



3

Girls Kingdom

Author: Nayo

Illustrator: Shio Sakura



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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

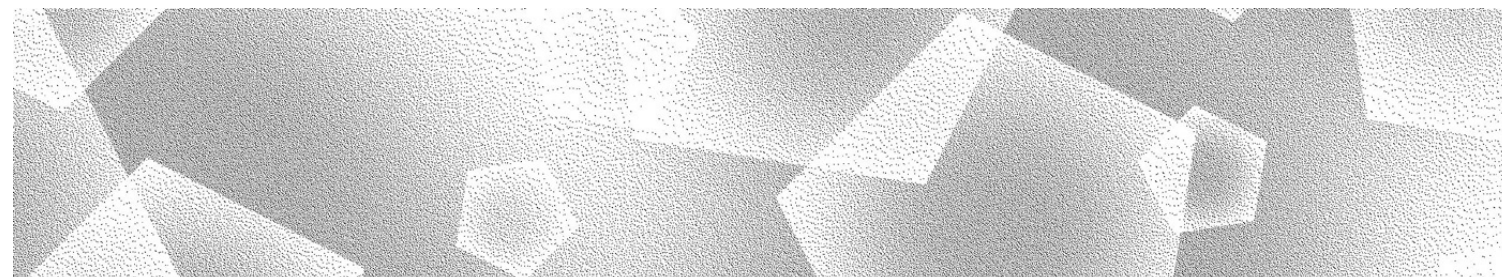
First-Year Domestic Arts

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



Kirara Hoshino

First-Year Domestic Arts



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

Kagura Mikage

Third-Year Societal Arts

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

Ayaka Kokonoe (Music Ayaka)

Second-Year Domestic Arts



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

Ayaka Kokonoe (Flower Ayaka)

Second-Year Domestic Arts





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

Asuka Nekoyashiki

Second-Year Societal Arts

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

Mei Kobina

Third-Year Domestic Arts



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

Erisu Kumashiro

Second-Year Societal Arts



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

Rika Yasuki

Third-Year Societal Arts

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

Sara

First-Year Domestic Arts



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

Minako Torano

Third-Year Societal Arts





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

Inaho Narukami

Second-Year Societal Arts

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



Haruka Oze

Second-Year Domestic Arts



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

Shion Tsukuyomi

Third-Year Societal Arts

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



Aoi Sougetsu

Third-Year Domestic Arts

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Amanotsuka Academy for Girls

From atop a hill, school buildings reminiscent of castles stretch into the sky. With a prestigious history spanning almost a hundred years, this academy for well-off young ladies is famous all over the country.

It's a flower garden where ladies are cherished and raised with the utmost care before they sprout wings and soar like angels into the wider world.

Around ten years ago, a new sort of flower sprouted there—flowers akin to dandelions. Now the school also teaches girls who endeavor to become maids and serve the young ladies. Blooming proudly alongside the white lilies, they take root across the land and look toward the future with fierce determination.

In this unusual academic landscape, the ladies and maids live their lives together.

Chapter One: The First Paycheck

The end of May was nearly upon us. One morning, just before homeroom started, there was a slightly different feeling in the air than usual among my fellow Domestic Arts students. They were all kind of restless. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it was like they were on edge because something big was happening that they were all looking forward to.

What am I forgetting? I thought as hard as I could, but nothing sprang to mind. *The whole class is acting the same way, so I guess it must involve me as well, whatever it is.*

I had been a little distracted lately with all the chaos of helping Lady Erisu turn her restaurant's fortunes around, so I hadn't exactly been giving my all in class. The idea that I'd missed something big felt *well* within the realm of reason.

I'd better find out.

"Hey, Kirara."

She was sitting in the chair next to mine with a studious expression as she waited for the teacher to arrive. I reached out and prodded her in the side.

"Eesh!" she yelped.

As the strange sound fell from her lips, I sensed more rage emanating from her than I'd ever triggered before. With her body contorted uncomfortably, she slowly turned to look at me.

That must be her weak point. Oops.

"You'll have to tell me what the weather's like in hell," she spat with a twisted smile. She reeled off a whole lot of other things that were just as unsettling, but no need to cover them all.

"I'm sorry!" I replied earnestly. I'd only just gotten used to my life here. It was way too early to think about giving up the ghost.

With a sigh, Kirara rested her elbow on the desk. "Well? What's up?"

Grateful that we were close enough that she wouldn't bear a grudge over that kind of thing, I brought up the question on my mind.

"Everyone's acting kind of weird, don't you think? It's like they're all on pins and needles."

"They would be, wouldn't they?" Kirara replied, agreeing with me in a slightly dismissive tone.

"So you know why they're all in such a weird mood, then?"

"I'm surprised you're even asking that. As far as I'm concerned, *you're* the weird one for *not* being on edge. You *do* know, don't you?" She frowned and tilted her head slightly.

"Uh, of course! It affects me, too, so of course I know what's going on."

"Huh? What are you talking about? It doesn't affect you or me."

"Oh, really? No way. Does that mean it's something Seraphs are excluded from?"

Hmm, I wonder what it could be. Is there some kind of special event I'm forgetting about? I tried to think of something that might have been announced, but however hard I racked my brain, I was coming up short.

She snorted. "I knew it. You actually don't know at all, do you?"

Then it hit me. "Were you trying to trip me up?"

"Yup. You were acting as if you knew all along, so I thought I'd test you."

I groaned. *Why didn't I just admit I didn't know in the first place?*

"As your punishment, I'm not going to tell you what it's about."

"Huh? No fair!"

When I let out this pathetic whine, Kirara seemed to take pity on me after all. With a sigh, she said, "Fine. I think Ms. Hiyori will tell us during homeroom anyway, but if she doesn't, I'll fill you in after class."

"You will? Thanks!"

"So just sit quietly until she gets here, okay? Come on."

“Got it!”

I did as she asked, arranging my things in preparation for class while waiting patiently for a few minutes.

Soon, Ms. Hiyori finally arrived. After she and the class finished exchanging good mornings, she made an announcement. Listening to it, I realized I really *had* forgotten about something important.

“Class, I have some very good news for you today. I can see you already know what it’s about!”

She looked around the room with a beaming smile on her face. Most likely, I was the only one still clueless. Everyone else’s eager impatience grew even more intense. You could practically reach out and touch it.

No one said a word, but Ms. Hiyori nodded and said, “Yes, you’re exactly right. It’s the day you’ve all been waiting for: the delivery of your first paychecks.”

While my classmates all let out quiet cheers of joy, I accidentally exclaimed *much* more loudly and leapt up from my chair. “Oh!”

Kirara couldn’t stop herself from bursting out laughing for a second.

I gasped. *Oh no, why did I do that?!* In an instant, I felt not just my face burning, but my whole body. I probably looked as red as a lobster.

“Thank you, Misaki,” said the teacher. “I’m glad to hear you’re so excited!”

This only poured salt in the wound. The rest of the class all started laughing at once.

Ugh, how embarrassing. Putting my hands on my cheeks, I quietly sat down and slumped face-first onto my desk. *Hold on, though. What did she just say? Paycheck?*

That was indeed something key that I’d been forgetting about. I’d been told it was coming, but now it was actually happening. I was getting paid. Ms. Hiyori had said “the day you’ve all been waiting for,” and in my case it was *definitely* true!

“Now, class, I need you to understand something. I know why you’re all so

thrilled, and this money is fair recompense for the hard work you all do at this school.”

I lifted my head.

“However, I’m sure you also realize who you have to thank for receiving payment while still in school. It’s all down to the young ladies of the Societal Arts program—whom you may end up serving after you graduate—and their families. Don’t forget to hold the proper gratitude toward them. Once you’ve received your paycheck, let it give you a sense of professional pride. Strive to measure up to that privilege and drive your skills to a new level.”

“Yes, Ms. Hiyori!” replied the whole class, a serious look in all their eyes now even though they’d been smiling moments earlier.

“You’re free to spend the money however you like, but try not to waste it. Also, those of you who already have exclusive contracts might want to find a way to express their gratitude toward their mistresses. Anyway, I’ll hand out the individual breakdowns now, so please come up in student number order.”

Once I’d gotten mine, I couldn’t help laughing maniacally to myself. *Here it is! My first paycheck! How incredible is this?!*

At first I’d scoffed at the idea of studying to be a maid, but a system that paid me for doing that seemed great right about now. In fact, I couldn’t think of anything better. Originally, I’d expected not to start earning until I entered the workforce, which made the money all the sweeter.

Being a maid’s not nearly as bad as I thought. Man, it’d be a real shock to past me if she knew I’d ever think that way.

People can change, though, right? Now that I’ve met Himeko, the best possible mistress for me, I’m steadily working to make my dream a reality—at least, that’s the plan. There’s nothing wrong with just my mindset changing, is there?

Anyway, time to get serious. I have to put all of it aside and save it for the future. Well, maybe not all of it. It’s okay if I buy a few donuts, right? It’s money I earned through my own blood, sweat, and tears, so treating myself a little can’t be a crime. That’s all, though!

“Misaki?”

“What is it, Kirara?” I replied, so overjoyed that my voice was as sweet as honey.

“You’re making me sick.” She scowled, not disguising her reaction at all.

“Because I’m happy? That’s so mean!”

“I just call it how I see it. Anyway, there’s something more important than that.” Kirara’s expression turned deadly serious. She grabbed my sleeve and drew her face in so close that she almost headbutted me.

“You’re not thinking of putting *all* of that money in a savings account, are you?”

“Uhm, what makes you think that? Are you some kind of psychic?”

“Nope. It was written all over your face. You’re so blissfully unaware. Overjoyed that you got some cash, but determined not to use it.”



“What? Ack!” Hurriedly, I scrubbed at my face. Not that it helped, of course. It wasn’t as though it were literally written on there.

“I get why you’re happy, but let me ask you something: what *are* we?”

“Huh? Uh, well...” If she was putting it like that, I had one solid guess. “We’re Seraphs?”

“Bingo.”

Phew, I got it right.

“Now, did you actually take a proper look at that breakdown of your paycheck?”

“Well, yeah. I guess.”

The pay covered my time spent cleaning, serving food and tidying up afterward, and taking care of my mistress’s needs. It wasn’t that much compared to what you’d get from a full-time job, but I was sure it was more than the allowance any normal student might get. To me, it was a large sum of money.

Kirara sighed as if my answer exposed me as terminally boneheaded. “I can tell you have no idea whatsoever. Again.” She pulled my head under the desk and came in even closer. “Listen. You might think the total at the bottom there is normal, but you and I have been given way more than all the other girls in this room.”

“Really?”

“Not only that, but yours is probably a lot bigger than mine.”

“Huh? What makes me so special?”

Then it suddenly came back to me. Himeko had told me about this before. She’d said something about a “special allowance” that only Seraphs received.

I rushed to pull it out again and take another look. There it was, plain as day. Listed among all the other items was “Special Allowance.”

“You mean this?” I asked Kirara, showing it to her with trembling hands.

“Exactly. You know, it’s better not to go around showing other people how

much you're earning, but I was right. Yours is way bigger. No real surprise there, since you've been a Seraph for longer. You've also gone to Lady Himeko's room a lot more than I've gone to Lady Kagura's. That'll be counted as overtime."

"But that means..."

I swallowed hard. I didn't know exactly how it worked out, but thanks to my special Seraph allowance and the time I'd spent serving Himeko privately in her room, it looked like my overall total was close to double what it would have been otherwise.

"I guess I should have picked up on this sooner, but being a Seraph is *really* something special."

"You can't seriously be just realizing that now, can you?! There are a ton of students here who wish they could be Seraphs but never will be. It takes luck, hard work, and plenty more. It's special, all right."

I gulped again. As someone who'd come here without any thoughts of becoming a Seraph, I wasn't especially conscious of it, but being a Seraph was like having your future all laid out for you. If you could get a Societal Arts student to like you enough that she gave you an exclusive Seraph contract, you'd be able to carry on working for her after graduation. It was more than just a guaranteed job, though. The ladies at the academy pretty much came from the country's wealthiest and most famous families. The benefits of working there would be immense compared to a normal housemaid position.

And Kirara and I fall into that elite bracket. Both of us are Seraphs.

"Now that that's clear, I'll get to the point."

She came up from under the desk, so I followed.

"Hmm?"

"You remember what Ms. Hiyori said at the end, right?"

"Uh..."

I tried to think back. It was something about how to use the money, but I couldn't remember the last part.

My mind's totally blank. Getting the money was just that exciting. I guess I

could pretend I know, but that hasn't worked out for me so far today.

Instead I admitted, “Nope. I’ve totally forgotten.”

“What is up with you?” She heaved a small sigh. “Listen, she said that those of us who have exclusive contracts might want to find a way to express our gratitude toward our mistresses.”

“Oh yeah, she did say that. I’d definitely better say thank you to Lady Himeko so she knows just how grateful I am.”

Lately, I’d started giving Himeko the title of “Lady” whenever we weren’t alone together, but whenever I said it, it made me keenly aware that she was my mistress, which made me slightly tense. Not only that, but it had even started giving me a sort of competitive feeling. It was like the meaning of “Lady Himeko” was slightly different when I said it than when other people said it. I felt as though I was holding up a sign saying that Himeko was *my* mistress and nobody else’s.

That was why I felt it would be plenty if I proudly went up to her and thanked her from the bottom of my heart! However, Kirara had other ideas.

“That’s *not* what she meant. Sure, thanking her with words is important, but this is the kind of situation where a gift is what really counts.”

“I should buy her a gift?”

“Absolutely. You don’t have to use up *all* the money, but it’s customary to use some of it to return the favor.”

“Oh, I see.” Since I’d been given more cash than I’d ever hoped for, that sounded totally reasonable. Still, that left one big question. “What do I buy her, though?”

“Yeah. That’s the tough part,” she said, frowning as she considered this. “Even if we have more money than our classmates, it’s a pittance compared to what Lady Kagura and Lady Himeko have. We can’t buy much with it, and even if we could, they can already buy whatever they want themselves. What could we get them that would actually matter?”

“I see the dilemma,” I replied nervously. “It doesn’t have to be anything big,

though, does it? I think even something as small as a handkerchief would be enough as long as it's a thoughtful gift presented with love."

"You really think that would be enough? We're not just serving *any* mistresses. These are supposed to be gifts for elite figures known as celestials. I don't know if they'd really be satisfied with that. They'd be happy, sure, but not *truly* happy deep in their souls. I'm sure both of them are well aware of this custom and expecting something more special."

I could imagine that Himeko really did have great expectations. Before she had a Seraph, she'd been eyeing all the other mistresses with envy, wishing she had someone to serve her like that. Though I still didn't know the story behind it all, one thing was clear, and that was that Himeko had been dreaming about life with a Seraph. Waiting a whole year before choosing one could only have built up her anticipation even more.

"Plus, if we give them something too average, people will start to talk. They'll say their Seraphs are average maids who aren't capable of doing anything beyond that. As representatives of Lady Kagura and Lady Himeko, we can't let any of our reputations be damaged like that. That's why we have to give them special presents that no one else would be able to give them."

"I'm not convinced rumors are going to spread over something so private and personal, but I guess I agree that we need to give something special. If possible, I really want to exceed Lady Himeko's expectations." I wanted to see her expression if I managed that.

"I'm glad you're on board. That's what makes it such a struggle, though. What in the world is going to fit the bill?"

"Hmm."

Both of us fell silent. As eager as I was to give Himeko something she wouldn't expect, I was drawing a blank as to what that might be.

"It's not easy."

"Right?"

Maybe I could get her some clothes that would look nice? Nah, that'll never work. Nothing I pick out with my fashion sense would look good on her, and in

any case, her room is overflowing with clothes. Not to mention that all the clothes available on campus are expensive enough to make my eyes fly out of their sockets. At most, I could maybe buy her some underwear. The kind of set that Himeko bought for me before wouldn't be too absurd. Trouble is, giving underwear as a gift would feel a little uncomfortable, and it doesn't exactly scream "special" in the first place.

I could give her some homemade sweets, but I can't really make anything other than donuts, and I've given her those plenty of times already. It's not like they cost that much, either. Himeko probably wouldn't think this herself, but I don't want anyone else to accuse me of being a cheapskate.

