowers was in charge of writing on the board.

“First, the nature of the contest,” began Music Ayaka. “It’s going to be a battle of table manners.”

“Table manners?” Lady Asuka blurted out.

“Yes. Good table manners are an essential for any lady—especially one who wants to rule the Sky Salon. Think of it as a test to see if you’re worthy of such an honor.”

Overnight, the twins’ approach to Lady Asuka had changed to one that was pretty calm and courteous. *Did Lady Angelica’s quick reprimand really make that much of an impact, or are they able to switch their politeness on and off depending on the situation?*

“Fine,” Lady Asuka scoffed. “I don’t care what kind of challenge it is.”

Whether she cared or not, she didn’t have a choice. All the conditions of the contest were up to our team to decide, so she had to go along with this.

Music Ayaka laughed with a hint of derision and said, “How nice that you’re so enthusiastic.” It was perfectly clear that she’d say a lot more if she wasn’t forcing herself to be polite. “Now, before we move on to the specifics, there’s something we’d like your agreement on, Lady Asuka.”

“Tell me.”

“From your side, we’re planning to have two participants—you and Mei—but we would like to have three.”

“Huh? Two against three? Doesn’t that put us at a huge disadvantage?!”

Lady Asuka’s question was totally reasonable. Sure, we got to decide the

rules, but that didn't mean we could set up an obviously unfair fight.

"Don't you worry. It could actually end up being more of a disadvantage for us."

Lady Asuka frowned, puzzled.

"The entrants we're putting forward are Lady Kagura, Misaki, and the girl who's been the talk of the school this past week, Kirara Hoshino."

When Music Ayaka gestured toward her, Kirara lowered her head robotically again. *Looks like she's still a bundle of nerves.*

"Wow, so you made her your Seraph after all."

"Not yet," answered Lady Kagura, jumping in. "We're involving her in this so I can decide whether to accept her request. That means we need your agreement to let us include someone who's not a member of the salon."

Lady Asuka's voice grew more intense. "That's fine. I don't care. Just as long as you're not saddling us with conditions that make it impossible for us to win. That's all that counts." She was clearly determined to have at least *some* chance of victory.

"I'll get to that soon," said Music Ayaka. "First we'll finish explaining how it's going to work. For now, just trust me that it's not too big a handicap. Anyway, the contest is going to be focused around French cuisine. We'll serve a meal made up of eight courses: *hors d'oeuvre, soupe, poisson, sorbet, entrée, salade, entremets*, and *café*."

As Music Ayaka listed all these, Flower Ayaka wrote them all down on the whiteboard. Looking at it, I wanted to bury my face in my hands.

*Sure, I know what hors d'oeuvre means, and soupe sounds familiar, but poisson? Entrée? Entremets? I don't get any of that!*

French food was a total mystery to me. I felt my spirits sinking.

"Before we serve each course, Lady Kagura and Lady Asuka will draw randomly to decide which dish we'll present out of several possibilities, each of which has to be eaten in a specific way. Some will be more complicated to eat than others, and who knows, maybe we'll throw in a few wildcards from the

world of Japanese or Italian cuisine. If luck is on your side, you'll only get easy dishes. Of course, you'll have no way of knowing in advance which dishes are going to turn up. We're trying to test Kirara Hoshino as well, so hopefully you'll believe us when we say we won't give the game away. Is everything clear so far?"

Lady Asuka gave a haughty nod. "Yes, that's all fine and dandy. No complaints from me."

"Then let's move on to the scoring system. Each participant will be given a set number of points at the start and will lose points for every mistake."

"Right, okay."

"We're thinking of having Lady Kagura, Lady Asuka, and Mei start with fifteen points each, while Misaki and Kirara start with ten points."

"Wait, what? Hold on a second. That means our team gets thirty points and yours gets thirty-five! Why do you get to have five extra points right from the start?!"

*It's true. That's how the numbers add up.*

"Gosh, we go to such lengths to make it a fair fight, and you still don't understand."

Lady Asuka stood up and banged her fist on the table. "Of course I don't understand!"

In response, Music Ayaka shook her head. "I'll try to explain, all right? If you add up the points our three participants get at the start, you're right that we're at an advantage—but what happens when points start getting subtracted? We have three people who can lose points all at once. Imagine if everyone makes the same mistake. Your team loses two points and ours loses three. Not to mention that an especially serious error will mean losing even more points. That five-point advantage from the start won't last for long. Plus, your side has Mei, an outstanding Seraph, whereas we're entering two first-year students with no experience at all. They barely know the first thing about table manners, so they'll have to start cramming to have any hope of winning. All in all, I'd say the advantage is on your side."

Lady Asuka frowned. “Hmm.”

*When she puts it that way, it really doesn't sound like much of a benefit for us. I have literally no clue about table manners. Still, Lady Asuka doesn't look ready to accept it just yet. Maybe she has some mental barrier to accepting anything she's told by one of the Ayakas. No surprise there, given the way they've been mocking her.*

“What do you think, Mei?”

“Let me see,” said Mei, putting a hand on her cheek and thinking for a moment. “The initial difference in points does worry me a little, but if we can believe Ayaka's explanation, it doesn't sound too bad. If the Kokonoe sisters were taking part, I'd expect a flawless performance, but with these two first-years, there'll be a few more ups and downs. I think we've got a good chance, definitely.”

Mei looked over and scrutinized me and Kirara. At least, that was my guess as to what she was doing; she always had her eyes almost entirely closed, so it was hard to be completely sure why she was looking at us.

Then she posed a question to Music Ayaka. “You said an especially serious error will mean losing even more points. How many, exactly?”

“Good question. If they really break a taboo, we're thinking of a three-point loss.”

“Which would mean if both of the first-years make the same mistake, and neither of us do, that alone could be enough to decide the match.”

“That's right.”

“Hey, that's pretty good!” shouted Lady Asuka, her tone doing a complete reversal from a minute earlier. “Me and Mei have perfect table manners, so *obviously* we won't make a single mistake. Isn't that right, Mei?”

“Yes, milady.” She bowed her head respectfully.

*It looks like Lady Asuka has a lot of faith in Mei.*

“Do you accept the terms, then?”

Lady Asuka nodded, a picture of self-satisfaction. “Bring it on.”