Some kind of accessory, maybe? Nah, it's just like with clothes. Anything I could buy her wouldn't be worth buying. Trying to make her something would be a nightmare too. If I wasn't so clumsy with my hands, I could try making her a stuffed animal or something, but she doesn't have anything like that in her room, so she probably doesn't have a taste for the cutesy.

Trying to think of what she might like was a real head-scratcher. I just didn't know what would make her happy. The more I pondered it, the more I sank into the depths.

Just as I was running out of steam, Kirara expressed the same thing. "It's no use. I can't think of any good ideas at all."

I tried to picture Lady Kagura receiving any gift that could be bought with money and getting excited over it. It was pretty tough, honestly. *She'd probably be happier to have a date set up between her and Lady Minako. Wait, that could actually work!*

"Hey, Kirara, what about giving Lady Kagura tickets for a sports game? She could take Lady Minako along with her, just the two of them."

"That's not a bad idea. Problem is, all I could ever afford are standard tickets. If they're not the kind of VIP seats she's used to, there'd be no point. Not to mention that she can easily buy those herself."

"Ah, I guess so. Forget about it."

This was a whole different kettle of fish compared to giving a present to a

friend. Were we really supposed to find a gift we could purchase with money for people who lived in a stratospherically higher economic bracket than we did? Unless it was something *really* obscure, they could afford whatever they wanted!

What can we possibly buy that would be good enough?

We were out of time for now. The bell rang to signal that first period was starting, and the teacher entered the room.

Kirara sighed. “I guess we’ll have to try and figure it out during class.”

“Yeah.”

It was a different situation than the trouble I had with Lady Erisu, but once again I had no hope of focusing on my school work.



When first period was over, I spoke to Kirara right away. An idea had occurred to me—a good one, I hoped.

“Hey, Kirara.”

“What is it? You’ve figured it out?”

“Not exactly. I was just thinking we could go and ask some other people.”

“Like who?”

“Specifically I was thinking of Mihaya, Haruka, and Matsuri.”

When I listed the names of these older and more experienced Seraphs from the Sky Salon, it was like a light bulb flashed above Kirara’s head. “I see what you mean! They’ve all been down this road before. If they can tell us what presents they got their mistresses, it should be a good frame of reference.”

“Exactly!”

“That’s a plan, then. We’d better be quick.”

Kirara immediately stood and rushed out of the classroom. Flustered, I ran after her.

“Huh? Wait!”

We headed up to the floor with the older students' classrooms, which was pretty nerve-racking. Even though it was only one floor above ours, as soon we set foot there, the atmosphere felt entirely different. It was more sober somehow, like the giddy feeling that surrounded us brand-new students had disappeared and left orderly decorum in its wake.

Surrounded by this unfamiliar atmosphere, we decided to visit Mihaya first. As ever, she spoke in a clear and beautiful voice.

"This is the first time we've met in the main building, right? You look like you have something pretty serious to talk about."

She tilted her head, puzzled, in a gesture so lovely I couldn't help grinning.

Her kind eyes were filled with such tenderness that when she looked at me, I felt like my soul was being cleansed. Her hair hung in loose curls on the left and right, but met in the middle at her chest, looking almost like a scarf. Only, it was the people who saw her whose hearts were warmed.

Wait! Now's not the time for gazing admiringly! We didn't have much time, so we asked her to come out into the corridor.

"Actually, there is something we'd like to ask you," I began.

"What is it?"

"You see, we just got our first paychecks today."

"Aah, I guess it is around that time." She put a finger to her chin and nodded. "In that case, I've got a good guess as to what your question is."

"I'm sure it's exactly what you're thinking. Apparently it's customary for students with an exclusive contract to buy their mistress some kind of present the first time they get paid."

"And you're not sure what kind of gift to go for, so you want to know what I did at the time?"

Yes! How handy that she figured it out so quickly.

"That's right. We think it could give us some kind of baseline idea."

Kirara boldly pushed past me and asked the question point-blank. "Without

meaning to pry, can you please tell us what gift you gave Lady Sumire?”

Mihaya’s mistress was Sumire Miyamori. They were both second years, and they were very close indeed. They could often be seen in the Sky Salon acting very friendly with one another indeed. They were renowned at the academy for being an exemplary pairing of mistress and maid, each as wonderful as the other. I was sure it would be useful to know what Mihaya had gotten for Lady Sumire that had contributed to their ideal relationship.

“Well, I’d better apologize in advance because I don’t think it’ll be all that helpful.”

“It won’t? How come?”

“It’s a little embarrassing to say it, but the truth is... I gifted her a song.”

“Ah, I see.”

That was easy to believe. Mihaya loved singing and had a strikingly beautiful voice. Lady Sumire was exceptionally fond of her Seraph’s singing, so we could often hear Mihaya singing in the private area the two of them occupied in the Sky Salon.

“I also got a bunch of different people to help me out with making a CD compilation of that song and others I’d sung in the past.” Her cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

“Wow. I wish I could listen to it.”

A song, huh? That’s definitely a gift no one could have given except Mihaya. If I sang a song, it would be the worst present ever.

I turned to Kirara. “What’s your singing voice like?”

“*Definitely* not good enough for that,” she replied dejectedly.

Putting her hands together in front of her apologetically, Mihaya said, “I told you it wouldn’t be much help. Really sorry about that!”

Seeing her look so adorable, I couldn’t do much but say, “No, don’t worry about it.” Then I changed tack and asked, “I know we can’t do exactly what you did, but I don’t suppose you have any ideas for what kind of present Lady Himeko might like?”

“Or Lady Kagura, if you can think of anything,” Kirara added.

“Let me think.” She put a finger to her chin and pondered for a moment. “I think Lady Himeko would be happy with just about anything you got her, Misaki, but Lady Kagura’s not so straightforward. She’s not really into luxury the way you might expect—she tends not to want anything she doesn’t need. Still, the Ayakas probably didn’t do anything like this, so maybe it’ll be like with Lady Himeko. Whatever you get her, she’ll be thrilled.”

“Hmm, do you think so?”

None of this really made it much easier. *Admittedly, I do think Himeko would be happy with whatever I got her.*

“Hehe. I get the feeling you’re not really satisfied with that answer.”

“No, I’m not saying that!”

“Don’t worry about it! I don’t exactly blame you. You don’t want to just get your mistress any old trifle. I’ll bet you want to find something unique that only you can give her. Isn’t that right?”

“Yeah, something like that,” I responded.

Kirara was more direct. “Yes, I’m looking for something only I can give Lady Kagura. Something that she’ll be truly, deeply happy to receive.”

“I’m sure that’s what every Seraph is looking for, but most of them probably never find it. I don’t know what the answer is, but I’m cheering for you from the sidelines. You can do it!”

She clapped both of us gently on the shoulder to impart her supportive spirit.

“Thanks!” we both replied. I couldn’t speak for Kirara, but I was suddenly ready and raring to go.

We didn’t have a specific idea yet, but we had a direction. When Mihaya had said she gave Lady Sumire a song, I’d felt pretty jealous. That really *was* something unique to Mihaya. It was exactly the kind of gift I was hoping to give Himeko.

“We want to ask a couple more people, so we’ll be going now, if that’s all right.”

“Of course. I hope it all works out!”

After saying goodbye to Mihaya, we made a beeline for Haruka next. Once we explained, Haruka quickly looked as though she was lost in her memories. She murmured, “Wow, that takes me back.”

“Did you have any trouble finding something for Lady Inaho?”

Haruka’s mistress was Inaho Narukami. Though Lady Inaho was petite, her height of four foot nine and a half meant she wasn’t *quite* short enough to meet the criteria for joining Asuka Nekoyashiki’s salon, the Paradise Palace. Her Seraph, Haruka, was a full head taller. Their relationship was a little odd; Lady Inaho was a huge fan of jokes, and she liked Haruka to set her up as the straight man of their comedy duo. When people who were out of the loop saw the two putting on an act, it often made them a little uncomfortable.

Given what an unusual pair they were, I was curious to know what kind of a present Haruka had given her.

“I was quite confident, but I messed up.”

“Huh? Messed up how?”

If Haruka, who knew Lady Inaho better than anybody else, had made a wrong call, I couldn’t imagine what had happened.

“I became her Seraph in the summer of my first year. Although I did more or less know that she liked jokes, I didn’t know about a certain... touchy subject.”

“Touchy subject?”

When I repeated this, a pained expression appeared on Haruka’s face. “Yes. I decided to buy her a children’s backpack, thinking she’d find it hilarious.”

Kirara and I immediately picked up on what the problem was. Instead of any words, we both let out a groan.

“I guess you already know by now, but Lady Inaho’s surprisingly sensitive about her height.”

It was true. Although she usually exercised a no-holds-barred policy and didn’t let anything get to her, this one subject was delicate. She was happy about not being invited to join the Paradise Palace because she was half an inch too tall,

and when she made her own height the butt of a joke, she made herself upset.

“Lady Inaho’s too nice to have gotten angry about it or anything, but when she thanked me, her smiling face looked like it was about to cry tears of blood.”

“Ouch.” *That must have been a sight to behold.*

“Well, to try and make up for it, I then sent her a kindergarten outfit. She reacted angrily again, but then she smiled and fully went along with the joke. ‘That’s right, even elementary school is too big for me; I should be in kindergarten. Thanks for the new uniform. Wait, what?!’”

Both of us gasped when we heard this.

“She actually leaned into it?” I asked.

“Wow, she’s brave,” Kirara agreed.

No ordinary lady would have just accepted that treatment.

“Well, it was a gamble, but it paid off in a way. It let me get a little closer to Lady Inaho.”

She smiled as if she was fondly reminiscing. By now, it seemed to be a pleasant memory.

“Hehe, well, it’s difficult to give someone a present that will make someone happy deep in their heart if you don’t know what makes them tick. Still, one thing I can say for sure is that it’s all right to make a mistake. If you think as hard as you can and give the best gift you know how to, I’m sure they’ll appreciate it. Maybe you’ll even learn something new about your mistress in the process.”

She was speaking from experience, which made her words pretty persuasive. I bowed my head, and Kirara did the same.

“Uhm, thank you for your help. This was really useful.”

“Hearing about the trouble you had takes the pressure off a little bit.”

After that, Haruka’s bouncy voice hit the backs of our heads. “Oh! I do have one other piece of advice.”

“Tell us,” we both said at once.

Advice from Haruka, who went for a bad choice of gift? Whatever it is, I’m

sure it'll be good to know.

"You two should perform as a comedy duo! I'm sure it would be—"

"No."

We cut her off without even letting her finish, then started to back away at a brisk pace.

"Anyway, our next class'll be starting soon, so we'd better go."

"Thanks for all your help. Bye for now!"

Behind us, we heard her say, "Great reactions there, both of you! Excellent comic timing!"

When second period was over, Kirara and I regrouped to decide who we'd go and see next. That wasn't as easy as expected, however.

"Shall we visit Matsuri next?" I suggested.

"Yeah, although I don't know if we'll get anything useful out of her."

"Mm, I see your point."

No one could deny that Matsuri was an excellent maid, but the mistress she served had some pretty unique qualities. Saeko Houjou had an extreme sadistic streak and was very strict to her Seraph indeed. However, Matsuri herself never seemed overly bothered by it—or rather, she *appeared* to be bothered but readily accepted Lady Saeko's treatment. Maybe they were just really compatible.

With the kind of relationship they had, I couldn't imagine there was anything ordinary about the present Matsuri had bought with her first paycheck.

"What do you think Matsuri got Lady Saeko?" I asked Kirara.

"Good question." She screwed up her face in thought for a moment, then said, "Maybe she bought a collar for herself or something."

The word she'd used there was not the kind you would expect to hear at a school for elite young ladies.

Wearily, I replied, "I don't know if I'd call that a present, but it's not entirely implausible."

“What do you think, Misaki?”

“Hmm.” I thought for a moment as well. “Maybe she offered up her entire paycheck.” Now I’d managed to suggest something that was well outside the scope of a normal present.

Kirara couldn’t deny it as a possibility, however. “If it’s to pay off those debts, it would make sense.”

When she said that, I remembered the reason why Matsuri had become Lady Saeko’s maid: it was to make up for the huge debts her family owed.

Kirara put her hands on the desk, her gaze dropping. “Let’s stop this. I don’t even want to ask her.”

“Agreed. We don’t need to open up Pandora’s box.”

“Who else can we go for, then?”

We tried to think of the upperclassmen Seraphs we knew.

“I feel like Mei would get whatever Lady Asuka wanted most in the world. She’d be good at that, I bet.”

The only other names that popped into my head were those of the trio working at Erisu’s École Kitchen: Yukina, Mizuki, and Hanaka. However, they were still Exousias rather than Seraphs.

“Yeah, you’re right. Mei’ll probably tell us something helpful.”

“There’s only one problem.”

“Which is?”

“I don’t know what class she’s in.”

Kirara sighed, looking exasperated.

It’s not my fault! She’s not even in our salon. How am I supposed to know that?

She said, “Not much point in sitting around here, though. We’re only wasting time. Let’s just go up to the third-years’ floor and try to find her.”

“Good idea.”

When we went up to the fourth floor, the air around us once again felt different than when we'd visited the second years. The way it hit us was just as dramatic, but there was more of a sense of ease. I quickly understood why that was.

Looking properly at the chests of the older students walking past us, I saw that every single one of them had a gold or silver school badge. *Right, I see. Being a Seraph or an Exousia would give you a little extra confidence, right?*

With all these girls' eyes falling squarely on us, we walked along the hallways. *Wait? Are all their eyes on us?!*

"Misaki, do you feel like we're being watched?"

Kirara's usual self-assurance had vanished. Clearly she felt the weight of all those stares as well. Before I knew it, she had drawn back and was walking a step or two behind me.

"Come on, Kirara. Don't make me go in front."

"I just didn't think we'd get this much attention!"

When we'd visited the other Seraphs, we'd known where to find their classrooms, so we'd headed straight for them and then gone straight back. We'd barely even noticed where we were. Now, though, we were journeying through the older students' territory. Either we *really* stood out, or there were some unspoken rules you were supposed to follow here that we didn't know about.

While I pondered that, the third years gossiped around us in hushed voices.

"Hey, isn't that Misaki and Kirara?"

"You're right! It totally is!"

"I've never actually seen them before."

"So those are the first years everyone's talking about."

Oh no! Have we become campus celebrities? We didn't ask for this!

I could understand why. My mistress was Himeko, a celestial and the school's deputy chairman, and I'd become her Seraph on my very first day. Kirara,

meanwhile, had broken the unwritten rule and directly told Lady Kagura that she wanted to be her Seraph. After begging her repeatedly, she'd eventually gotten her wish.

The second years hadn't paid us much mind, maybe because they were still preoccupied with their own business, but it seemed the third years had a bit more freedom to watch who was walking through their corridors. Every single student we passed peered at us with curious eyes.

Ugh, how embarrassing.

We kept going, but as they continued gaping at us like we were rare animals at the zoo, we soon found ourselves huddling together nervously.

Eventually, someone came to our rescue—either because she took pity or because she was eager for an up close and personal experience with the rarest of creatures.

“Misaki? Kirara? What are you doing all the way up here?”

“We're looking for someone,” I replied awkwardly, looking at the girl and trying to remember where I'd seen her before.

“Really? Let me help you find them.”

This girl, with her perfectly elegant posture, definitely looked familiar. It wasn't the first time we'd met.

Her long hair, which had a slight touch of indigo, was arranged into an elegant updo, and she exuded the aura of a beautiful, mature woman. Underneath her bangs, which were parted mostly to one side, her kind eyes gazed at us affectionately. Her lips held a hint of a smile that could give anyone who saw it a warm sense of security.

She's incredible. I can't believe I would see someone like this and then forget who she was.

I racked my brain as hard as I could to remember, but Kirara got there first.

“Aoi, right? We really appreciate it.”

Aoi? Who's that?

Then, with a start, it came back to me.