“Excellent. That just leaves the time and place. We’re thinking this Monday after school at Erisu’s École Kitchen. We’ll supply the chef, so we’ll only need to borrow the restaurant itself.”

“Huh? Where’s that?”

Music Ayaka tilted her head in confusion. “I thought you would have known.”

Erisu’s École Kitchen was a cozy little European-style restaurant in the forest behind François House, the Societal Arts students’ dorm. With its Provence-style exterior, it gave the illusion of having wandered into a remote French village. It was a lovely place, but it just wasn’t very popular for some reason. Whenever I’d been there, there were no more than two or three groups occupying the tables. It seemed that maybe word about it hadn’t spread very far—that it was a secret known only by a select few.

The only reason I knew about it was because Himeko was quite a fan. She’d apparently gone there frequently before we met, and she’d taken me there several times now. To me, it didn’t seem so surprising that Lady Asuka wasn’t familiar with it.

“Mei, have you heard of it?”

“Well, yes, actually,” said Mei with an awkward look. She leaned over and whispered into Lady Asuka’s ear.

Suddenly, Lady Asuka cried out in shock. “What?! Erisu owns a restaurant?! I had no idea!”

“Yes.”

It sounded like the owner was someone Lady Asuka knew. If she knew the owner but didn’t know about the restaurant, that spoke volumes about its popularity.

“Is the location clear enough?” asked Music Ayaka.

Nodding her head vigorously, Lady Asuka said, “Yes, all clear now. Thanks.”

With the discussion all wrapped up, Lady Angelica stood. “Then it’s settled. The Salon Struggle will be held after school on Monday at Erisu’s École Kitchen. I look forward to a solid effort from both sides.”



After Lady Angelica and Lady Asuka left, we had a meeting among ourselves. One thing was clear above all else: if Kirara and I didn't learn all we could about table manners, and fast, we had no hope of winning.

"We only have the weekend, so it's best if someone teaches you. Two days should be plenty, though."

It was all well and good for Lady Kagura to say that, but to me, two days sounded like no time at all. How was I supposed to learn everything in only two days? It sounded tougher than any test I'd ever studied for.

That was when the Kokonoe twins chimed in.

"We could teach them, but it would be better to ask someone else."

"We might accidentally spill the beans about what's coming up in the contest."

*I'm surprised they're so focused on keeping it all aboveboard. I guess we can't expect any little hints from them. Darn, that would have made life easier.*

I couldn't help feeling slightly cheated. All the rules had been decided by our team, so they could have been set up so that we would never lose. Why was I being put in such a tough position?

"I'm wondering if we could ask Lady Himeko to do the honors."

"That's a good idea. The point is to test Kirara as well, so it wouldn't make much sense for Lady Kagura to be the one teaching her."

Lady Kagura nodded at the sisters. "I see what you mean." Then she turned to Himeko and asked, "Would you be okay with that?"

"Absolutely. Leave it to me." A look of glee appeared on Himeko's face. "I'm going to be a strict teacher, so you two had better be prepared!"

"Right! Preparing!" I replied hurriedly.

"I'm eager to learn," said Kirara.

There was nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. All we could do now was accept whatever was coming our way.



Our special training started that same day. Going straight to a restaurant to practice would have been too sudden, though, so first it was time for some reading.

Himeko took us into a private study room at François House and sat us down in front of a tome entitled *The Fundamentals of Dining Etiquette*. Apparently, this was to be our textbook.

Incidentally, Himeko had pulled out the stops with her look. Her white blouse, short navy-blue skirt, and glasses worn just for show gave her a sexy teacher vibe. Occasionally, she did things like gently lifting up the glasses by the rims. She was really getting into the spirit of it.

“Today we’ll start with the basics before we move on to the practical side of things tomorrow. I’ll have a table reserved for us at Erisu’s so we can do a mock exam.”

“Okay,” we responded.

“Now, do you know how to hold a knife and fork?”

*A knife and fork? Hmm. Western cutlery was not something I was used to. I tried holding up an imaginary knife and fork in the air in front of me, but I had no idea what to do other than gripping them with my fists. How in the world am I supposed to beat anyone in a battle of table manners like this?!*

Kirara replied with, “Hold the fork in your left hand and the knife in your right, with your index fingers along the back.”

“Correct!”

*Oh, I see!* “You’re so good at this, Kirara.”

“How can you not know that? It’s common knowledge.”

My honest admiration was met with a cold glare from Kirara, but honestly, I couldn’t blame myself for not knowing this when I’d never needed to do it before.

*All I need is a pair of chopsticks and I can eat anything. That’s my theory, and I’m sticking to it! Even if I did only just come up with it.*

Himeko smiled in a teacherly manner. “Everyone’s got to start somewhere. There’s nothing wrong with being a beginner.”

*I could cry. Himeko’s such a nice teacher. If the Kokonoe twins were teaching us, they’d have gotten annoyed with me for sure.*

“Tomorrow I’ll be able to teach you properly using the real thing, so for today, just imagine holding them.”

Himeko raised her hands to about chest height and held an invisible knife and fork. This came so naturally to her that I could almost see the cutlery in her hands.

*That’s the refinement of a proper lady.* I heaved a sigh without meaning to.

“Now you do the same.”

Both Kirara and I followed Himeko’s example and tried to look elegant, but we inevitably looked stiff and clumsy instead.

“Focus on your posture first of all. The trick is to hold them straight out in front, then turn them slightly inward. Always keep the blade of the knife facing down. Hold the food in place with your fork, then gently cut it with your knife. If you keep them both at those same angles the whole time, it’ll look nice and neat.”

I tried this, and it seemed to go okay with the imaginary versions, at least.

“Whatever you do, do it with beauty and grace. That’s the motto you should stick to. Apart from that, it’s just a case of remembering the unbreakable rules.”

She rattled off a series of these. *Don’t make noise with your cutlery. Always cut starting from the left-hand side. Never use the zig-zag method.* And so on and so forth.

“So many rules! I don’t know if I can cope with this.” Having all this crammed into my head at once was getting me all tangled up.

“It only feels that way at first. You’ll get used to it soon enough. Besides, it’s better to learn it now than before you go out into the world. It could be embarrassing later on if you don’t know how to use Western cutlery.”

“That’s true.”

Regardless of my current exploits as a maid, this definitely seemed like something that would come in handy in my adult life.

“Anyway, with all that in mind, I’ll start teaching you some of the specific details you’ll need to learn for the contest. Let’s start with the *hors d’oeuvre*. The general idea is to cut them up into mouthful-sized pieces, but you must use the outermost knife and fork on the table. You’ll need to watch out if they serve canapes or caviar, though. It’s fine to pick up canapes with your hands. Caviar should be eaten with a spoon, but if you’re served crackers to go with them, it’s best to put the caviar on the crackers and eat them together.”

*What are canapes? That reminds me, I still don’t know what “entrée” or “entremets” are. If she doesn’t explain all that, I’ll never be able to keep up.*

I had a long road ahead of me.



“I am *exhausted*.”

Once Himeko’s crash course in table manners was over for the day, we headed back to our dorm and I immediately collapsed onto my bed. We’d been at it for roughly three hours. The more she’d told us, the more I’d started to feel like every spare inch of my brain was taken up by table manner trivia.

This was new and uncomfortable territory for me. I was drained both physically and mentally, and I was close to my limit.

Next to me, Kirara muttered to herself as she went over the day’s lessons.

“Try to eat soup without making any noise. When it comes to salad, never pick up the dish. Eat with a knife and fork, layering thin items together.”

With her hands, she practiced cutting up imaginary food in front of her. *If nothing else, we’ve improved our pantomime skills today.*

“Have you really remembered all that?”

“With a fish *meunière*, start by peeling off the fin, then—no, not yet, but I plan to have it all locked into my brain before I go to sleep.”

She stopped moving her hands just to answer me, but her air knife immediately started moving again.

*I guess she really has to give it everything she's got, given what's at stake for her. I should probably do the same. If I end up being responsible for us having to hand over the Sky Salon, and for Kirara having to leave the academy, I'll regret it for the rest of my life.*

*Well, here goes!*

I got up off the bed and faced Kirara. "Let me join you."

"What's this? Are you a model student all of a sudden?"

"I just can't let them beat us. This is no time to be lazing around." I picked up my own air knife and air fork and held them at the appropriate angles. "With *meunière*, you slit the fish with a knife along the backbone, then lift up the nearest fillet and put it closer to you on the plate. Right?"

"Yeah. First you separate and eat that, then you start on the other side. Then you use a knife and fork to remove the bones."

"And turning the whole fish over is a major no-no."

"Lady Himeko said the same about any meat with bones in it. If there's a finger bowl provided, then it's okay to eat it with your hands, but it's better to use a knife and fork if at all possible."

*Table manners are pretty complicated, but as long as I'm not on my own, I can work at this. Maybe it'll even be a chance to develop a closer bond with Kirara. That would be nice.*

Until it was time for bed, we went over every single little detail we'd learned that day and practiced it all as thoroughly as we could.



The next day, Himeko took us to the very place where we'd soon be competing: Erisu's École Kitchen.

"So, today we're going to get some practical experience at a real restaurant."

"Right!" said the two of us.

The plastered outer walls were a tranquil beige, while the roof tiles were orange. Opening the antique wooden door and stepping inside was like being

transported to the Middle Ages.

Despite how charming it was, though, there were still no other patrons besides us. I didn't think it was because Himeko had reserved the whole place. Either it wasn't that popular or it was too unknown to have much of a reputation. Even outside of mealtimes, I'd still have expected there to be a few people chatting over a cup of tea. Maybe it was somehow not as good as it seemed to me—but then why would Himeko be such a fan?

Speaking of Himeko, she was the picture of schoolteacher sophistication again today. Her slender legs, extending from below her tight skirt, were absolutely dazzling.

*She must like that look. I have to say, with her figure, adding that extra touch of maturity makes my heart race a little, even though we're both girls.*

"I've asked them to prepare the kinds of things that are likely to come up in the contest based on what I know about the Ayakas. Let's go through them all and try to master them."

"Yeah!"

Today I was feeling motivated. I was determined to give it my all, for the sake of Kirara and the Sky Salon.

"Then let's make a start." She turned and said, "Can you present the first dish, please?"

"Coming right up!"

The one who replied was the restaurant's chef. Like all the other staff here, she was a Domestic Arts student. There was nothing unusual about that; almost all the students working at the stores and other establishments on campus were students from the Domestic Arts program working part-time. This included the various stores in François House, from those selling groceries to those offering fancy lingerie. Working a part-time job outside school grounds was against the rules, but this was a good way to earn some extra cash, and there were plenty of places hiring.

It also provided more chances to meet Societal Arts students and get to know them. Apparently, it was fairly common for a lady to get to know someone

through their part-time job and then make them into her Seraph or Exousia.

“Here you go!”

In a flash, the first dish was presented before us. I looked at it and groaned. It was something a lot of people had heard of but had never tried, myself included.

*“Escargots à la bourguignonne,”* said Himeko.

Snails, in other words. Already we were being served something I hadn’t reckoned with. There was some kind of green liquid pooled in the shells, which didn’t exactly look appetizing. To each their own, sure, but to me that sauce made the dish look kind of moldy.

That didn’t mean I wasn’t going to eat it, of course. I just had a strong urge to complain to no one in particular. It was like I’d been forced to do a crazy food tasting challenge.

Even Kirara looked totally lost, since this hadn’t come up in our practice. “How are we supposed to eat this?”

“You have special tongs. Use those with your left hand to hold the shell, then use the fork in your right hand to take the meat inside and pull it out.”

“Oh, I see.”

It didn’t sound too complicated now that she’d explained it.

“As for the sauce left inside the shell, you can either put it on some bread if you’ve been served any, or else just drink it. Although it doesn’t look like it appeals to you all that much, Misaki.”

I laughed awkwardly. *Busted, I guess.*

“It’s just butter mixed with finely chopped parsley and garlic, you know. In any case, as long as you can eat the meat itself without making a mess, the sauce doesn’t matter. The worst thing of all would be to go for the sauce and end up spilling it.”

Having started with something so unexpected, our training soon began to feel like a war zone, with cacophonous metallic clinking sounds, cherry tomatoes rolling away from us, and soup spilling everywhere.



I puffed and panted, gasping for breath. *It's only eating. Why do I feel like I've run a marathon?*

Himeko sighed in frustration. "Kirara's improved a great deal, but you're still a bit lacking, Misaki."

"I'm trying. I can't help being clumsy."