Right, Aoi. I couldn't forget her name or her face. Well, I *had* forgotten them both, but now I remembered that she was the Seraph of Lady Shion from the Mauve Manor.

I don't think Kirara's actually met her, though. She must be an entry in Kirara's mental database of everyone and everything. I wouldn't put it past her to have researched anyone we came anywhere close to on the day of our debut.

A quiet groan escaped my lips. Just *thinking* about that visit to the Mauve Manor made me break out into a cold sweat. I felt traumatized, like I'd wandered into the lair of a vicious beast and lived to tell the tale. It was one of the scariest experiences of my life.

Maybe that's why I forgot about Aoi; I was trying to repress the painful memory. Not that I need to be scared of Aoi, though, I guess. It was Lady Shion who made me want to run away screaming.

"Something wrong?" Aoi asked with a look of concern.

"No, all good! Everyone here's been staring at us, that's all. I'm feeling a little exposed."

My honest confession caused her to grin. "I suppose you two are pretty famous around the school. The third years haven't had a lot of other things to gossip about lately, either."

I whimpered.

"We're sorry!" Kirara blurted, apologizing for no clear reason.

"Hehehe, there's nothing to be sorry about. You know, Misaki, Lady Shion's worried about you in particular. She's hoping you're getting on well as Lady Himeko's maid."

"Huh? Lady Shion's worried about *me*?" Considering I still felt like she might swoop down and attack me at any moment, I couldn't imagine why that would be the case.

"She's like an older sister to Lady Himeko, so of course she cares."

"Oh, really?" There wasn't much else I could say.

“It’s all right. It’s true that Lady Shion acts like royalty, or a god, and she can be pretty cruel to people she doesn’t like, but she’s actually a really nice person.”

No way. That is definitely a lie. Not that I could say that out loud, of course.

“Yes, erm, I’m sure she is.”

“Heh. You don’t look *or* sound very sure of that.” Smiling, she lightly poked my cheek.

With another whimper, I realized she’d seen through my insincerity.

“Well, I’m sure Lady Shion does look scary if you’ve only seen what’s on the surface. If you spent more time with her, you’d learn more about the real her and how lovely she is.”

“You must be right.” This time, I wasn’t lying.

“You’re likely to have plenty of opportunities for that, too, being Lady Himeko’s Seraph.”

After a moment’s pause for thought, I exclaimed, “Right, of course.”

That is true, isn’t it? Or at least it should be, in theory. Himeko’s really close to Lady Shion, so if I were going to keep serving Himeko after graduation, I’d probably see her a lot.

What most people didn’t know was that Himeko and I had agreed I’d be her Seraph only for one year. I couldn’t say that now, of course. If I did, the third years all around would talk about nothing else for the rest of the school year.

Worse yet, it would probably go down in history. There’d be generations of students whispering about the outlaw who became Lady Himeko’s fake Seraph.

“Yes. That’s true. I’ll see her a lot. How nice.”

“Misaki, your eyes are looking shifty again and your voice has gotten awfully robotic.”

“What? No. It hasn’t. I’m fine.”

I tried to push the truth as far out of my mind as possible. If Lady Shion and Aoi ever found out about it, there’d be hell to pay. Just thinking about what

might happen made my heart feel like it was about to give out.

I have to change the subject. The less we talk about this, the better.

“Uhm, that reminds me. There’s something we’d like to ask you, Aoi.”

“Oh, really? Go ahead.”

“We got our first paychecks today, you see, so we’re going around to all the older Seraphs we know.”

“Aha!” That alone had been enough for Aoi to figure it out. “You’re not sure what to buy?” She pressed a hand to her cheek and smiled gently.

“Exactly. Could you tell us what you gave Lady Shion?”

“Actually, I didn’t exactly give her a gift. Instead, Lady Shion ordered me to plant my own rose garden, so I used the funds for that.”

“Oh, really? So the flowers in the Mauve Manor aren’t the only ones you tend to? You also have a rose garden?”

“Yes. It’s just next to the Mauve Manor, actually. I grow blue roses.”

“Wow, blue ones? They sound amazing.”

The purple roses I’d received from Lady Shion had been absolutely beautiful. I was sure blue roses would be just as striking, if not more so.

Bringing a hand to her chin, Kirara said uncertainly, “I didn’t think blue roses grew in nature, though.”

“Well done for knowing that. That’s true—or rather, it *was* true. Modern advancements in biotechnology have made blue roses a reality.”

Just hearing a word like “biotechnology” made my head spin, but it was pretty impressive that scientists had managed to do something like that. “That’s incredible.”

“Agreed. Unfortunately, it’s still not possible to make them a perfect shade of blue. I guess you could call them bluish purple. In the end, that means my rose garden looks almost exactly the same as the one in the Mauve Manor. It’s quite difficult to tell them apart.”

“Right, I see.”

She chuckled again. “You should come and visit the Mauve Manor again. Next time I’ll give you some of my own roses.”

“Oh, uh, yes. If I have a moment to spare, I’ll definitely, erm...”

As eager as I was to see what Aoi’s blue roses looked like, going there would mean talking to Lady Shion. My interest in visiting couldn’t win against my instinct to avoid her like the plague.

I just don’t think I can do it. I don’t have the courage to face her again.

Picking up on this, Aoi kindly added, “No pressure. Only if you feel like it! I know you have a lot going on yourself, Misaki.”

“Hopefully I can visit again one day.” Even getting myself to say that felt like a major effort.

“By the way, didn’t you say you were looking for someone?”

“Yes, we were on our way to find Lady Asuka’s Seraph, Mei. We were thinking of asking her.”

“I believe she’s in class three. Come on, I’ll take you there. Follow me.”

“That would be great!”

At the entrance to Mei’s classroom, Aoi asked a nearby student, “Excuse me, could you go and get Mei for us, please?”

Moments later, Mei came over and exchanged greetings with Aoi in an exemplary maid-like manner.

Man, every movement they make is so enchanting. I bet the Societal Arts ladies were lining up to choose them as Seraphs.

After that, Mei smiled at us. “My, if it isn’t Misaki and Kirara. We’ve never met inside the main school building, have we?”



“I’m going now,” said Aoi as she began to head back. “Good luck, you two!”

“Thanks for all your help!” I replied.

“Thank you,” Kirara said as well.

We turned back to Mei, and I began to explain the situation. “We’d like to ask you something. I hope you don’t mind us coming here.”

“Oh, don’t tell me. You want to know Lady Asuka’s bust, waist, and hip measurements.”

For a second, my brain refused to process this.

“No, that’s, uhm... That’s not it.”

“Then you must want to know about her tastes and interests—or where she scrubs first when she gets in the bath, maybe? Or perhaps you want to locate the heart-shaped birthmark on her butt and use the info to blackmail her!”

“No! That’s not even close!”

Mei had kind of a one-track mind when it came to Lady Asuka, so this didn’t seem too weird for her, but we didn’t have time for it right now. *With all due respect, if we don’t get back to the point soon, the break’ll be over and we’ll be late back to class!*

I continued, “It is about Lady Asuka, but would you mind listening to the question first?”

As soon I mentioned her mistress’s name, she snapped out of it and replied, “Certainly. What is it?”

Whew. Thank goodness.

“We’re looking for advice about what gift to buy with our first paycheck. We’ve been asking a bunch of Seraphs to try and get a picture of what they did.”

“Yes, I see. That is a challenge, especially given the esteemed positions your mistresses have at the academy.”

“Yeah.”

“So, should I tell you what gift I gave Lady Asuka?”

“Yes, please!” we both said, bowing our heads.

“I’ll tell you, but I must warn you, I’m not sure it’ll really help.”

Don’t tell me she did the same as Haruka and got her mistress a children’s backpack and kindergarten uniform. I know how fond of petite girls she is, so I wouldn’t put it past her to do something similar.

However, the answer she gave us was nothing like that. “I gave her a tiara.”

“Oh, a tiara?” I responded.

Kirara asked, “Is that the same tiara Lady Asuka’s always wearing? The one that marks her as the head of the Paradise Palace?”

“The very same,” Mei replied with a nod. “Luckily, silver isn’t that expensive to buy on its own, so I got the materials together and constructed it myself.”

Wow, that’s some impressive metalworking.

“I see what you mean now,” I said. “We’d never be able to do that.”

Kirara groaned. “Making something by hand *is* a good idea. Gifts like that are really thoughtful. Problem is, Lady Kagura already has a tiara, and I couldn’t make her anything worth replacing it with.”

Seeing our expressions, Mei’s face clouded over with worry. “You really don’t need to think that hard, you know. I know it’s tough to find something just right for people like Lady Himeko and Lady Kagura, but I think if you give them a gift and put all your feelings of gratitude into it, they’ll be happy no matter what.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” I said uncertainly. I knew she was, but part of me still *really* wanted to get Lady Himeko something truly amazing.

Then her face lit up as if she had remembered something. At last came a hint that could be our solution. “Actually, there is one option. I’m guessing you’ve heard about it already.”

“There is?”

“Yes. I’d be surprised if none of the other Seraphs mentioned it. If you’re asking them about the best possible gift, it’s an obvious go-to.”

“What is it, then? Please, tell us!”

We leaned in eagerly, like puppies begging for a treat.

A gentle smile appeared on Mei’s face, and she put us out of our misery. “You know the store on the first floor of our dorm, right?”

“Yes!”

“There’s a special kind of cake there that you can only get in the Domestic Arts dorm.”

“Really? There is?” I replied.

“I had no idea!” Kirara said.

“There are a lot of students who are like you—a little lost when it comes to gifts for their mistresses. That’s what it’s there for. It’s also said to be one of the absolute tastiest things available on campus, and sales are limited exclusively to students who have become Seraphs. The ladies know that, of course, so when they have a new Seraph, a lot of them are really hoping to get a taste of that delectable treat. Lady Himeko can’t have eaten it yet, and Lady Kagura probably hasn’t either. Knowing the Kokonoe sisters, I bet they decided they should buy *anything* but that.”

Kirara nodded solemnly. “I know what you mean.”

“So I think if you buy some of those and throw a tea party, that’ll be more than enough to make your mistress happy.”

I considered it for a moment. “Honestly, I think there’s a good chance that Lady Himeko’s been dreaming about those cakes. I bet she’s *really* excited about finally getting to eat them. What do you think, Kirara? Could this be an option for you, too?”

“It’s not a bad idea. It’s a definite plus that they’re a limited item, not just ordinary cakes. I don’t know, though.”

Mei chuckled. “At the very least, you can file it away in your minds as a possibility.”

“Yes,” Kirara said, bowing deeply. “We’re hugely grateful for your advice.”

“It’s something, at least,” she replied.

Exclusive cakes. That could really work.

I bowed as well. “Mei, you’ve really helped us. Thank you so much.”

With a glance at the clock inside the classroom, Kirara said, “Shall we start heading back?”

I looked too and saw that our break was nearly over. “Yeah, we should go.”

With a quick “Thanks again!” to Mei, we set out toward our own classroom.

From behind us, I heard her graceful voice say one last thing. “It wasn’t an easy decision for me, either. You remind me a lot of myself back then. I believe in you!”

Thanks to Mei, we had a workable idea. Those special cakes that only we could buy were almost guaranteed to make Himeko happy.

However, that did nothing to dispel the feeling that I wanted to give her something she wouldn’t have expected. Something to exceed her expectations.

Kirara seemed to feel the same. Right up till lunch time, we spent class with troubled frowns on our faces.



Since we still hadn’t thought of anything by the time lunch rolled around, I was on tenterhooks hoping the topic of our paychecks didn’t come up as we ate. If the discussion turned to that before I’d decided what to buy, I had no idea how I’d respond.

Please, I just want to get through this without any awkwardness. I’m going to act like I’m not even here and hope nobody notices.

When I went into the dining hall, I saw that Himeko was already at her usual table, so I hurried to get her food ready.

“Lady Himeko, I’ve brought your lunch.”

“Thanks, Misaki!”

Serving lunch to their mistress was one of a Seraph or Exousia’s duties. Now that the room duty rotation had started, there were also a lot of other students

serving particular ladies on a temporary basis. The room was buzzing with maids rushing around.

Other first years are starting to enter into the Golden Contract, too, just like we have. That should mean we finally stop standing out quite as much. Maybe I'll finally get to have a peaceful life at this school.

I set the table for myself as well and sat down next to Himeko.

Time to eat lunch in invisible mode.

I did my utmost to avoid saying anything or drawing any attention. Inside, I silently begged for no one to mention the paychecks.

“Oh yeah, you must be getting your paycheck soon.”

I knew it. It had to be the very first thing she said!

I gulped.

In the end, though, I should have seen this coming. It was inevitable for Himeko to be excited about getting a thank-you present, so how could she *not* bring it up?

But I still hadn't decided yet—and if the plan was to get her something that exceeded her expectations, I *definitely* couldn't spill the beans now.

I didn't want it to come to this, but you've left me no choice.

“What did you say? A crewneck? Sure, maybe next time we go shopping.”

Upon hearing this, Lady Inaho burst into howls of laughter. “Bahaha!”

Unfortunately, this was just after she'd put a piece of carrot in her mouth, so an orange chunk flew out of her mouth in a graceful arc. Fortunately, the distance wasn't *too* great, so in a split second, her Seraph, Haruka, wiped it up with a cloth, removing all evidence that anything had happened.

“I said your *paycheck*, not a crewneck. I'm sure you'd look cute in a crewneck, but why would I bring that up out of nowhere?”

Ugh. She's determined to talk about that paycheck.

I couldn't blame her, but I *had* to fight back. Today was the one day I absolutely, positively did not want to discuss this subject.

“My boat deck? I don’t have a boat, being so financially challenged and all.”

“Bahaha!”

This time, a piece of potato flew out of Lady Inaho’s mouth. Haruka again cleaned it up and left no trace of it.

Today’s menu included meat-and-potato stew.

Lady Saeko and Lady Sumire joined in, both chuckling furtively, unable to stifle it completely.

“What in the world are you talking about? I didn’t say a word about a deck. I’m talking about your paycheck. Why would I say ‘your boat deck,’ anyway? I know you don’t have a boat! Why on earth would you have a boat?!”

Himeko’s rant prompted Matsuri and Mihaya to quietly erupt into laughter as well.

Yes, I know. I know what you’re actually saying, Himeko! I don’t really think you think I have a boat!

“It’s about your paycheck. P-A-Y-C-H-E-C-K. Paycheck!”

To make it even clearer, she had spelled it out letter by letter. Trying to feign ignorance past this point would be *really* awkward.

Maybe I can manage one more? High-tech? Aztec?

While I silently panicked, an unusually reproachful remark came from Lady Kagura. “Himeko, can you *please* calm down and pay attention to what you’re doing?”

“What?”

She cast her eyes around. When I did the same, I realized everyone was staring at us because Himeko had gotten so animated.

Her face turned bright red, and she quickly covered her mouth with one hand. “Goodness, when did I get so loud?”

“It’s thoroughly unladylike,” Lady Kagura scolded her.

“My apologies. Misaki just kept mishearing me in such strange ways, and—”

“She did indeed. My suggestion, however, would be to avoid that particular topic for today.”

I had the sense that *she’d* more or less figured out what was going on, at least.

“Why?” Himeko asked.

“How shall I put this? I think those two have a lot on their minds right now when it comes to that subject. We should leave it alone for now.”

“Hmm?” Himeko turned to look at me. I couldn’t meet her gaze.

“Don’t you remember, Himeko? When they get their first *you-know-what*, there’s a certain custom, isn’t there?”

Lady Kagura kept it ambiguous, but Himeko caught her meaning. “Oh dear. Have I overstepped the mark?”

“There might be some possibility of that,” Lady Kagura replied vaguely, doing all she could to avoid specifying that she had noticed anything amiss with her own Seraph. In a slightly nervous tone, she added, “There are some things we don’t need to talk about. They’ll be fine on their own. Isn’t that right, Kirara?”

“Oh! Erm, yes, it should be fine.”

Huh? Maybe I’m imagining it, but Lady Kagura almost seems excited. More than I expected! She’s slightly more on edge than usual, like when she’s with Lady Minako.

“I don’t doubt it. These are the Seraphs we chose. They’re fully capable without us saying a word.”

She’d gotten us through this, thank goodness, but she might have also inadvertently raised Himeko’s hopes and expectations at the same time. Now those cakes, and maybe a tea party, *really* didn’t seem sufficient.

With grim faces, Kirara and I continued eating lunch, receiving silent cheers of “You got this!” from Mihaya and Haruka.

When we were all finished and heading out toward our respective classrooms, the Kokonoe sisters grabbed me and Kirara from behind.

“Are you planning to do something weird with your first paychecks? Is that it?”

“Why bother? Just use a third of your paycheck to buy a handkerchief or something. That’s more than enough for a gift, you boneheads.”

While feeling the weight of their bodies on my back, I remembered that we hadn’t actually asked them about this. It wasn’t so much that we’d forgotten; we’d just assumed that they would be singularly unhelpful, like Matsuri, so we hadn’t gone to the trouble.

As the Ayakas freely poked and prodded her cheek, Kirara ignored it and responded, “We’re not planning on buying anything weird. We just want to find presents only we can give them.”

Unlike Kirara, I tried to fight back, but it was useless; both my arms were locked in place, so my cheeks were at their mercy as well. “It sounds like you two bought Lady Kagura a handkerchief. Is that right?”

“We certainly did *not*.”

“Why would we waste our money on a custom like that?”

Ah, there it is. It’s just like Mihaya said. They didn’t buy anything at all.

“She’s the one who should be thanking us, frankly.”

“Exactly! Being a maid is hard work. We deserve more than a pittance for it.”

Hearing them call it a “pittance” when it was such a large sum of money felt typical for the Kokonoe sisters. They may have been Domestic Arts students, but they were a different class of Seraph altogether.

“What do you have in mind, then? Tell us.”

“We’re your friends. Let us help.”

With unusually soft and coaxing voices, they rubbed their cheeks against ours.



Kirara tried to push them away, but it was in vain. “We haven’t actually decided yet.”

I’d already given up resisting at this point. “Mei told us about some cakes that only Seraphs can buy, so those are on the list of possibilities.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve heard of those.”

“We’ve bought them and eaten them once, but we never gave any to Lady Kagura.”

“Which means she’s never eaten them, I guess.”

Kirara murmured, “It’s perfect, then.”

Tilting their heads, the Kokonoe sisters started nitpicking this choice.

“You’re really going to get her that?”

“It’s kind of plain and obvious in the end, isn’t it?”

“Lady Kagura probably would be pretty happy about it, though.”

“I think I’ve heard her say something about wanting to eat those cakes.”

Kirara cut in, “I’m not saying it’s definitely what I’m getting her. Like, I’m sure she’ll really enjoy them, but I’m still looking for something else that’ll go above and beyond, you know?”

The twins sighed with exasperation.

“Are you thinking the same kind of thing, Misaki?”

“What a waste of time and effort.”

“It’s not a waste!” I replied. “Whatever I get Lady Himeko, it has to be good. Otherwise, people will talk.”

“No, they won’t.”

“Not in a million years.”

“Yes, they will!” I insisted. All eyes were on Himeko, after all. She was a member of the Sky Salon *and* the deputy chairman.

“You’ve really become Lady Himeko’s perfect little pet, haven’t you?”

“She’s got you well trained. Good job, Lady Himeko.”

“What are you talking about?!”

“Fine, don’t listen to us then.”

“Do whatever you like. It’s your problem. Good luck!”

With that, the sisters finally released us from their grasp. They looked like they were ready to leave, but they both suddenly stopped and turned around.

“Kirara, Lady Kagura’s a lot like Lady Himeko.”

“You’re the first *real* Seraph she’s ever had, so as long as you’re devoted and true, everything will be fine.”

That was the slightly inscrutable advice they gave her.

“Oh, uhm, thanks,” Kirara replied. “Understood!”

A few moments passed. The twins disappeared into the distance.

“Kirara, did you really understand that?”

She shook her head firmly. “Nope. Not at all. It doesn’t matter, anyway. What matters is that we head back to class and start getting ready. We can think some more on the way.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I replied. “Actually, I need to visit the bathroom, so I’ll meet you there.”

“Got it. Try not to be late.”

“Will do!”



After leaving Kirara behind and finishing up in the bathroom, I suddenly stopped when I noticed someone out of the corner of my eye.

“Huh? Was that who I think it was?”

There was a familiar face outside, I was sure of it. I went over to the window to make sure, and my suspicions were confirmed.

However, she had a very distracted expression, like she was there in body, but not in spirit. She stared up at the cherry blossoms, apparently not noticing me

looking at all.

Class is about to start. Why isn't she moving? For a moment, I felt a little smug and superior. If I wanted to go there, this was my chance to be the one chiding her when she turned up late. *We need a head maid who's on time, you know!*

She'd be the one with bigger problems, though. I decided to open the window and call out her name.

"Sara, what are you doing?"

No response. No reaction at all, in fact. She continued looking up at the tree.

"Sara!" I cried, much louder. "You'll be late for class!"

At last she noticed me trying to get her attention. Turning to face me, she said, "Misaki, it's you. Is something the matter?"

Her beautiful silver hair fluttered in the wind. She smoothed it down with her right hand and tilted her head in puzzlement.

I felt myself gazing in admiration. *Wow, she's so pretty.*

"Are you really asking that? Class is about to start and you're just standing around outside."

"Oh, I hadn't the foggiest that it was quite so late. I'd better get cracking. Thank you for the help."

"No worries. Are you sure you're all right, though?"

Normally, Sara seemed so confident and self-assured. It was like she'd been sapped of all her energy. Today she looked like some sort of tragic heroine.

"Capital, thank you. I was just admiring the cherry blossoms."

"If you say so."

She started walking back toward the building, so I headed to the classroom, figuring it was okay now. Behind me, I thought I heard Sara muttering someone's name, but I couldn't quite make out what she was saying.

Not long after I arrived, the chime rang to signal the start of afternoon classes. Sara also arrived with seconds to spare, taking her seat with a composed expression. I watched her arrive and sit, then switched gears, ready

to ponder the gift situation again.

Sorry, Ms. H! I'm probably not going to learn all that much this afternoon.

I was sure Himeko would be thrilled to get the cakes Mei had told us about, so I figured I could call those a done deal. I just wanted something extra—something only I could get her. A gift that couldn't come from just anyone, but was a special present from her Seraph.

But what? What can I possibly give her? It's not like I have any special skills or anything. I don't know what would make Himeko happy. Ugh, this is so hard!

No matter how hard I thought, nothing came to mind. I did keep coming back to the idea that Himeko would be happy with *anything* I gave her, but all that did was bring me back to the start. My mind kept looping around and around, and before I knew it, class was over for the day.

On our daily trip to the Sky Salon, I checked in with Kirara. “Well? Any good ideas?”

A surprisingly buoyant expression appeared on her face. *No. Don't tell me.*

“As it happens, I've figured out a general direction. All that's left is the details.”

“What?! No way! You traitor!”

This is the ultimate betrayal. I haven't come up with anything!

“Traitor? What kind of an accusation is that?!”

“Okay, yeah, I guess that is going a little far.”

It was just a bit of a shock when I assumed she hadn't come up with anything either.

“Anyway, what did you decide to get her?”

“I guess I can tell you. Just keep it a secret from Lady Kagura, okay?”

“Of course! I'd never tell.”

“I'm going to throw her a tea party with those exclusive cakes.”

“What? That's all?!”

Has she let the Kokonoe sisters change her mind? Sounds like she's going for something plain and simple after all.

"No, that's *not* all. Duh."

"Oh, okay."

"I'm going to invite Lady Minako to join her, and buy a set of two matching teacups and saucers."

"That sounds great. Lady Kagura's sure to love it."

"Right?"

"Wait a sec. Wasn't inviting Lady Minako my idea? It's what I said at the start."

"Yeah, it's pretty similar to your suggestion. Inviting her seems likely to get me a lot of brownie points, so I borrowed that part."

"Hey, no fair. What about me? Don't you have some idea I can 'borrow'?"

I'd never expected that off-the-cuff remark to be so close to what she actually went for. I didn't mind, of course, but if she was on easy street thanks to me while I still had nothing, that really *did* feel like a betrayal.

"Hey, stop glaring at me like that. I'm gonna help you think of something, okay?"

"You'd better," I said with a groan.

"I get it already."

We mused over it together, but we didn't come up with anything new. We kept thinking during our work at the Sky Salon, too, but not a single bright idea came of it.

One thing that was *very* clear that day, though, was that Himeko was eagerly awaiting her present. Sadly, that only piled on the pressure even more.

While she hummed melodically to herself—rare for her—I felt my stomach being squeezed tighter and tighter.



When we got back to our dorm room, I clung to Kirara in tears. “She didn’t say anything about the paycheck, at least, but she’s building up her expectations more and more!”

“Yeah, uhm, I got that feeling too. I think Lady Kagura’s looking forward to it as well. If we put it off too much longer, it’ll only reach a fever pitch, so we’d probably better tell them tomorrow.”

Kirara had pretty much decided already, so that was easy for *her* to say.

Hearing my tearful voice, our roommates, Karen and Akira, came over to see us.

“Hi! Welcome back.”

“Is something wrong, Misaki?”

Neither of them had exclusive contracts yet, so I felt a bit shy about asking them. *Hmm, they’re going to be Seraphs at some point, though. It should be fine to share my worries with them.*

I decided there was no harm in asking if they had any good ideas.

“You two might be able to help, actually.”

“Really, Misaki?” Kirara put an arm out in front of me, but I grabbed onto it.

With an admonishing face, I said, “Come on, Kirara. Don’t you think this is a problem that affects *all* Domestic Arts students? It’s no use trying to come up with something alone. It’s better to have an atmosphere where we can all share the load and discuss it openly, then find a solution together. That’s what I say.”

“You can justify it however you want,” said Kirara with a disgruntled look.

Karen and Akira, however, were ready to jump on board.

“It’s totally fine, Kirara. I’m really curious about what it is.”

“I bet it’s something about Lady Himeko. If so, I’d love to hear it.”

Gosh, that’s a surprise. I knew Karen would be interested. She was like most students at the school: keenly focused on the goal of serving one of the young ladies. It was Akira’s interest that I hadn’t seen coming. I’d always had the impression she didn’t have her heart set on being a maid, given the slightly

lacking amount of effort she put into it. Maybe she'd changed her mind.

This was good for me, anyway. We quickly moved to the living room and sat around the table, then I broached the subject.

"Basically, after you become a Seraph, it's customary to buy your mistress a present with your first paycheck. That's what I've been told, anyway. I didn't know a thing about it until this morning. Have you heard about it?"

"Yeah, I have."

"It's one of the unspoken rules."

It seemed they were both already aware.

"Yeah. Anyway, that's what I'm worried about. I've already decided on one part of my gift. There are cakes that only Seraphs can buy, so I'm thinking of giving her those."

"Oh, now that you mention it, I do remember seeing some special-looking cake boxes on display at the store. They looked way too fancy for the likes of us."

"Only Seraphs can buy those? That I didn't know."

"Yeah, that must be it. I figure that's the bare minimum I can get her to show my gratitude, but I'm still looking for something really special. Something no one can give her but me."

Karen and Akira started thinking.

"Hmm, that is a challenge."

"I understand the urge to find something special, but it's easier said than done."

"Exactly," I replied.

"If it were me, I'd just ask her what she wanted," Karen said. It looked like she was a fan of the direct approach, which I hadn't expected.

Akira tacked on her own opinion. "I think I'd try to pick out something practical that she could definitely use. I guess that doesn't really fit with wanting something only you can give her, though."

That idea wasn't bad, but I didn't want to give Himeko anything that felt like a half measure.

When I expressed this concern, Karen said, "If that's the goal, why don't you present her with yourself?"

Out of nowhere, she'd suggested something *really* outlandish.

"Myself?" I replied hesitantly. "What do you mean?"

"People do it all the time for birthday or Valentine's Day presents, right? They strip naked and tie a ribbon around themselves, then say, 'I'm yours!' Why not go for that?"

I stared at her uncomfortably for a moment. "Karen, have you always been this audacious?" Then I waved my hands in front of my face in a panic, eager to dismiss the idea right away. "No, I'm *definitely* not doing that."

Akira calmly interjected, "I'm not sure if it counts as a gift, anyway. Becoming a Seraph is already more or less the same as belonging to your mistress, right?"

"Oh, true," Karen replied, nodding.

The idea of gifting myself still didn't seem that bad on the surface. *No way I'm stripping naked and putting a ribbon on, obviously, but that might not be a bad direction.*

"Hmm. That could actually work," I murmured.

Kirara jumped back, flabbergasted. "What?! Misaki, are you serious?!"

"Hey, don't act so shocked. I didn't say I'm going to wear nothing but a ribbon, okay? I just like the rough concept of presenting her with myself."

"What do you mean?"

I began, "It's like this..."

When I told them about my bright idea, all three girls nodded. It seemed to make sense to them.

"It's not a traditional present, but I think Lady Himeko might like it," Kirara said.

"I think it's fantastic," Karen agreed. "It'll strengthen your master-servant

relationship.”

“It’s definitely something only you could give—or rather, that only a Seraph could give,” Akira added.

They all approved, which was reassuring. It was a present other people could go for as well, but in a very literal sense, it was still something only I could offer Himeko.

“Then that’s what I’m doing!” Finally, I had a clear vision, and I was sure Himeko would be pleased. “Now, I’d better go and buy those cakes.”

When I sped out of the room, Kirara came chasing after me in a rush. “Hey, wait! I’m coming too! I have to buy the same ones!”

From behind, Karen and Akira bid us goodbye with a wave.



The next day, once I had everything more or less prepared, I went to the Sky Salon after school like always and asked Himeko if it would be okay to stay the night in her room.

She stood from her chair with a sudden, jerky motion unbecoming of a young lady. “Of course! Absolutely!”

This was the first time I’d ever been the one asking her, so I’d already given away that something was up, but I just had to accept that.

“Glad to hear you’re so passionate about your duties!”

She didn’t directly bring up the elephant in the room, but she folded her arms over her chest and I could tell she was trying her hardest not to break out into a big grin. I could tell she was eager to see what I’d gotten her, which made it tough for me to stay calm while serving her.

What if she’s expecting too much? I hope what I’ve gotten her is enough.

It was something she never would have expected, so it would certainly shatter her expectations. In that sense, it would be a successful gift for sure. What I didn’t know was whether she’d actually like it. There was a chance she’d be disappointed instead.

Nah, she'll definitely be happy with it. Right? She has to be. She spent all that time longing for the lifestyle that comes with having a Seraph.

After we'd only spent half the time there as we normally did, Himeko finally gave up and blurted, "Misaki, let's go back to my room now."

"Uh, sure! Okay!" I'd already made all my preparations, so that was fine with me. "I'll have to go back to my own dorm to grab a few things first, though."

"Yes, same as always. No problem—I'll see you there."

"Great!"

The very second we were done with that exchange, Himeko set off toward the elevator with a spring in her step.

When I followed, Kirara gave me a cheer of encouragement. "You got this, Misaki!"

"Yup!" I replied with a nod of determination. I left the Sky Salon, ready to give Himeko her gift.



When I arrived at Himeko's dorm room carrying my gifts, she was waiting for me in the doorway, rubbing her hands in glee. "So, you've bought me a present with your first paycheck, right?"

Her eyes were sparkling. She'd spent two days longing to bring it up and ask me about it, but Lady Kagura had put a firm stop to that. This had clearly raised her expectations to a breaking point.

"You know, if you build it up this much, it's like an impossible hurdle. You're making me really nervous."

Himeko's level of excitement is truly intense. If I'd been keeping records, this would have broken them all for sure.



Noticing how fear-stricken I was, Himeko rushed to clarify. “No, don’t get me wrong! I’m just getting all emotional because this day’s finally here. The event itself is a big deal, regardless of what you’ve gotten me. Any present from you is going to be the best present ever.”

“That’s reassuring, I guess.”

Either way, I couldn’t make a start until we actually went inside her room. “Do you mind if I come in?”