*Honestly, I never thought it would be this tough in real life. It all felt so much easier when I was practicing with Kirara last night.*

"Maybe you just don't know how to use the right amount of force. How about I give you a more hands-on lesson?"

"Huh?"

She stood behind me and placed her hands on top of mine.

"With cherry tomatoes, keep them in place with your knife like this, then insert your fork at an angle. If you're eating anything firm like this, don't apply too much pressure. Gently move your knife back and forth to cut through it little by little."

"Oh, uh, okay."

I'd never noticed this before, but Himeko's pale fingers were so smooth and slender. Now her hands were on mine, manipulating me like a puppet. When she taught me like this, it was like all the struggles I'd been facing so far had never existed. I could cut up the tomatoes with no difficulty whatsoever.

"Don't lose focus until it's safely in your mouth. If you drop it along the way, you're guaranteed to lose points."

She moved my left hand, bringing the piece of tomato closer to my lips. As she fed it to me, I felt a sense of awe deep in my soul. *This comes so naturally to a real lady like her. I wonder if I'll ever be as good as her.*

"Now, let's keep going. No time to waste. The more you practice, the more you'll improve—and your rising confidence will lead to better results. Let's make good use of every second we have."

"Right!"

The remainder of our Saturday and Sunday was filled to the brim with training. The end result was that I felt pretty optimistic about our chances. I believed that whatever came our way, we'd be able to cope with it. Hopefully.

## Chapter Seven: The Salon Struggle

Before I knew it, Monday arrived. The softly lit interior of Erisu's École Kitchen was already set up for the Salon Struggle. Two large tables had been placed in the center, surrounded by a wall of one-way mirrors.

Lady Asuka and Mei were already standing by, and spectators were filing in. The air inside the restaurant was electric.

*I knew there would be people watching, but I didn't expect to have this many eyes on me.*

Underscoring this was the group of people, maybe five or six of them, assembled at a spot on the mezzanine floor that offered a very good view. I couldn't make out exactly how many were there, but all of them wore tiaras.

The heads of the other salons had come to watch the proceedings. No, "watch" didn't do their expressions justice. They were scrutinizing every detail.

I began to tremble.

Suddenly, an upbeat voice broke through the tense atmosphere. "How are you all doing this fine Monday afternoon? We're broadcasting live from today's Salon Struggle, where the Sky Salon, led by Kagura Mikage, will face off against the challenger, Asuka Nekoyashi!"

*Broadcast? Live?!*

"In a surprise twist, the Sky Salon has chosen to enter two first-year Domestic Arts students. However, these two are no ordinary first-years! One of them is the Seraph of a certain lady you all know, Himeko Amanotsuka. Let's find out just how excited Misaki is to take on this huge responsibility!"

As I stared blankly and wondered what was going on, a microphone was thrust into my face.

"Hi there! I'm from the Amanotsuka Academy news crew! Do you have a moment?"

“This school has a news crew?”

*I didn't expect it to be this big a deal. They have cameras set up! Are there really people watching this?*

“It sure does! Misaki Hotaru, tell us how you're feeling right now.”

“How I'm feeling? Well, um, I don't know. I guess I just have to try my best, basically.” This sudden question left me at a loss.

My floundering was interrupted when Himeko appeared from behind and came to my rescue.

“Misaki's been working her hardest to prepare for this. She's learned everything she has to, and I know she's going to win it for the Sky Salon!”

“Thank you, Himeko!”

She hugged me from behind and gave a reassuring grin.

The camera and mic were turned toward her.

“What a rare treat for Lady Himeko herself to make an on-camera appearance! We'd love to get an impromptu interview.”

“Misaki, you go and get ready. Just remember everything you've practiced and try not to panic. It'll all be fine.”

“Thanks!”

With a light pat on the bottom, I was ushered away, glad to escape the camera's glare.

*Phew. I have to say, I never, ever expected this to be on TV. I'm just glad Himeko took their attention off me. If they'd kept asking me questions, all the techniques I memorized would've started leaking out of my brain.*

“They've really made a circus out of this.”

“Oh, hey, Kirara!”

She had appeared beside me out of nowhere.

“I really hope they don't spot me here before we have to start.”

Kirara had spent the past week causing an uproar in the school and was now

entering the Salon Struggle under the proviso that she might have to leave the school forever. For the news crew, she was probably a juicy target.

Even if the ones holding the mics were Societal Arts students, that didn't mean we had to obediently answer all their questions.

Lady Kagura, who had been watching this unfold, appeared to be worried about our well-being. "Taking care of things like this is one more duty I have as the head of the salon. Given the current circumstances, I think we should start early. Ayakas?"

They heeded her call and came over.

"If everything's ready, I'd like to begin."

"Certainly, milady!" they replied with exaggerated enthusiasm before going ahead with the introduction.

"Thank you all so much for joining us today," said one of the twins.

"The battle for ownership of the Sky Salon is about to begin," said the other.

Soft applause sounded across the room. The news crew, who were still focused on Himeko, hurriedly ran over to the Kokonoe sisters. At last, it was time.

We each sat in the seats assigned to us and placed our napkins in our laps, mentally bracing ourselves for whatever we were about to be served. Lady Kagura sat opposite me and Kirara, while Lady Asuka similarly sat facing Mei.

The twins continued in their role as emcees.

"Before the Salon Struggle officially begins, we'd like to make one announcement."

"During the contest, all conversation is strictly prohibited. You may not speak to your opponents or your teammates."

*Really? No talking at all?* This was the first time I'd heard anything about this rule.

"Due to the nature of the competition, this measure is required to prevent the contestants from explaining how any given dish is supposed to be eaten."

“Conversation is an essential part of any dining experience, but you’ll have to manage without it just this once.”

*Hmm, yeah. I guess asking during the match would be a way to game the system—not that I’d be able to do it all properly without any practice. If there’s one thing I’ve learned over the course of two exhausting days, it’s that.*

Still, something was bothering me about this that I couldn’t put my finger on. The rule itself seemed fine, but what was I missing?

I was left with no time to dwell on this, because the Ayakas swiftly moved on. However, despite telling myself that I was probably worried over nothing, the reason the rule was bothering me became clear much sooner than I’d expected.

“Without further ado, let’s start on the *hors d’oeuvre*!”

“Lady Kagura, Lady Asuka, please choose your dishes.”

The two salon leaders were each presented with a box, out of which they drew a plastic card.

“Let’s see what you’ve picked. Aha! Lady Kagura’s chosen dish is *escargots à la provençale*.”

“And Lady Asuka has selected smoked salmon with sliced onions.”

In my mind I gave a celebratory fist pump. Even if it was a different flavor, this was a dish I’d trained for and knew I could manage.

The snails that were brought out were still in their shells, but of course, they were accompanied by tongs. This would be a piece of cake.

Kirara and I exchanged a glance. She looked very relieved as well. Even though we were forbidden to speak, our eyes alone were enough to tell each other,

“We got this!”

“*Bon appetit!*” said the twins in unison, giving the signal for both teams to start.

Lady Kagura used her tongs to hold a shell in place and effortlessly pulled out the meat and brought it up to her mouth—the very same technique Himeko had taught me. That was when I cottoned on to exactly what had been bothering me before.

*Hold on a moment. Isn't showing me how to do it exactly the same as telling me? Even if she doesn't say a word, all we have to do is watch her and we'll know how to eat every single dish.*

No wonder the rule hadn't felt quite right. Had the Kokonoe twins made a mistake? That seemed pretty implausible given how fastidious they were, but there was definitely something behind this.

*I could bring it up, but then I'd be breaking the no-talking rule. I don't want to lose points over this. Plus, it's possible the twins had this in mind from the start. Better to just keep quiet.*

I'd practiced as much as I could, but my table manners were still far from perfect. It was possible we'd be faced with some dishes I didn't feel 100% confident about, in which case it would be pretty handy to have Lady Kagura there as a reference. Looking at it in this light, it really felt like this might have been a deliberate attempt to swing the match in our favor.

*Either way, I can't do anything to change the rules, right? Weird, but it is what it is.*

After delaying a little in my uncertainty, I got to work on the snails. I pulled the plate toward me slightly and gripped one of the shells with my tongs.

When I put the meat in my mouth, I inadvertently let out a moan of pleasure.

*This is incredible! It tastes totally different from the ones I ate in practice. Is it just the sauce that's changed? I could eat these all day!*

I got through the *hors d'oeuvre* course with elegance and poise.

Next came *soupe*, for which both Lady Kagura and Lady Asuka drew corn soup. For us, it was served in bouillon cups, whereas the other team received it in soup bowls.

The key to this course was not making any noise. With soup served in a bouillon cup, it was apparently fine to just pick it up by the handle and drink, but I decided to use a spoon as I had during practice. Kirara and Lady Asuka both did the same.

It was a matter of perseverance. Every return trip made the soup deplete a

tiny bit more.

From the other side of the one-way mirror behind me, I could hear the news crew giving live commentary.

*Is this really exciting enough to put on TV?* This course was so lacking in drama that I even had time to start worrying about viewers getting bored.

So far, neither side had made any mistakes—I was fairly sure of that.

*If we can keep this up, our victory is guaranteed. I'd better not get complacent, though. Everything so far is just a warm-up.*

Next came *poisson*, the fish course. Now the contest would require skilled control of a knife and fork.

“Lady Kagura’s chosen dish is rainbow trout *meunière*,” said one of the sisters.

“Lady Asuka’s is salt-grilled Pacific saury.”

Here it came. I suspected this might prove to be the toughest round of all.

Although the other team’s dish was unexpectedly Japanese, there were no chopsticks provided. All five entrants were served a whole fish, bones and all. The challenge would come from removing the bones using correct technique.

We had focused on this pretty heavily in Himeko’s lessons. *First, you peel off the fin. Next, you slit the fish with a knife along the backbone, then lift up the nearest fillet and put it closer to you on the plate.*

I repeated the steps to myself in my head, glanced at what Lady Kagura was doing just to be on the safe side, then started eating.

Everything was going okay. I removed the backbone and put it down on the other side of the plate, then started on the portion underneath, cutting it into bite-sized pieces one by one just as I had been so far. The three of us moved our cutlery elegantly and with perfect precision, making short work of our rainbow trout.

The accident didn’t happen until after we had finished—and it was on Lady Asuka’s side, not ours.

Lady Asuka and Mei both took care of their own fish just as smoothly as we



did, but then, suddenly, Mei rose from her seat. She walked over to Lady Asuka, took a handkerchief out of her pocket, and started to wipe Lady Asuka's mouth.

*It did look like she had a bit of food stuck there, but this is definitely going to lose them some points, right?*

It had to have been a painful choice for Mei. She would have been well aware of that, but still decided she couldn't let Lady Asuka appear on-camera in such a state. As a maid, that might have been the right choice, but we were in the middle of a contest. What if that decision led to them losing?

I wondered if Lady Asuka would get angry at this, but she dutifully allowed her mouth to be wiped and then set down her knife and fork. *No doubt this is what a master-servant relationship looks like when it's full of trust. Mei has decided to put her duties as a maid above all other concerns.*

The fourth course was *sorbet*, a palate-cleansing sherbet. This was a simple case of digging into it with a spoon one mouthful at a time. The main point to keep in mind was that picking up the plate was a no-go. As long as I scooped it up carefully to avoid dropping any, I was in no danger.

Next came the meat course. After getting this far, I *really* didn't want to mess up.

However, the dish Lady Kagura drew was a chicken drumstick served on the bone—or, in other words, fried chicken.

The moment I saw it, I groaned softly. This was likely to be even more of an ordeal than the fish. Eating food with bones in it was already a challenge, but in this case the central bone was fully surrounded by a thick layer of meat, which made me all the more nervous. On top of that, we hadn't been given finger bowls, which was an implicit sign that we had to use a knife and fork rather than picking it up with our hands.

*We've practiced eating meat on the bone, but I never thought we'd be served something so cumbersome. If I knock it even slightly, there's a risk it might roll off the plate and lose me boatloads of points.*

By contrast, Lady Asuka's dish looked surprisingly easy to eat. It was the kind of thing I expected from this course: a sirloin steak made from finely marbled

Wagyu beef.

Being as cautious and deliberate as I could, I peeled off the meat starting from the top. This was a dish that required extreme concentration to avoid making an error. Lady Kagura had managed to draw possibly the worst option imaginable. Normally it would at least have been served in a way that was easier to eat, or with a finger bowl provided so you could just pick it up.