“Oh! Yes! Sorry, I didn’t mean to block the doorway.”

Accompanied by Himeko, I stepped into the familiar living room. All the while, her eyes remained laser-focused on the bag I was holding.

I don’t care what she says, I’m really feeling the pressure here! Her expectations are through the roof, I can tell!

I’d committed to this plan now, and there was no turning back, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that if I gave it another day to think it over, I still might have come up with something better.

Himeko turned to face me in the center of the room, staring at me with eager eyes. “Teehee! Well then, Misaki, what did you buy me with your first paycheck?”

This was it. I just have to go for it. In the worst-case scenario, I’d just have to apologize and do it over, like Haruka.

“Here goes. To express my gratitude for all that you do for me every day, I’ve bought you these special cakes that are only available in the Domestic Arts dorm.”

“So you did go for those. I’ve never eaten them before, so I can’t wait!”

Thank goodness. That’s one she’s glad about, at least!

“Also...”

Himeko’s face lit up. “There’s more?”

“Yeah. It’s kind of a present, but kind of not at the same time.”

“I’m not sure I get it.”

Figuring it would be easier to show her than tell her, I laid the bag on the table.

Looking through it, Himeko pulled a bemused face. “That’s an awful lot of stuff. I can see some pajamas, and some underwear.” She dug through a little. “A toothbrush? A towel? It’s all kinds of daily necessities. It looks like the underwear’s in your size rather than mine.”

She tilted her head in confusion as she picked up a plain-looking blue brassiere.

Himeko was absolutely right. All of this stuff was for my use.

I steeled my nerves, then told her exactly what my present was. “Basically, I’m thinking of leaving these here in your room.”

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“It’s kind of a pain having to keep carrying my things back and forth whenever I stay over. If I have a set of everything here, I’ll have more time to spend serving you instead. That was the idea.”

“So now you’ll be able to stay over every night?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, but yeah, pretty much. I want to meet your needs as thoroughly as possible. Even if giving you things for me isn’t exactly a normal gift, leaving them with you means I’ll be able to stay over whenever you want at a moment’s notice.”

Getting naked and tying a ribbon around myself was a definite no-go, but I’d found a more roundabout way of giving myself as a gift.

With a satisfied giggle, Himeko embraced me.

“That’s so funny. I’ve never heard of anyone using their first paycheck to buy things for themselves, then give *those* to their mistress. I’m happy to hold on to them, of course! You can have as many changes of clothes here as you want. I’d even be happy for you to live here full time.”

“Let’s not go too crazy, okay? I want to spend time with my roommates, too.”

“Hehe, I know, don’t worry. Still, it feels like you’ve made a commitment. Even though our master-servant arrangement is only temporary, you’ve

decided to fully devote yourself for the time we'll have together."

"You're right. That's just how I feel. By this point, I'm really grateful to have become your Seraph."

All of a sudden, it was like she was overcome with emotion. She made a strange noise and started hugging me twice as hard. Even though she was squeezing so tightly that it hurt, I still felt comfortable in her arms.

Considering how awkward I'd felt about it, I was really glad I'd gone for this present. This also seemed like the right moment to honestly express my feelings.

"Himeko. Lady Himeko. Thank you for choosing me. Until the time comes, I'm going to put everything I have into serving you, so don't hold back. If I'm ever doing anything wrong, please tell me."

"All right. There's nothing you're doing wrong, though. You make me happier than I could ever have imagined. I'm really glad I made you my Seraph as well."

I have the kindest mistress around, but I can't take advantage of that. If I rest on my laurels, I'll never become the type of maid she deserves. I need to be tough on myself. It won't be easy, but it'll be more than worth it.

In the end, I'd made it through this challenge unscathed. I'd used my first paycheck to get Himeko a gift she was thrilled with.

Kirara apparently had some trouble getting Lady Minako to agree to the invitation, but she managed to convince her by reminding her of the "prize" she'd won for beating us in the volleyball challenge—a free pass to visit the Sky Salon whenever she wanted. When Kirara appealed to her in tears, saying that if Lady Minako never came then it would make Kirara herself a liar, she successfully browbeat her into it.

Lady Kagura was thrilled with the resulting tea party, and ultimately, this was a story with a very happy ending.

Chapter Two: A Ghostly Commotion

If there was any kind of spiritual being associated with Amanotsuka Academy, it would be angels for sure. “Amanotsuka” was even written with the kanji for “angel.”

Accordingly, the most common topics of discussion were all things beautiful and elegant. That was why I was shocked one day when Himeko said something totally out of place.

“Misaki, have you heard? People have been seeing a ghost on campus.”

“A ghost?”

My hand, holding on to the teapot, stopped mid-pour. The moment I heard that word, a chill seemed to fill the air of the Sky Salon.

I knew what the word meant, of course. However, I’d never seen one in real life. If you’d asked me if I believed in them or not, my answer would have been that I didn’t know either way.

This academy was the last place I’d have expected to hear people discussing something more spiritual than scientific.

Himeko rested her elbows on the table, interlacing her fingers in front of her face. In a chilling tone, she said, “I haven’t seen the ghost myself, but apparently she appears as soon as night falls—a ghostly pale woman wandering around near the dormitories as if she’s lost.

“The first sighting we heard about was three days ago. A Seraph was on her way back from serving her mistress in the Societal Arts dorm and saw the pale figure deep in the woods. At first she thought it was another Domestic Arts student out for a walk, but then she thought, who’d be out so late? It was practically the middle of the night, long past curfew. No one else should have been in the woods except other Seraphs with permission from their mistresses. And yet, this woman clearly wasn’t wearing a school uniform—or even a maid’s uniform.

“Although the Seraph was frightened, she mustered up all her courage and hid behind the trees to try and get a closer look. Then she saw the ghostly figure, clad in pale, translucent clothes, wandering back and forth and muttering to herself in a half-whisper, ‘She’s not here. She’s not here.’”

A shiver ran down my spine. “Who was she looking for?”

Isn’t it a bit early in the year for scary stories? It’s not even summer yet. And why does Himeko have to tell it in that voice?!

“The Seraph wanted to run away, but she was frozen in fear. She *had* to escape, though; if the woman saw her, she might be cursed or even possessed. With all the courage she could muster in her trembling body, she took her first, ginger steps. Alas, luck was not on her side. A second later, she stepped on a twig. *Crack*. The tiniest sound—but it was enough. At horrifying speed, the pale figure turned to look. ‘*There she is!*’ Then the ghost charged toward her.

“The Seraph says she doesn’t remember exactly what happened next, but she ran for her life and shut herself away in the dorm. She didn’t even turn the light on, just threw herself under the covers of her bed and lay there, *praying* for the pale woman not to find her.”

“Oh, um, is that so?”

Ugh, I don’t like this. I wish I’d never heard about a ghost prowling around the dorms!

Suddenly, I felt a strange sensation on my shoulder. “*There she is!*”

I let out a blood-curdling scream. My whole body shook, and I crumbled to the ground, my legs having turned to jelly.

“My word, I didn’t expect you to be *that* shocked.”

“Huh?”

I timidly raised my head. There, wearing a broad smile and sweeping away her somewhat short hair with her fingers, stood Lady Saeko.

“It sounded like Himeko was telling the ghost story everyone’s been talking about, so I thought I’d try scaring you a little. It worked better than I expected!”

She burst into cheerful peals of laughter.

“Ugh, come on. Did you *have* to do that? I wasn’t expecting someone to come up behind me.”

“Hehehe, sorry. It was really funny, though, you have to admit. I never thought you’d actually fall down like that. I bet you even peed yourself a little. Did you?”

“No, I did not! What a rude question.”

“You don’t sound very sure. Himeko, you’d better check on her later. If she *has* wet herself, I’d feel *awful* for her.”

For reasons I couldn’t fathom, Himeko nodded and smiled. “Yes, I think that’s a fine idea.”

“Well, *I* sure don’t! No checking needed, thank you!”

I promptly brushed my skirt down and stood. *I really didn’t, not that it’s any of their business!*

Lady Saeko chuckled again. “Either way, you also serve Himeko in her dorm pretty often, don’t you? You’d better watch out for the ghost.”

“Yes, I know. I get it.”

With that, she turned and made her way to her private spot. It was terrible timing that she’d happened to walk by right as Himeko and I were having that conversation.

In all honesty, it didn’t surprise me too much that Amanotsuka Academy had its own paranormal phenomena. It was standard for a school to have its own urban legends.

“It’s not real though, is it?” I asked Himeko. After a pause, I pressed, “Is it?”

“Who can say? There have been an awful lot of sightings over the past few days, but we don’t know what’s *really* going on yet. Though I’m sure every student will want to keep their distance for now. It could be anything.”

“Yeah, but what if it’s some intruder? Couldn’t it be pretty dangerous?”

“That is one possibility, yes. We can’t rule out it being someone climbing in over the fence like you did.” Himeko giggled to herself.

“Do you have to bring that up again?” *It’s not like I had much choice!*

“As a school official, I also can’t let rumors about mysterious figures spread around campus without doing anything about it. That’s why I’ve asked the student council to launch an investigation.”

“You have?”

“You should be extra careful for now too, Misaki. If you’re still at my place and it’s getting late, you’re better off staying the night.”

“Hmm, good idea. I’ll do that.”

Now that I’d left spare clothes and everything else I needed in Himeko’s room, I could stay over anytime.

Himeko sighed softly. “I mean, it’s probably just someone’s idea of a bad joke.”

If so, then I didn’t need to be afraid. I just hoped that was all it turned out to be.

Himeko had a meeting with the student council that day to discuss how to deal with these spectral shenanigans, so as soon as we’d finished drinking tea together, she said I should head back to my own room. She told me it was possible they’d practically put us on lockdown until they figured out what was going on.

This is far too creepy. It’s not that I hate ghosts, exactly. What I hate are scary stories!

“I’m back,” I announced once I got to my dorm room.

Karen and Akira both greeted me with a hello. Kirara was probably still busy serving Lady Kagura at the Sky Salon.

With a teasing smile, Karen said, “You’re back early. I thought for sure you’d be staying over again.”

“Not today. Lady Himeko’s busy talking to the student council about a gho—uh, about something.”

It was pretty rare for me to come back around this time, so I figured it was a

good chance to chat with these two for once. I parked myself on the sofa.

Sadly, my initial attempts to play it off as nothing crashed and burned in the face of Akira's persistence. "It's about the ghost, isn't it?"

"Huh? No, it's not."

Do we have to talk about this?

"Everyone's gossiping about it in my class, too," said Karen.

She knows about it as well?

Akira's voice turned markedly deeper. "A pale, spectral woman, right?"

I can do without the spooky voice, thanks!

"Yeah, apparently," I replied. "I only just heard about it today."

Karen's eyes were now aglitter with a hint of glee. "I'm surprised you haven't seen her yet. You're always coming back pretty late in the evening."

It looked like there was no avoiding this topic. They were enjoying it too much.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I haven't seen any sign of her."

"Oh."

"I bet it's just a practical joke, anyway. Or people seeing things."

It had better be, anyway. What will we do otherwise?

"What a shame. It would be so much fun if it was a real ghost."

No, it wouldn't!

"As long as it's not some pervert. I mean, it's probably not. Did Lady Himeko say anything?"

"For now I think she's just asking the student council to investigate. Then she'll wait and see what they come back with."

"Fair enough. By the way," Karen continued, her tone dropping as she geared up to tell a spooky story, "did you know that there was a Domestic Arts student here a long time ago who was always getting sick?"

“Stop!”

I didn’t even want to know what she was about to come out with.

Akira, on the other hand, was definitely in. “No, I’ve never heard of her. Maybe you can tell us more.”

“Poor thing had a frail constitution, you see. She got into this school, but she couldn’t actually attend many classes. That meant she didn’t have much chance to meet any of the ladies, either. She’d spent so long looking forward to becoming a maid and serving a mistress, but her illness just didn’t get any better. Her body kept getting weaker and weaker until she knew she didn’t have long left.

“One day, she crawled out of bed, determined to go to the school building and find a mistress. She only made it as far as the forest before breathing her last. Ever since then, they say she can be seen wandering around in the woods whenever the anniversary of her death is approaching.”

I covered my ears. “No! I don’t want to hear about this!” Then I huddled up on the sofa with my arms around my knees.

Karen chuckled. “Well, who knows if it’s true or not? It’s firmly in the rumor category. Still, the mere existence of a story like that gives the recent ghost sightings an air of credibility, right?”

I let out a groan. *She made it sound so real. I had no idea she had that side to her!*

Thanks to Karen’s scary story, I had trouble getting to sleep that night. I lay awake thinking to myself.

Someone probably just heard that same story and decided to play a prank by acting it out. That has to be it. Right? Hopefully the culprit will be caught and given a good, stern talking to.

Ugh, I can’t stand it. Well, I can see the supposedly haunted forest from my window. I’ll just have to get up and look. There won’t be anyone there. Definitely not a ghost. No harm in checking though, right? Just a quick peek to make sure I can’t see anything, and then I’ll be able to get straight to sleep.

Having convinced myself, I gently lifted up the bottom of the curtain and peered outside. Then I froze.

No. It couldn't be.

She's there. She's right there!

I gulped hard. Deep in the forest, almost hidden among the trees, was a wavering white form.

This is impossible. I'm imagining things. I must be. Yes, that has to be it. This is a dream. I fell asleep, and now I'm having a very realistic dream.

Inside the dream, I buried myself under the covers. It was definitely a dream. For sure. With all my might, I tried to will away what I'd seen. To make it not real.

It was no use. I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd just seen the ghost with my own two eyes.



The following morning, Ms. Hiyori greeted the class with a curious look on her face. "Before we start homeroom today, I have an announcement."

She set about handing everyone a piece of paper.

"I imagine a lot of you have already heard, but lately people have been saying they've seen a ghost on campus. Setting aside whether that's true or not, the reports themselves are undoubtedly real, so the academy has come to a decision after some discussion with the student council."

Students who'd received the handout started whispering to one another.

I glanced down at the page in my hand. It stated that a curfew was being put into effect. Due to eyewitness reports from students of a ghost or suspicious person on campus, the latest students were allowed to be out of their rooms in the evening was being changed from nine o'clock to seven o'clock. This was to apply until the investigation was complete. After seven, leaving our dorms was now strictly forbidden.

It even applied to Seraphs, which meant the latest any maid could be in a Societal Arts student's dorm was now about 6:30. Students' whereabouts

would be checked, so there would be no staying overnight. Teachers would patrol around the classroom building, special classrooms, and auditorium, and the area around the dorms would be patrolled by the student council.

I really hoped this would be over quickly.

“This is for everyone’s safety, so whatever you do, you *must* follow those instructions. Got it?”

“Yes, Ms. Hiyori!” the class replied.

Seeing them all respond in agreement, Ms. Hiyori breathed a sigh of relief.

“I don’t really believe it’s a ghost, but it’s still worth taking precautions. I’m also in line to join the patrol, so I hope the matter’s resolved before it gets to my turn.”

If my eyes weren’t deceiving me, Ms. Hiyori’s face had turned ever so slightly pale. It looked like she wasn’t a big fan of ghosts either.

After school, I went to the Sky Salon as usual. No sooner did I arrive than Lady Kagura called everyone to a meeting around the central table.

“I’m sure you’ve all been told by your teachers, but a curfew is now in effect. Accordingly, we’ve been told that salon activities need to end early as well. It can take some time to get back from the Sky Salon, so as of now, I’m setting a deadline of six o’clock for everyone to leave here.”

This was starting to feel like serious business.

“I know it’s not ideal, but we just have to live with it. The teaching staff and student council are working hard to deal with this as soon as possible, so your cooperation is appreciated too.”

When Lady Kagura finished, Himeko gave a brief update on the current situation. At times like these, it was a huge benefit to have Himeko there to share information from the academy’s perspective.

“Such a shame that you can’t stay over, Misaki. Just when you made it so much easier.”

“I know. Better that than coming face to face with a ghost, though.”

“Yes, I suppose.”

“That reminds me...”

“What is it?”

I was about to tell her what I’d seen last night, but then I changed my mind. I could have just been imagining things, and it wasn’t like I had any proof.