Sweat formed on my brow as my intense battle continued. Himeko had taken great pains to teach me, so I knew I'd improved compared to when I started out. Hopefully I could do this.

With one careful movement of my knife after another, I finally succeeded in eating the entire top half. I felt like a surgeon in the operating room.

The next step was to take out the bone. I lined up my knife ready for this—but that was when I noticed something wrong.

*What's Lady Kagura doing?*

After finishing the top half of her fried chicken, she had turned the rest over, leaving the bone facing down.

*What?! Hold on a sec! I thought that was strictly forbidden. From what Himeko taught me, the rules for meat on the bone should be pretty much the same as for fish. Or is it my mistake? Is her way of eating fried chicken the right way?*

There was no denying that it was much easier. Turning it like that left it in a much more approachable form.

*Oof. What do I do?!*

I looked over at Kirara, who had similarly frozen and was breathing heavily. Her face made it clear that she was incredibly conflicted.

*What's the right choice here? Do we go with Himeko or Lady Kagura?*

I longed for advice and reassurance, but we were surrounded by a one-way mirror, so I couldn't even see Himeko, let alone gauge her reaction. Nor could I ask Lady Kagura, since talking would have broken the rules.

*So this is where that rule really comes into play.*

Seeing both of us sitting there paralyzed, Lady Kagura glared at us with eyes that demanded to know what we were doing. She repeatedly glanced down at her own plate, practically ordering us to eat it in the same manner as her.

*Maybe her way is right? If we don't all make the same choice, someone is guaranteed to lose points. The ideal case would be that we both follow Lady Kagura's example and all of us get full marks. It's hard to believe Himeko would have given us the wrong advice, though.*

I heaved a heavy sigh.

*I'm sorry, Lady Kagura. I choose to believe in Himeko.*

Throwing my indecision aside, I confidently thrust my knife forward, ready to remove the bone. Lady Kagura stared daggers at me and I could hear voices stirring all around.

*I know I'll be raked over the coals later, but I'll just have to live with that.*

That was my decision: to stick to Himeko's advice. As for Kirara, it looked like she'd finally committed to a choice as well. With her knife and fork, she slowly turned over the fried chicken.

*So she's chosen to trust Lady Kagura.*

This meant that no matter what, one of us would be losing points. The best-case scenario was that I was in the wrong; if so, we still had a good shot at winning. Still, the *entrée* definitely looked like our worst course so far.

*With any luck, it won't be the deciding factor. Mei has to have lost at least one point for what she did just before, so maybe the two sides are about even.*

After that tumultuous round came number six, the *salade*. Lady Kagura drew green salad *à la provençale*, while Lady Asuka drew carrot *lape*.

The second she saw her dish, Lady Asuka let out a sound of disgust. "Blegh!"

*I guess she must really hate carrots.*

With a grimace, she reluctantly started lifting it up to her mouth.

Ours didn't look all that challenging. There was nothing in it that was tough to eat. As long as we remembered to layer the leafy greens together to make them

easier to grab with the fork, we were golden.

All that remained were the *entremets* and *café* courses. Soon the battle would be over.

I really, *really* didn't want to make any more mistakes, but the dessert Lady Kagura picked out of the box did nothing for my confidence. It was a strawberry *mille-feuille*.

By contrast, the other team's dish was a cheesecake served with blueberry sauce. Much more straightforward.

Obviously I couldn't expect to be served my beloved donuts, but *mille-feuille* required particular care and attention to eat properly. It consisted of several layers of pastry with cream and slices of strawberry sandwiched in between. Eating it without destroying the pastry layers was exceptionally difficult. Himeko had told us that even for her, it was a challenge to get through one of these without making a mess of the plate.

It would have been a *little* easier if we could have turned it onto its side and attacked it that way, but even the very top layer of pastry was decorated with strawberries and cream. I had a sense that this was a sign of how we were supposed to eat it, just like the lack of finger bowls with the fried chicken.

We'd been taught that the right approach was to insert the fork about halfway deep, then cut it into bite-sized squares with the knife. Apparently there was another approach that involved peeling off the layers of pastry and eating them one at a time, but my skill level made that route all but impossible.

I cut into the pastry ever so gradually, using the softest sawing motion I could to break through without wrecking it. What I really wanted was to abandon this laborious technique and just bite straight into it. Fighting that urge, I remained focused and kept up the methodical approach.

Lastly came the *café*. I couldn't rest on my laurels yet, but there wasn't too much they could throw at us for this last round. We were served Darjeeling tea. For Lady Asuka's team, it was a demitasse-sized coffee. As long as we avoided any slurping sounds, we could relax and enjoy the flavor.

When they deemed that everyone had finished their drink, the Kokonoe

sisters declared, “And with that, all eight courses are now complete!”

I felt so exhausted, I wanted to collapse. I started to feel a lot of compassion toward the ladies from the Societal Arts program, who were expected to act this way every single time they ate.

“We just need a moment to tally up the points and then we’ll be right back with you.”

They quickly disappeared backstage.

Considering how convinced I’d been of an easy victory at the beginning, it had ended up being pretty touch and go. If we lost, not only would we lose the Sky Salon, but Kirara would have to leave the academy forever.

With the twins gone for now, Lady Kagura immediately turned to me. “Misaki, do you have a moment?”

Although her tone was friendly on the surface, I knew she wasn’t about to commend me for my efforts. There was a stern undertone to her voice. I could tell she wanted an explanation.

“Uhm, yes?” From her point of view, I alone had made a terrible mistake, so I couldn’t blame her for wanting to give me the third degree.

“I won’t say anything until after we get the results, but after that, we have a *lot* to talk about. You understand why, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I replied wearily.

I’d known this was coming. I was the one who had contradicted the rest of the team.

An uneasy silence fell over the room. However, it didn’t go on too long, as the Ayakas soon returned.

One said, “We’re ready to announce the results.”

The other added, “Could we ask everyone to gather round, please?”

I was on tenterhooks. The one-way mirrors were cleared away and the other members of the Sky Salon and the Paradise Palace drew nearer to us.

Himeko clapped a hand on my shoulder and smiled kindly. “You got through

it.”

“Himeko, I’m so sorry! I ruined everything.”

“I wouldn’t say that at all. Let’s just listen to what the Ayakas have to say.”

The look on Himeko’s face was reassuring, like maybe I’d managed to meet her expectations after all.

The twins began to announce the results, each speaking in turn.