“No, it’s nothing. I hope they uncover the truth soon.”

“Me too.”



The glass rattled in the windows as it was assailed by strong winds. Being cooped up inside and not being allowed to go out reminded me of waiting for a typhoon to pass. It had that same ominous feeling.

I pulled back the living room curtain a little and peered outside. All I could see was the forest stretching out under a cloak of twilight.

At this time, there would normally be people strolling around here and there, but the curfew meant the whole area was deathly silent.

“For dinner tonight, we want to show you two our skills!”

It was rare for the four of us to all be around for dinner, so Karen and Akira were in higher spirits than usual and decided to treat me and Kirara.

This is what’s great about having roommates. Maybe I should be thankful to the ghost for this, if nothing else.

Soon it was time for lights-out, and it seemed a quiet day was coming to a close.

This might have been the least time I’d spent serving Himeko since arriving at the academy. Whether it was because I’d been thrown off from my usual daily rhythm or because I was still worried about the ghost, I again struggled to get to sleep.

It was around this time last night that I saw that pale figure, wasn’t it?

I should have stopped myself, but I once again lifted up the bottom of the curtain and looked outside.

I froze. Stared intently. Really squinted.

This time there was no white form. *Phew! Thank goodness. Yesterday I really was just seeing things.*

Only, if I wasn't mistaken, there was a black swarm passing through the forest.

What are those? Bats?

I couldn't count them at this distance, but it looked like a large number of bats was flying between the trees. Had they always been there? Had I just not noticed them until today?

Whatever the case, they were way cuter than a ghost. It wasn't like they were flying into my room. There was nothing to be afraid of.

Unlike the previous night, I managed to fall sound asleep.



"Good day, Misaki," said Himeko as she exited the elevator.

She was accompanied by an unexpected visitor to the Sky Salon, who greeted me similarly.

"Oh! Lady Angelica!" I said.

Himeko had arrived with the student council president in tow.

"Good to see you again," she replied, lifting the hem of her skirt to deliver a curtsy so elegant I could picture a field of large white roses blooming behind her.

Her silvery hair was slightly wavy and hung past her shoulders, glistening in the rays of the sun. As ever, she was so beautiful that she struck me with a sense of awe.

"You never have tea with me, so I insisted Himeko let me come here to see you."

"What?! Surely you can't have come all the way here just for me. And I promise it's not that I don't want to have tea with you; I just haven't had a chance!"

In a panic, I related a string of justifications, but Lady Angelica just chuckled.

“I’m joking. It’s true that I want to have tea with you, but I’m here on a different mission today.”

“Phew! Okay, then.” Relief washed over me.

“I actually came here to have a chat with Himeko.”

“That makes sense.”

“Himeko insisted we do it this way because a formal meeting straight after class would mean she didn’t get to spend time with you.”

“What?” said Himeko, flustered. “I don’t think I said anything like that. I brought you along because *you* said we should chat in the Sky Salon today!”

“Well, it was written all over your face. If you can’t see Misaki, you start to get really cranky.”

“No, I don’t!”

Rubbing her own face, Himeko fervently denied the charge.

Ugh, she’s playing her like a fiddle. The only way this could get any worse is if the Kokonoe sisters or Lady Saeko turn up.

As her Seraph, I decided it was up to me to try lending a hand. “Lady Himeko, how about I lead you to a table? No need to talk standing up.”

“You’re right. Please do!”

“Then follow me. You too, Lady Angelica.”

“Gladly. You’re getting very good at the job, aren’t you?”

“I’ve had a lot of help,” I replied bashfully.

“Of course she’s good,” Himeko declared. “I personally chose her as my Seraph.”

The praise for me had put a boastful smile on Himeko’s face.

After I led them to their seats and served tea, Lady Angelica started to explain the latest updates on the ghost situation.

“I’m told there were sightings near the Societal Arts dorms last night.”

“Should I leave you two alone?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t worry. It’s nothing you can’t hear, and I could use some input from a Domestic Arts student.”

“All right, then.”

Since Lady Angelica had given her permission, I took a seat next to Himeko.

“So far all the sightings have been close to the Domestic Arts dorm, so we focused the patrols around there last night, but it sounds like that was a swing and a miss.” She sighed.

Himeko furrowed her brow. “Does whoever it is know our movements? Is she slipping through the net on purpose?”

“Not necessarily,” said Lady Angelia, shaking her head. “I tried marking all the sightings so far on a map of the campus, and it looks like she’s gradually moving from one point to another.”

Lady Angelica pushed out her chest a bit, pulled a sheet of paper from between her breasts, then unfurled it on the table.

You seriously kept it in there?! Frankly, I felt I deserved a medal for not saying that out loud. Not that I’m uncomfortable or anything. Nope.

I looked down at the map. Indeed, the very first sighting had been almost right next to the Domestic Arts dorm, but they’d been gradually moving farther away.

“I think it’s probably a student rather than a ghost,” said Lady Angelica as a preface. “Also, the ghost—the student—is said to have been repeating the words ‘She’s not here,’ so the most likely conclusion is that she’s searching for someone and moving to cover new ground.”

“Ah, I see. That makes it probable that she’s a Domestic Arts student, right?”

“We can’t be sure of that,” Lady Angelica replied, gently rebuffing Himeko’s idea. “I know there are rumors about a Domestic Arts student who died at the school, but that didn’t actually happen. There’s no student who died on campus.”

“Yes, you’re quite right,” Himeko agreed.

Huh? That was all made up? I guess I could have just asked Himeko about it.

“Which means that in ghost story terms, it’s just as likely to be the other way around. It could be a Societal Arts student wandering around near the Domestic Arts dorm looking for a Seraph.”

“That could indeed be the case.”

“Misaki, have you picked up on anything related to this? Are there any girls in the Domestic Arts program who are absolutely desperate to become a Seraph, or any Societal Arts students relentlessly seeking one?”

Lady Angelica interlocked her fingers in front of her face and gazed at me with her almond-shaped eyes. Her beautiful, piercing gaze made a shiver run down my spine all of a sudden.

“I’m not the best person to ask. Everyone I know is either a Seraph already or really eager to be one, so that doesn’t narrow it down. As for the opposite, I wouldn’t have the first clue.”

“That’s a shame.”

“One more thing,” I added hesitantly. “I’ve actually seen a white silhouette myself. Just a glimpse of one.”

Himeko sprang up out of her chair. “Did you really?!”

“Yeah. Only while I was inside my dorm room. I couldn’t tell you anything specific.”

“You should have said something sooner. You weren’t in any danger, were you?” She grabbed my shoulders and shook me back and forth. I was grateful for her concern, but it was surprisingly painful.

“No, not at all.” I presented a big smile to try and reassure her.

Lady Angelica’s shrewd eyes trapped me again. “Do you think what you saw was a ghost? Or did it look more like a regular person?”

“I’m not quite sure. I didn’t have much to go on, but if I had to decide, it felt more like a person.”

“Oh, really? Then it definitely seems more likely that it’s one of the students.”

“Erm, if the ghost turns out to be a student, are they going to be given some kind of punishment?”

“Good question.” Lady Angelica paused to think for a moment. “That would depend on what she’s doing and why, I suppose. If it really is just a prank, then she’ll be punished quite harshly, but if there’s a deeper reason... Well, I won’t say there’ll be no punishment at all, but we should be able to avoid putting her place here in jeopardy.”

“That’s good.”

In that case, it sounded like even if it turned out to be a Domestic Arts student, it might not lead to the worst possible outcome.

Their meeting continued for a while after talk of the ghostly business concluded. They had all kinds of things to discuss, like other problems on campus, the upcoming end-of-term exams, and the event schedule. Still, since it wasn’t an official meeting, the friendly chatter sort of took over, and the deadline for leaving crept up before we knew it.

Lady Angelica smiled gently at us. “Himeko, thank you for letting me come along today. I’m glad I got to have tea with Misaki. It was great fun.”

When she and Lady Himeko were together, they were so overwhelmingly gorgeous that it made me want to put in even more effort than usual while serving them.

It was nice that they were satisfied with my work, but it still grated on me that I couldn’t accurately judge my own skills. When Sara had watched me work, her feedback had essentially been that I still had a long way to go. Right now, I felt that on a deep level. Being a maid had far more to it than it appeared at first.

Himeko stood to see Lady Angelica out. “I’d be happy to have you here anytime! Kagura even said you’re welcome to visit whenever you like.”

“That’s lovely to hear. I’ll definitely come back when all this fuss is out of the way.”

“I can’t wait!”

Grinning to one another, they headed toward the elevator that led out of the

salon. I followed behind them with a prim and proper expression.



I scooped up water with both hands and let it trickle through my fingers.

Bathing alone like this made me feel like something was missing. My routine was eating dinner with Himeko and then getting into the bath together, where we'd wash each other's hair and scrub each other's bodies. It had happened too gradually for me to notice, but I was so used to being with her that I was lonely by myself.

"I really hope life gets back to normal soon."

I submerged myself in the water up to my shoulders and sighed softly.

Today, the student council would focus their patrol on the area around the Societal Arts dorms. If they found the spooky culprit, the curfew would be lifted.

Every other Seraph was probably just as antsy as I was right now. I wondered what Himeko was doing. Had she eaten dinner alone and gotten into the bath alone? She'd done everything by herself before we met, so there was probably no need to worry, but it made me sad to imagine her thinking she was pretty much fine without me.

I heaved another sigh. It was crazy to think I'd become so dependent on Himeko.

"*Really* crazy," I said aloud. I let my face sink beneath the surface and blew bubbles.

This was not good. At this rate, I really would become a maid.

"Misaki, are you still in there?" came Kirara's voice from outside the bathroom. "Other people need to use the tub as well, you know!"

I must have been in there longer than I'd realized. "Sorry! I'll be out in a minute. Or you could come and join me. I've gotten really good at giving other people a good scrubbing, so I don't mind helping you out!"

"No, uh, I'm good," Kirara replied awkwardly. "Just hurry up, okay?"

"Sure thing!"

What a shame. I think I'd have enjoyed having a bath with Kirara.

If Lady Angelica's prediction was accurate, the ghost wasn't likely to appear anywhere near the Domestic Arts dorm tonight. Even so, I couldn't let go completely. There was a certain nagging thought in my head.

Most likely, the ghost was actually a student at the school. If so, I had a faint idea of who that white silhouette might be.

But it can't be. Can it?

I clambered into bed a little earlier than usual that night, then stayed up reading a book while keeping the curtain slightly lifted. If that pale figure really was a Domestic Arts student, it was possible I'd see her leaving the dorm.

For a while I just sat there and kept reading—but then, just after lights-out, I saw her.

Swaying to and fro in an ethereal manner, the white silhouette disappeared into the woods. Until yesterday, this would have been enough for me to drop the curtain and scurry under the covers. Now that I could look at the spectral figure as a living, breathing human, I was hardly scared at all.

The night before, that silhouette had reminded me of something in particular that I'd seen recently. If I was right, it was probably better to go and get her back. She'd be spotted by the student council if I let her get too close to the Societal Arts dorms.

Nerve-racking though it was, I steeled my courage, got out of bed, and left the room.

The hallway was so quiet you could have heard a pin drop. There was absolutely no one around. A normal Domestic Arts student would never dream of breaking a curfew directive from the academy, so they were probably all sleeping soundly in their beds.

Being caught would be pretty bad for me as well, but fortunately there was no one on patrol anywhere nearby. *And the front door's easy to unlock from the inside, so—*

My hand froze on the doorknob. Someone else had unlocked it already. It was

looking more and more likely that the ghost's true identity was a Domestic Arts student.

I quietly opened the door and stepped outside, where I could hear the faint buzzing of insects. The moonlight shone all around, taking away some of my fear.

Now, where did she go? She was wandering back and forth like she was sleepwalking or something, so she can't have gotten too far.

I walked at a quick pace to try and catch up. First I started along the normal route to the Societal Arts dorms, which typically took about ten minutes. It was also full of twists and turns and had tall trees all around, so visibility was poor. Those same trees kept the bright sun at bay in summer, and provided good cover for me on this moonlight night, but by the same token they made it very hard to spot my target.

"She has to be around here somewhere."

I started to think I couldn't stick to the side of the road. I'd have to go deeper into the forest.

I guess I have no choice.

Mentally preparing myself for how dirty my clothes would get, I changed to a more direct route. Weaving my way between the maple, camphor, and cherry trees, I kept going for maybe a few minutes.

Then, at last, I saw her.

Just to make sure, I hid behind a tree for a moment and watched.

"So I was right," I murmured to myself.

I knew I'd recognized the shape of that white silhouette. My instinct hadn't led me astray.

The "ghost" was someone I knew. I crept closer and called her name.

"Sara! Hey! Over here!"

Yes, the pale figure had been my classmate all along. The silhouette had reminded me of the sight of her looking up at the cherry tree the other day.

With her silver hair and nothing on but a pale white negligee, it was no wonder everyone had mistaken her for a ghost. But what was she doing out here?

Sara was muttering something to herself. "She's not here. There's simply no sign of her."

"Hey!"

I tried calling again, but got just as little response as before. It looked like maybe she really was sleepwalking.

Still, now that I knew there was nothing supernatural going on, I had nothing to fear. I tiptoed closer.

"Sara. Sara!"

I grabbed her by the shoulders and gently shook her. She finally turned around.

Suddenly, her eyes opened wide and she put her arms around me. "Oh! There she is!"

I yelped in shock. "Calm down, okay? It's me. Just me!"

"Me'? Who's that?" Finally, her eyes seemed to take me in. "Misaki, is that you?"

I had the feeling she still wasn't fully aware, but she had recognized me, at least.

"What are you doing out here in the middle of the night?" I asked.

"She's not here."

"Huh?"

With a tearful face, she repeated, "She's not here. My mistress is not here!"

Sara's mistress? Who was that, I wondered? As far as I knew, Sara didn't have a contract with anyone yet.

"I don't know anything about your mistress, but if the student council finds you you'll be in trouble. Let's head back to the dorm for now, okay?"

Rather than trying to snap her out of it there in the forest, priority number one was getting her back to safety. I took her hand in mine, ready to set out.

That very moment, a sharp voice interrupted us.

“You two! Stop right there.”

Then someone descended from the sky.

Wait. From the sky?!

I quickly took hold of Sara and stooped down with her. I heard the sound of a large quantity of creatures flapping their wings. Through half-opened eyes, I could see they were bats.

The person had descended with them, as if they were her retinue.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said. “I definitely didn’t expect to see either of you here.”

Her beguiling voice emerged from lips as red as blood.

It was someone I knew well. I’d had tea with her that very day.

“Naughty, naughty. I didn’t think I’d find students breaking the rules to go wandering around. Least of all that it would be Misaki and Sara.”

I looked up at her. She brought a finger to her chin and let out a small, teasing chuckle.

Everything about her seemed different than it had during the day. She had an alluring yet somehow terrifying aura.

However, she was still strikingly beautiful. In fact, she looked far more bewitching now. Even though there was no wind, her silvery hair fluttered as if it had a mind of its own. Looking closely, it even appeared to be floating in the air.

What stood out most of all, though, were the grand pair of wings on her back and the fangs visible in her smile.

I gulped audibly. “Erm... Lady Angelica? Is that you?”

When I said her name, she replied, “Good evening, Misaki.”

Lady Angelica lifted the hem of her skirt and delivered a graceful curtsy in

mid-air, fluttering her wings as she did so.





“Dear oh dear. I’d never have guessed you two were behind this whole ghostly kerfuffle.”

Lady Angelica sighed and looked at us. No, not just looked; it was more like her piercing gaze cut right through us.

A cold sweat spread over my body.

“Not only that, but you’ve seen my true form.” She did a twirl in the air to show herself off.

In a voice wrung from the depths of my throat, I replied, “That’s not exactly my fault.”

“You’re made of strong stuff, Misaki. I’m really piling on the pressure right now. A normal person would have passed out. Like Sara there.”

“Huh?”

When I looked down, Sara was lying limp in my arms.

“Well, you did purposely break the rules and go wandering about in the evening. That takes a lot of guts.”