“Now then, the moment you’ve all been waiting for.”

“First we’ll go through the mistakes that were made.”

“Starting from the ones that resulted in a loss of one point. There were a few of these.”

I gulped. I didn’t remember making any mistakes other than the issue with the fried chicken, but I had no way to be sure.

“In the first course, the *hors d’oeuvre*, Misaki used her hands to move the plate closer to her.”

*Huh? Is there some problem with that?*

“When eating Western food, good table manners require you to leave the plate where it is. This means you lose one point.”

“Oh no!” I exclaimed.

*But it was pretty far away. If I didn’t move it, I’d have had to awkwardly bend over to eat it!*

Himeko whispered, “It was mean of them to put the plate where they did. Who’d have thought they’d care about a small detail like that? It’s not your fault in the slightest.”

I appreciated her consolation, but either way, I’d lost us a point right off the bat.

“Next, the third course, *poisson*.”

*I remember this. It’s when Mei stood up.*

“Lady Asuka loses one point.”

“What for?!” she snapped.

The twins peered down at her from both sides.

“I can’t believe you have to ask.”

“Do you really not understand?”

“Anyone who leaves a piece of food sticking to the side of their mouth is unfit to be called a lady.”

“Not only that, but you didn’t even notice it yourself. You had to wait for Mei to clean it up for you. Outrageous!”

“What are you, a little kid who can’t even clean up her own mess?”

“It’s disgusting that you put Mei in that position, pipsqueak. How can we *not* deduct a point?”

“Don’t call me a pipsqueak!”

Despite her visible and audible annoyance, Lady Asuka appeared to accept that she was at fault. She didn’t raise any further objections.

Now both teams had lost one point. This loss counteracted the mistake I’d made right at the start and reset the board to square one.

“Next we come to the *entrée*, where points were lost by both teams.”

“However, we’d like to skip over the Sky Salon’s error for now and discuss it later.”

Immediately I knew they were talking about our disparate methods of eating the fried chicken.

*If they’re putting it off until later, does that mean we lost more than one point for it? Ugh, my stomach hurts.*

“On the Paradise Palace side, Lady Asuka lost a point here again.”

“She made so much noise with her cutlery that it had our ears ringing. We just couldn’t turn a blind eye.”

Lady Asuka gritted her teeth. “Ngh!”

I’d been so preoccupied with my own dilemma that I hadn’t even noticed.

“Also, her method of eating the steak was so lacking in refinement that we’re forced to deduct another point.”

“Gah!”

*Yes! This means we have a two-point advantage! With the extra five we had at the start, this extends our lead to seven whole points.*

“Moving on to the *entremets*, Misaki and Kirara each lost one point.”

*So much for that. What a pain that mille-feuille was! I can’t imagine how I could have managed it any better.*

“The reason is basically the same as the one we just gave Lady Asuka. You just looked too unladylike when you were eating it.”

“Your actual method was fine, but your attitude and posture were horrifying. We *have* to take off points for that.”

*Rats. I was so focused on not breaking the pastry that I forgot all about everything else.*

“That’s every instance where an entrant lost one point.”

“Which brings us to the biggest issue in the whole contest, the Sky Salon’s *entrée*.”

*Here it comes at last. Victory or defeat—it’s all riding on this.*

After everything we’d heard so far, the difference in points was right back where it had started: with us five points in the lead. If I was the one who had messed up, we’d lose a maximum of three points and win the contest. However, if I was right and the other two were wrong, we’d likely lose six points. In that scenario, we’d lose.

“It is with heavy hearts that we must inform of you of our decision.”

“As much as we love and care about our own team, rules are rules. We can’t play favorites.”

*Oh no. This sounds bad.*

“If you’re eating meat on the bone, you’re not supposed to turn it over halfway through. That’s a major *faux pas*.”



“As a result, Kirara and Lady Kagura lose three points each.”

“*What?!*” shouted Lady Kagura in disbelief. “Hold on just one minute. What are you talking about? Are you saying *I’m* the one who was wrong?”

The Kokonoe sisters each put a hand on their forehead and feigned a tearful expression.

“We’re afraid so!”

“What a shameful display from our own mistress!”

Lady Kagura stared in blank amazement. It must have come as quite a shock given how confident she had been. She lost her composure completely and leaned on the table to avoid stumbling. “But how? That was the method I was taught! I was told it was correct!”

“Come on! Anyone can tell that’s the wrong way to do it. It’s obvious just by looking.”

“Seeing you glare at the first-years with that haughty expression was just too much. We died laughing!”

To illustrate this, the sisters both laughed loudly. “Ohohohohoho!”

“I just don’t see how this happened,” said Lady Kagura. “Wait. Hold on a moment. Wasn’t it *you two* that taught me that method?”

*Huh?*

“Are you trying to blame your own mistake on *us*?”

“I never thought our mistress was so twisted!”

She replied, “Don’t try to play dumb. I remember it clear as day. You warned me specifically that meat on the bone has to be treated differently than fish. In fact, I recall you repeating that at every possible opportunity for *years*.”

“Oh, is that right?”

“I can’t say *I* remember that.”

*Wow, they’re like evil masterminds. This is a premeditated crime that they’ve been working on for ages. Betrayal! Treason! We’ve been stabbed in the back by one of our own!*

Lady Asuka stepped forward, smiling from ear to ear. “Listen, you can deal with your personal issues later. Get to the important part! Announce the final result!”

I knew why she was so eager. The six points lost by Kirara and Lady Kagura were decisive for the race.

Turning to her, the twins replied.

“Yes, indeed. It’s time to announce the winner.”

“The Sky Salon lost nine points and the Paradise Palace lost three.”

“If we subtract those figures from the amount each team started off with...”

“That leaves the Sky Salon with a score of twenty-six and the Paradise Palace with a score of twenty-seven.”

Finally, in unison, they announced the dreadful truth. “The winner is Asuka Nekoyashi of the Paradise Palace!”

*We lost. We actually lost.*

Beside me, Kirara’s knees buckled and she fell to the floor.

Lady Asuka and Mei joyfully hugged each other.

“Mei, we did it! We won!”

“Yes, milady. Congratulations.”

*This means the Sky Salon won’t belong to Lady Kagura anymore. Worse than that, Kirara will have to leave the academy!*

“What are you doing, Kirara Hoshino?” asked one of the twins in a coldhearted tone, as if kicking her when she was down.

The other added, “Stand up. We still have to announce the results of your test.”

I decided I had to do something. I had to try to defend her so she could stay at the school. “Wait, please! It was just a simple mistake. Kirara knew the proper technique. She did!”

Despite my impassioned plea, they shut me down immediately. “Quiet, you.”

They continued.

“Kirara Hoshino, we have a question for you.”

“When you had to decide whether to go with what you knew or follow Lady Kagura’s example, why did you choose the latter?”

Kirara raised her head meekly.

“Well?” they both demanded.

“Because... Because Lady Kagura is my mistress. At least, I want her to be. If she says that’s the right way to eat that dish, that makes it the right way for me, even if it’s wrong for everyone else.”

*Oh, I see. So that’s what she had in mind when she looked so panicked.*

“Understood,” said the Ayakas, turning and nodding to one another. “Kirara Hoshino, you have officially passed the test. You are worthy of serving Lady Kagura.”

“What?!” cried Kirara and I, our voices in sync just like the twins.

They resumed speaking one after the other.

“The rules are made by the person in charge.”

“You looked to your mistress for guidance and faithfully obeyed.”

“That’s the mindset you need to become a Seraph.”

“You have to believe in your mistress. That’s the most important rule of all.”

I piped up, “So does that mean Kirara doesn’t have to leave? But we lost the contest!”

“We never said the test had anything to do with winning or losing the contest.”

“Just that we planned to use table manners as a way of testing Kirara Hoshino and judging whether or not she was worthy.”

“Really? You mean it?” I asked, just to be sure.

“Absolutely.”

“As long as our mistress agrees.”

The Ayakas and I all turned to look at Lady Kagura. She sighed with a disgruntled expression.

“Indeed, Kirara Hoshino has passed. However, keeping in mind the potential impact on other students, I’d like her to start off as my Exousia. Then, when the time is right, I’ll promote her to Seraph.”

“My, my,” said the twins. “That’s pretty high and mighty for someone who messed up so badly in the contest.”

“Shut up, you two!” After scolding the twins, she offered a hand to help Kirara up. “Would you be all right with that?”

“Yes, of course.” She took her new mistress’s hand. “I look forward to serving you, Lady Kagura.”

*What a relief. I’m so glad it worked out.*

Unfortunately, there was still the matter of the Sky Salon. Lady Asuka closed in on Lady Kagura, ready to demand her eviction. “Sorry to interrupt your celebration, but I’d like you to vacate the Sky Salon at your earliest convenience. It belongs to me now, after all.”

*What a shame. I would have gotten to work there alongside Kirara, but now that’s off the table for good.*

“Oh yes, about that,” said one of the sisters.

“Allow us to congratulate you on getting through the first round,” said the other.

“Huh?” Hearing this, Lady Asuka was momentarily stunned. “First round? Get out of here! You’re just being sore losers!”

“Not at all. We’re just giving you the facts.”

“The salon usage fees that you pay are lower than Lady Kagura’s, of course, but they’re also *significantly* lower than what *we* pay.”

“Excuse me?!”

“If you plan to take over the Sky Salon while paying so little, then naturally, you have to go through us next.”

“This is all in accordance with the standard rules for a Salon Struggle.”

“*What?*”

“Incidentally, if you do beat us, after that you’ll have to face off against Lady Himeko.”

“You see, the salon usage fees *she* pays are also much, *much* larger than Lady Kagura’s.”

“*Whaaat?*”

“To sum it up, the Salon Struggle rules require you to beat every member whose usage fees are higher than your own if you want to take over the salon.”

“Don’t worry, though! The only ones left are us two and Lady Himeko. No one else.”

“*Whaaaaat?!?*”

Both beaming, the twins turned to Lady Angelica and said, “Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, basically. I don’t blame you for not knowing about that rule, since it’s pretty rare for one salon to have multiple members paying fees.”

“*Whaaaaaaat?!?*”

Ignoring her series of flabbergasted outbursts, the twins said bluntly, “Speaking of which, we’d like to hold the next two contests tomorrow.”

“Mine’ll be horseback riding!”

“And mine’ll be a fencing battle!”

The Salon Struggle—or rather, the first round of it—had finally come to a close.



Afterward, Himeko and I went back to her room. On the table was a spread of donuts she’d bought as a show of appreciation for my efforts. I was overjoyed to be able to eat a casual snack after spending all afternoon being formal.

“Himeko, did you know about that?”

“I had some inkling in the back of my mind, but I’ve never really worried

about it, since we've never lost before. It sounded like the Ayakas were very well versed in the rules, though."

In the end, we'd all been dancing to the Kokonoe sisters' tune. When I really thought about it, it had all seemed kind of weird from the start. They added in a no-talking rule that would obviously serve to hamstring us, gave separate boxes to each team leader for choosing the 'random' dishes, and never let anyone see what else was inside the boxes. I wouldn't have been surprised if every possible *entrée* we could have ended up with was meat on the bone. In fact, I'd have put money on it.

*Even the reasons for deducting points were kind of suspect. If violations can include subjective things like "lacking in refinement," they had a lot of leeway to place their thumbs on the scales.*

"Still, all's well that ends well," said Himeko. "I'm glad Miss Hoshino passed her test, too."

"Yeah, that is a relief." I wondered if this meant they'd intended for her to pass all along as well.

"By the way, Misaki, there's something I want to ask you."

"Sure, what is it?" I replied, ignoring any semblance of manners by grabbing a donut and stuffing it into my mouth.

"Why did you ignore Lady Kagura and go your own way?"

"Oh, well, you know..."

"Come on, tell me."

She tilted her head and smiled sweetly. I could tell she already knew exactly what I was going to say. *Still, what's wrong with saying it aloud?*

"Because you're my mistress. I chose to believe in you and what you'd taught me."

"Hehe. That makes me happy."

Grinning, she picked up a donut and brought it up to my mouth.

"Mmph!"

Thinking it might have been better not to say it after all, I munched on the donut she fed me.



The second round of the Salon Struggle went ahead as planned. The Kokonoe sisters not only won, but thrashed Lady Asuka so overwhelmingly that I actually felt sorry for her. In the end, the Sky Salon remained safely in Lady Kagura's hands.



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Girls Kingdom: Volume 1

by Nayo

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