“No, I really wouldn’t say that,” I murmured. “It’s more like everything happened so fast, my brain can’t quite keep up.”

“That’s not what matters to me, anyway. What I care about is whether you two are the culprits behind this ghost nonsense or not.”

Lady Angelica gently touched down on the ground. As soon as she did, her wings and fangs disappeared, and the overwhelming aura surrounding her seemed to dissipate just a little. *She really was floating, wasn’t she?*

“I was just following Sara. I don’t know if I’d use the word ‘culprit,’ but I’m pretty sure Sara was the ghost all along.”

I’d finally managed to calm down a little, so I could talk normally again.

“Is that so? Now that I look, Sara’s appearance does match the eyewitness accounts, while you’re just in regular pajamas.”

“Exactly,” I said feebly.

“Did you ask her why she’s been walking around at night?”

“No. Before I got a chance you, uhm, flew down.”

“I see. That must have come as quite a shock!”

“You could say that.”

Was I dreaming? Was it some kind of illusion? There was no way I’d seen a person descend from the sky. I knew Lady Angelica, and she was just a normal human—wasn’t she?

I’d seen it just moments ago, but I was already beginning to doubt myself.

“I was a little careless as well, I suppose. You see, I suspected that an organization coming after me might have sent someone to the school.”

“Oh,” I replied, baffled. *An organization? Huh?*

“I also thought everyone would obey the new rule, so there’d be no students wandering around who might spot me.”

“I’m sorry.” I had no way to excuse that.

“Well, what am I going to do with you now that you’ve seen me like this?” She peered at me meaningfully.

“Are you going to... silence me?”

“Hehe, don’t worry. I’m not about to say anything frightening like ‘Now that you’ve seen my true form, I have to kill you!’ At most, I’ll have to erase some of your memories. Only, someone needs to ask Sara what she’s been doing every night, and I feel like that might be better coming from you. Hmm, yes.”

After a brief pause for thought, Lady Angelica buoyantly clapped her hands together.

“For now, I’d like you to just take Sara back to the dorm. Tomorrow, can you ask her why she’s been sneaking out and wandering around the forest?”

“Uhm, sure. But after that, are you going to silence me after all?”

“You’re kind of a worrywart, you know that? I’ll keep my promise. As long as

you swear to talk to Sara and not to reveal my true identity to anyone, I don't think I even need to wipe your memories."

"Great," I managed, my heart still aquiver.

By this point, I'd gathered that Lady Angelica wasn't quite human, but I had to know what she actually was. I steeled my courage.

"Erm, are you a vampire or something?"

"That's exactly what I am. To be precise, I'm one-quarter vampire."

"Gosh."

"You don't believe me? If you want, I'll gladly prove it by drinking your blood."

I gasped. "No, that's all right, thanks!"

"Oh, really? What a shame. Though to be honest, I don't usually drink blood directly out of people anyway."

"You don't?"

"No. My family runs a company that collects and delivers blood for transfusions, so getting enough blood is never a problem."

"Either your family's found their true calling, or they're solving a problem of their own making."

"Heh. Don't go telling anyone about that, either, by the way."

"Right! I won't!"

Ack, I don't like this at all. I didn't come to this school to learn secrets like this!

"Is there anything else you'd like to ask? We can't talk about it when there are other people around, so if you're curious, now's your chance."

"No, I think that's everything. I wouldn't even know what to ask."

She chuckled again. "Fair enough. You seem to be all about living the quiet life."

Lady Angelica scooped up one of my pigtails and stroked it gently.

"I'll take you at your word, Misaki. Neither of us will say anything about seeing the other here tonight. It's like it never happened."

“Yes, uhm, that sounds like it’s for the best.”

“Then I’ll leave Sara in your hands.”

“All right.”

With that, she departed. That was all well and good for her, but even after I woke Sara up, she was still unsteady on her feet. Getting her back to the room was actually a huge effort.



When second period was finished the next day, I spoke to Sara.

“Do you have a moment?”

“By all means. Whatever could it be?”

I asked her to go out to the courtyard with me. It was time to find out what was going on.

“Erm, do you remember what happened last night?”

“Last night? No, I haven’t the foggiest.”

A question mark appeared above her head as she tilted her head to the side sweetly. *Oof, it looks like she really might not remember. I can see it on her face.*

“Not just yesterday, either,” I added. “You’ve been sneaking out of the dorm every night, haven’t you?”

“No, I haven’t.”

Ugh, I knew it.

“I saw you, though. Last night, you left the dorm and walked into the forest, and I caught you saying ‘She’s not here, she’s not here’ to yourself over and over.”

When I said this, Sara fell silent and appeared lost in thought for a moment.

“I thought I was dreaming.”

Oh, thank goodness. At least she has some idea.

“It was no dream. You were really doing that.”

“My word.”

“Sara, have you had something on your mind lately? The other day, I saw you staring up at a tree in the courtyard after lunch. You remember?”

“Am I under some sort of obligation to talk to you about that?”

She stared at me with a guarded expression.

“You do, I’m afraid. You might be about to take the blame for causing all this commotion about a ghost. You’re normally completely in control, so something must be up. I’m worried about you, Sara. As a friend.”

“A friend?”

“You don’t want me to call you that?” In the confusion of the moment, I’d put it out there without really thinking, but it seemed she wasn’t going to let it go unacknowledged.

“No, I don’t particularly mind. Indeed, if you’re willing to call me a friend, I suppose there’s no reason not to open up to you.”

Yes! Here we go.

Sara cast her eyes down and quietly began to explain.

“In my dream—well, I suppose it was actually quite real, wasn’t it? I seem to recall that I was searching for my mistress.”

“Your mistress? I didn’t think you had one.”

“I don’t have one at this school. I’m referring to my real mistress, whom I served a long time ago.”

“In Britain?”

“Yes. Before coming here, I was in the service of a lady there. Now that I’m apart from her, I must have developed withdrawal symptoms and not even realized it.”

“Gosh. You like your mistress so much that being away from her gives you withdrawal?”

“But of course. I put every ounce of my being into serving her.” A look of happiness appeared on her face, the likes of which I’d never seen there before.

“Wow, fair enough. Where’s your mistress now, then?”

“She remained behind.”

“Oh. Does that mean you won’t be able to see her again until you graduate from here?”

I didn’t want to imagine these ghostly goings-on continuing long term.

“No, it’s not all that bad. In Britain, we have compulsory final exams at this time of year called GCSEs. My mistress intends to travel to Japan once she’s finished with those.”

“That’s a relief. When will that be?”

“I expect she’ll arrive in July or August.”

She gazed off into the distance, perhaps in the direction of the United Kingdom. She was no doubt picturing her mistress’s face.

“So you still have more than a month to go. You must be pretty lonely.”

“Frightfully so, I must say.”

“At least I understand that now. Still, it’s dangerous to go walking around at night. In more ways than you realize.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Though I couldn’t tell Sara, there was a chance a scary vampire girl might suddenly decide to make a late-night snack of her.

“I don’t doubt that, in any case. Sadly, I’m not sure what I can do about it.”

“Hmm, I see.”

She was doing it unconsciously, so how could she stop? I had no idea what to suggest.

For now, I’d better just tell Lady Angelica what I’ve learned.



I went to see Lady Angelica during my lunch break and relayed what Sara had told me. However, the response I got was kind of mystifying.

“Aah. A classic case of mistress deficiency syndrome.”

“Uhm, I see.”

I must have looked totally lost, because Lady Angelica hurried to clarify. “That’s not something I just made up. It’s a condition that crops up quite a lot at this school, you could say. It happens when a maid has to be apart from a mistress she’s been serving for a long time.”

“Really? I had no idea.” It sounded sort of like homesickness.

“Sometimes a mistress in her third year will have a Seraph in her first year, for example. Let’s say they forge a really strong master-servant relationship. The mistress then graduates after one year, and the Seraph is left at the academy on her own. She gets so lonely that it develops into what we call mistress deficiency syndrome. Classic story.”

“That makes sense.”

“Since Sara already has a mistress in Britain, it’s no surprise that she’d develop the symptoms. Actually, I think the admission papers have already come through, so we can go ahead and tell Sara the date.”

“Will that make her feel better?”

“Maybe. But I have a little trick that might help as well.”

“You’re not going to wipe her memory, are you?”

“No, no, no. It’s just about trying to think optimistically. She knows her mistress is arriving soon, so she should get everything ready for her and look forward to that day.”

“I see what you mean.” *Maybe that would give her some peace of mind.*

“At least now we know who the culprit was, which is a relief. What to do about Sara’s punishment, though? She was acting unconsciously, so I’d like to hold off on making it public, but we also can’t let her get off scot-free after causing such a big commotion. Well, I guess all she really did was scare a few students, so we don’t need to be that harsh either.”

The punishment didn’t seem like a topic that would normally be discussed with someone like me, but Lady Angelica was considerate enough to do so anyway.

“I’d like that as well,” I replied.

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you for your report. Leave the rest to me.”

“Okay. Goodbye, then.”



After school that day, an urgent bulletin in the name of the student council was brought to every salon. It stated that the truth behind the ghostly mystery had been uncovered by the student council, so the rules would go back to normal, and the curfew would be lifted.

It also mentioned that the “ghost” had turned out to just be a student, but out of concern for the individual and her future life at the academy, her name would not be made public.

“What a relief!” Himeko said. “Now you can stay over at my place again.”

“Yup.”

From what I could tell, the details hadn’t been shared with Himeko, either. If they had, I’m sure I’d have come up as well.

I’d better thank Lady Angelica sometime. If Himeko knew I’d broken the rules and gone out at night, I bet she’d start worrying her head off.

What I still couldn’t get over was that Lady Angelica wasn’t human. I hadn’t had time to think it over properly in the moment, so I’d just taken it in my stride, but I’d actually stumbled upon some worrying information.

Why was she at this school, serving as the president of the student council? What was her true goal? And was she really no danger to others?

What am I even thinking? There’s no such thing as vampires... is there? Lady Angelica could have been making it all up. But then, I did see her float down from the sky.

I groaned to myself. Part of me thought it would have been better if she *had* erased my memories.

Just as I was thinking about her, the young lady in question appeared in the Sky Salon.

“Good afternoon. It’s me again.”

She had entered along with Lady Kagura. A shriek escaped from my lips before I could stop myself.

“Oh, Misaki, hello. Did you just shriek the moment you saw my face?” She smiled at me, looking very amused.

In a flash, I looked away and feigned indifference. “No, uhm, you must have misheard.”

“Really? Very well, then. Oh, good day, Himeko. Do you mind if I sit with you?”

An angelic smile appeared on her face. I knew the truth, however. Behind it lurked the fangs of a vampire.

“Be my guest. Misaki, could you make some tea?”

“Coming right up.”

I mean, there’s no way she’d do anything here, right?

Lady Angelica lowered her head. “Actually, the reason I came here today is to apologize to you, Himeko.”

“Whatever for?”

“For not being able to tell you who the student is behind all the ghost sightings.”

“Oh, that. No need to worry, honestly. I understand you’re just looking out for whoever it is.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it.”

“I trust your judgment at the end of the day. How could I not?”

Watching her talk to Himeko, she really did just look like a fine, upstanding student council president and nothing more.

“Hehe, you’re so kind. It must be your noble blood. If only you could share some of it with me.”

She took Himeko’s hand and drew her lips toward it. *Eek!*

“Lady Angelica, here’s your tea!” I interjected in a near-yelp.

When she stopped moving, her teeth were a hair’s breadth from the back of Himeko’s hands. “Ah, thank you, Misaki.”

“Anytime! Truly!”

As she smiled, she flashed her fangs for me alone.

“I’m so jealous of you, Himeko. Misaki makes such a delicious cup of tea.”

“That’s nice of you to say,” Himeko said. “I’m happy to hear it.”

She had no idea at all about the danger Lady Angelica presented. It made me nervous to see her acting so calmly.

Lady Angelica brought the cup to her mouth and took a sip, then closed her eyes and gently murmured, “I really like this school. How about you, Misaki?”

There was only one answer to that question.

“I like it too.”

“You do? Excellent. I consider it my duty to ensure that the lovely students here have a healthy and peaceful environment in which to grow. I’ll spare no effort to achieve that.”

“That’s a wonderful ambition to have. I know I’ve been slacking a little on that front.” Himeko sounded slightly apologetic.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I know you’re pulling out all the stops for the academy.”

“No, I’m definitely not doing enough to be worthy of such praise, Lady Angelica.”

“Everyone’s their own worst critic, I suppose. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“Fair enough,” Himeko replied. She had a melancholy look about her. It was a rare sight.

Lady Angelica’s kind eyes turned to me. “Misaki, your help with making the school the best it can be will be appreciated as well.”

I couldn’t see any hint of deception in her eyes.

“I’ll do what I can, at least.”

“Thank you so much!”

Was Lady Angelica trying to tell me that I had nothing to be worried about? That even though she wasn’t human, she genuinely cared about the academy?

I guess I have to believe that. What other choice do I have?



“Misaki, I’ll turn on the water now.”

“Got it!”

Himeko’s words in my ear were the signal for me to close my eyes. Immediately after that, the hot water from the shower rained down pleasantly onto my head.

Running her fingers through my hair with her free hand, she said cheerfully, “I wasn’t sure what would happen, but it was dealt with pretty quickly in the end. I’m so relieved!”

The second the ghost scare was over, she’d practically forced me into her room, saying, “You just bought all those overnight supplies, so it would be a waste if you didn’t use them! Besides, I really need you to clean my room. You’ll have to stay over tonight.”

Soon enough, we were in the bath together. It had only been a few days since the last time, but it sounded like she’d been pretty lonely without me around. She was definitely the kind of mistress who was grateful to have a maid.

Normally, I washed Himeko first and then we switched, but this time Himeko started on me first. I wondered how the other students would react if they knew about this. Would they be envious or just plain angry?

I guess it’s just one more perk of being a Seraph.



“Apparently, the student who caused all this fuss was wandering around, desperate to see her mistress again.”

Choosing my words carefully, I replied, “Yes, that’s what I heard, too.”

As far as Himeko was concerned, I didn’t know any further details. I had to maintain that facade.

“Misaki, if you couldn’t see me for a long time, would you start longing for me the same way?”

“Huh? I don’t know how to answer that.”

“So you’re saying you wouldn’t?” She was sulking.

“I mean, if that did happen, I think *you’d* be the one wandering around at night looking for *me*, wouldn’t you?”

Picturing that, I couldn’t help but burst out laughing. It was far too plausible.

“What do you take me for? Loneliness doesn’t make me fall apart *that* easily!”

As if to punish me, Himeko wrapped her arms around my stomach and squeezed tightly.

“Wait! Don’t do that! Haha... Ahahaha!”

The showerhead in her hand was now laser-focused on my side, blasting water straight at it. I reflexively writhed and squirmed.

“Oh yes, that’s your weak point isn’t it?”

Oh no.

Himeko was in her element now. With a cry of joy, she started targeting my open flank with everything she had. She had me pinned from behind, so I was at a major disadvantage.

“Haha! No, stop! Seriously, stop it!”

I have to grab the showerhead off her! Wait, I have a better idea.

My hand shot out to grab the shower valve, and I turned off the water.

“Ack!” cried Himeko, freezing in place.

“Tell me, milady. Do you agree that mistresses who bully their maids deserve to be punished?”

I turned to face her, grinning, and she looked away at once.

“Lady... Himeko...”

Speaking in a hair-raising ghostly voice, I fixed my eyes on Himeko. At the same time, I smoothly inched my fingers toward the showerhead and nonchalantly stole it from her.

“Hey!”

But by the time she noticed, it was too late.

“Misaki! You’re the best Seraph ever! I’m your mistress and I care so much about you!”

“You should have thought of that sooner.”

Grinning, I turned on the shower again with slightly cooler water. Himeko let out an adorable yelp as it rained over her face.

“Okay, your turn, Himeko. I’ll wash your hair now.”

I untied Himeko’s hair, which was gathered on top of her head, and soaked her hair all over.

“I really thought you were going to do something awful!” Himeko whined.

“And I never thought you’d target my weak point on purpose.”

“Look, I’m sorry. I just got swept up in the moment. I was so excited about finally getting to take a bath with you again.”

Behind the stream of falling water, Himeko opened her eyes slightly and looked up at me.

Come on! I can’t stay mad at her when she makes such an adorable face.

“Fair enough. Then let’s call it even.”

“Sounds perfect,” she replied cheerfully, tilting her head to indicate that she wanted me to scrub her.

As I set about washing her just as thoroughly as ever, I murmured something

at the top of her head.

“I’m not quite at the stage of getting *that* lonely, but I might be before too long if we keep spending time together.”

I’d spoken so quietly that I thought the sound of running water would have swallowed it up, but then Himeko replied.

“You really mean that?”

Her hearing was way too sharp.

Chapter Three: A Gathering Storm?

At Amanotsuka Academy for Girls, it was customary for the Domestic Arts students to serve lunch to the Societal Arts students. This was one of the most important duties for the girls aiming to become full-fledged maids.

Seraphs and Exousias saw to their own mistresses, of course, but they weren't the only ones. The students with temporary mistresses as part of the room duty rotation heroically brought lunch to the young ladies they were serving and then ate with them.

This was to allow the two types of students more opportunities to meet, which in turn led to more Seraph contracts.

The room rotation changed every month, so now, at the start of June, a lot of girls could be seen frantically waiting on brand-new mistresses. Learning about mistresses' tastes anew caused them no end of fuss. If there was an ingredient their new mistress didn't like, they had to negotiate for less of it to be included. If there were rolled omelets, they had to find out if she wanted it with salt or soy sauce. If there was a salad, they had to order it how she liked, whether that was with sesame dressing or Japanese-style dressing without oil. Did she want green tea or Darjeeling? And so on.

Since I'd become Himeko's Seraph on my very first day at the academy, I was in the fortunate position of not having to keep learning the culinary preference of a new mistress every month. I already knew everything Himeko liked and disliked, so lunch was a breeze for me.

It *should* have been, anyway.

The Kokonoe sisters assaulted us with their next round of questions.

"Look! A new one's arrived!"

"What's her name? What food does she like and dislike?"

"How should I know?" I replied, on the verge of tears.

“What about you, Kirara?”

“Uhm, just the name. Not so sure about her preferences.”

“That’s not good enough!”

“You’re slacking, Kirara!”

Behind us, the twins made a big show of sighing and shaking their heads.

What are they expecting? If we don’t know, we don’t know!

Of course, that wasn’t enough to make the Kokonoe sisters back down.

Kirara and I were being forced to recall the personal details of every young lady arriving to eat in the dining hall. June had spelled the end of our being treated like guests, or maybe the sisters had decided to play the older and wiser role. Either way, they’d made us stand by the doorway and state the names and preferences of every single mistress as they entered one after another. Naturally, we didn’t know most of them, so we were repeatedly being berated for our failings.

One of them stood behind each of us, clinging on with their arms around our bodies to keep us from escaping. From there, they whispered their impossible questions into our ears.

At first, I didn’t know why they’d bother with this. It wasn’t like we needed to know that much about anyone other than our own mistresses. However, after five minutes of drilling I started to have a vague inkling that gnawed at my mind, and after ten minutes a conclusion hit me that sent a shiver down my spine.

Whenever we couldn’t answer, they smoothly reeled off all the information.

“That’s Tokiko Zaizenji, okay?”

“Her family runs the Zaizenji shrine. She doesn’t like meat all that much, but she loves fish.”

“Her favorite fish are tuna and mackerel pike. She’s not so much a fan of yellowtail.”

“To drink, she normally goes for green tea.”

“She’s also fond of coffee while studying, though.”

That didn’t just go for this one example, of course. They had a detailed knowledge of every young lady who stepped into the room and could recall all their likes and dislikes at the drop of a hat.

They really have memorized all of this information, I realized.

When they’d first started up this little game, all I could think about was escaping from the twins’ clutches. However, when it became clear that this was a genuine educational exercise, running away was no longer an option.

As a member of the Sky Salon, and a Seraph serving Himeko, being told I didn’t measure up left me with no choice but to rise to the occasion.

To be fair, the Kokonoe sisters probably did see it as a fun way to torment us as well. From my point of view, though, we’d embarked on a task of such gargantuan proportions that it left me in a cold sweat.

“Now, on to the next one.”

“Ooh, this one’s a bonus round!”

Here comes a new challenger! Well, not exactly. When I turned to face the door, the head of the Paradise Palace, Asuka Nekoyashiki, stared back with a very bitter expression indeed.

The look on her face said that she didn’t know what idiotic nonsense we were doing this time, but whatever it was, we should keep her out of it. She quickened her pace and went right past us.

Lady Asuka’s beautiful forehead sparkled as she passed by. Not to be outdone, her tiara with a design of hearts strung together glittered just as beautifully atop her head alongside her ribbons.

The soft waves of her well-groomed hair extended to her back; her Seraph, Mei, had probably put her heart and soul into styling it. It had an entirely different kind of charm than Himeko’s straight hair.

We definitely couldn’t expect Lady Asuka to rescue us, but this was indeed a bonus round. This was someone we knew for sure.

“It’s Asuka Nekoyashiki.”

“Yes! Correct!”

“Can you name her likes and dislikes, too?”

“Uh...”

This one left me stumped.

Oops. I know her name, of course, but I’ve never learned about her food and drink preferences.

If it had been her fellow Paradise Palace member Erisu Kumashiro, this would have been a piece of cake. Thanks to a convoluted series of events, I knew plenty about *her* tastes.

“Time’s up!”

“Doesn’t look like you can tell us either, Kirara.”

“No,” Kirara admitted, hanging her head in shame.

“You’re not putting enough effort into your daily information gathering!”

“A Seraph is no ordinary maid, you know. It’s the mark of being an *exceptional* maid. If this is the best you can do, it’s just not good enough.”

I groaned pitifully, while Kirara said, “I’m so sorry!”

What could we do but meekly agree?

Kirara knew far more than me about the school and all its workings. She’d done plenty of research about the various ladies. Somehow, it still didn’t measure up. All we could do was stand there in awe at the Kokonoe sisters’ exceptional skill in collecting and retaining all this information.

“Let’s leave it there for today.”

“I’m starving.”

With that, the twins finally set us free.

By the time I grabbed my own lunch and sat down at the table with the other Sky Salon members, I was exhausted. “Sorry I’m late!”

Himeko greeted me with a kind smile. “I know you’ve been working hard.”

Incidentally, I’d served Himeko her lunch beforehand, so by now she’d already

eaten about half of it.

“Sorry for starting ahead of time.” She brought a hand up to her mouth apologetically.

“You don’t need to be sorry at all. It’s my fault for being so clueless.”

I was extremely grateful to have a mistress who showed so much concern for her maid. Not everyone had that.

“I know it must be tough, but it looks like the Ayakas want to spend more time with you, so I want you to stick with them for a while. I think it’ll be worthwhile for you as well.”

“Okay. You got it.”

Even if Himeko *hadn’t* made that request, I was sure I wouldn’t have been in any position to refuse.

Honestly, I was seeing the Kokonoe sisters in a new light. Given how little passion they usually showed for their maid duties, they’d done an unexpectedly thorough job of memorizing all these key facts. Even though they appeared not to care that much about anyone but themselves, they still had respect for all the Societal Arts students and were no doubt being careful to avoid offending any of them.

It must have taken a huge amount of effort too. Maybe they’re secretly more hardworking than they look.

I’d originally assumed they had a bad attitude because of the less-than-deferential way they talked in the Sky Salon, but their work there was impeccable in every other way.

The twins’ way of entertaining guests, serving tea, cleaning up, and even minding the finest details when it came to setting the table—looking back, they did their work as maids almost perfectly. In fact, there was no “almost” about it.

That meant that if I threw away my preconceptions, their abilities were equal or superior to those of the other experienced Seraphs working in the Sky Salon. Being personally tutored by maids of their caliber was actually something to be grateful for.

Besides, it's not like I was doing anything else educational during my lunch break. This is sure to come in handy eventually, so I might as well learn what I can.

"I had them all wrong. If they know so much about all those ladies, the Ayakas must really be giving it their all as maids. And all for Lady Kagura's sake!"

It had taken this long, but I finally felt some admiration toward the sisters. I felt embarrassed admitting it out loud, but those were my true thoughts.

"Hah! What are you talking about?"

Music Ayaka—the older of the two, with music notes on her ribbons—came back with her own lunch. After placing it on the table, she put me into a bear hug from behind.

"Are you sure you haven't misunderstood somehow?" she whispered in my ear.

As she did so, she began fondling around the region of my butt, being careful to ensure Himeko couldn't see.

"Hey!" I said, trying to wriggle away.

The voice in my ear continued. "Giving it our all as maids? Total nonsense. Listen to me: the reason we collect all this data isn't *just* to get a grasp on their personalities and preferences. It's also so we know their weak points! The better you know your enemy, the more you can use their favorite things against them to build up trust, leaving them open to manipulation. This wealth of information lets us twist things to our will. We do it all for ourselves. The reason we're teaching you two our knowledge is partly to kill time and partly to experiment on you cute little newbies. We're trying to see how differently things turn out if people like you try to make use of the same information we have."

"Oh," I replied nervously.

She giggled. "Never forget that we have every student, Societal Arts or Domestic Arts, right in the palm of our hands."

That shows me for finally looking up to them.

Well, by their nature, the twins didn't fit neatly into the way the academy was set up, so this did feel entirely in character for them.

"You'd better catch up with us fast, Misaki. Otherwise, you'll only fall deeper and deeper into our clutches."

Saying that, Music Ayaka stroked my bottom again.

"I'll do my best! I mean that!"

Smiling, I lightly pinched the backs of the Kokonoe sisters' hands and heaved a tiny sigh.



A figure approached the Sky Salon members' table.

"I know you're eating, but do you mind if I join you?"

This phrasing was probably just Lady Angelica being extra polite. By now, we'd more or less finished eating lunch and were enjoying a modest post-lunch tea party.

Yes, the new arrival was none other than Lady Angelica. Her beautiful blonde hair rustled when she moved her head even a little. She had eyes of the same golden color with narrow, slit-like pupils. When those eyes looked my way, I always found myself dazed, like I was a captive being drawn toward her.



On her head, she wore a hairband decorated with crosses and a tiara with an image of a bat worked into it, which sat at an angle.

Those deep, golden eyes met my gaze. My back straightened as if it were a conditioned reflex.

Only days ago, I'd found out Lady Angelica's true identity. I still struggled to believe it, but I'd seen that she was a vampire. Since then, I'd found myself trying to keep some distance from her. I didn't know if it was fear or a deep subconscious urge to avoid involving myself with her as much as possible, but for better or worse, I'd naturally started avoiding her.

"Good day, Lady Angelica," came the mild-mannered response from Kagura Mikage, the head of the Sky Salon. "By all means. We don't mind at all."

The president of the student council had personally come to chat. It would be rude not to give her the welcome she deserved, even if we were in the middle of our own conversation.

Lady Kagura casually raised her hand, apparently to signal the Kokonoe sisters, but after a moment's thought she instead said, "Kirara, prepare a place for her."

"Yes, milady!" Kirara replied, standing up with delight.

Recently, Lady Kagura had started giving Kirara orders quite a lot. It looked like she'd started trusting in her as a Seraph.

"Oh, there's no need for all that. There's just been a slight change of plans, so I came here to tell Himeko." She put her hands on Kirara's shoulders and said, "My apologies!" before sitting down.

The broad smile Kirara directed at Lady Angelica was a rare sight on her face. "Please don't apologize. I'm grateful for your kindness!"

She'd become pretty used to how to behave in these situations.

After smiling back at Kirara, Lady Angelica started talking to Himeko.

"It's about that exchange student. Apparently she'll be coming here a little sooner than expected."

“Oh, really?”

“I want to go over the plans again, so can you meet me in conference room one after school today?”

“Sure, no problem.”

“And when you do...” she began, glancing my way for some reason.

I don't like where this is going!

“I'd love for you to bring Misaki along with you.”

I knew it! I thought, grimacing.

Himeko tilted her head in confusion. “That's unusual.”

“I know, but it's related to the exchange student. I want to ask a thing or two about Misaki's friend, you see.”

Realization dawned on me as to what Lady Angelica was talking about. The friend she was referring to was Sara, and the exchange student was undoubtedly the mistress Sara had told me about.

“I certainly don't mind bringing Misaki along. Are you all right with that, though, Misaki?”

She didn't even need to check, really. If Himeko told me to go with her, the answer was an instant, obvious yes.

“Of course.”

“Glad to hear it,” Lady Angelica replied. Then, with a teasing smile, she turned to Lady Kagura. “It might end up involving you as well, Kagura, but I'm afraid I have to keep it a secret for now. Teehee!”

That was apparently enough for Lady Kagura to sense a deeper meaning behind her words. Her expression grew more serious. “You've made me *really* curious, but very well. I'll eagerly await the day you can tell me.”

“That's all I came here to say. Goodbye for now!”

Lady Angelica gracefully lifted her skirt a touch and bowed her head, then departed.



As soon as we were given the signal to leave class, I grabbed my shoes and told Kirara, “I have to go to a meeting with Lady Himeko today, so I’ll head to the Sky Salon after that.”

“Got it. I don’t know what they need you for, but if it’s something you can talk to me about, let me know later, okay?”

“Will do.”

Then I sped out of the classroom.

“Misaki, be sensible in the hallway.”

“Sorry, Ms. Hiyori!”

The teacher had left the classroom just before me and chided me as soon as she saw me running. I hurriedly bowed my head in apology and switched to a fast walk.

At my new, slightly more restrained pace, I headed for Himeko’s classroom. Normally I waited for her arrival at the Sky Salon, but today I thought it would be nice to go to her classroom and greet her there.

That meant getting a move on. Whatever happened, I was determined to arrive before Himeko left the room and be there waiting with a smile.

I walked along the fairly long passageway that stretched across the courtyard and made for the building with the Societal Arts students’ classrooms. As soon as I went inside, I found myself letting out a cry of astonishment and coming to a halt.

The classroom building we used was already so stunningly beautiful that I couldn’t believe it was part of a school, but the Societal Arts students’ building went a step beyond that. Words like “opulent” and “extravagant” were all that did it justice.

All over the hallway, there were large vases that looked so expensive, I’d probably have balked if I heard how much they’d cost. Brightly colored flowers stood proudly inside each one.

The walls were not mere coated concrete, but decorated from top to bottom

with elaborate tiles. Even the handrails on the stairs were intricately carved, giving the ambiance of a castle or a palace.

Everything from floor to ceiling was markedly different compared to the Domestic Arts building.

This is too much.

I froze, momentarily afraid to even take another step. This was even more overwhelming than when I'd visited the classrooms of upperclassmen in the Domestic Arts program.

In fact, I was more than just overwhelmed. I genuinely felt worried that I wasn't supposed to be walking these grand halls. It was like I was out of place, having strayed into another world where I didn't belong.

However, if I didn't get myself moving, I wouldn't be able to meet Himeko outside her classroom.

Just as I let out a timid groan, someone spoke to me.

"Can I help you at all? Oh, it's you, Misaki. What are you doing standing around here?"

"Oh, uh, I'm fine."

I didn't recognize the voice, but I was getting used to people knowing me even if I didn't know them. I slowly turned around.

The girl I saw there was a Domestic Arts student. From the color of her ribbon, I could tell she was a second year. Her mid-length hair hung in loose curls, and her eyes were lively and filled with curiosity. A gentle smile warmed her lips. Even her posture was just as flawless as I'd come to expect from the older maids. I found myself gazing in admiration.

On her chest, the golden badge that marked her as a Seraph shone brightly. Her maid uniform wasn't the ordinary kind either; it had some extra decorative touches. In other words, she belonged to a salon, and it was their special attire.

Incidentally, it was typical for Domestic Arts students to wear their regular school uniforms for morning classes, then don aprons to serve lunch to their mistresses and stay in them for the whole afternoon. If there was a subject in

the morning that required being dressed as a maid, it was also common to just stay like that for the rest of the day.

In any case, even if I didn't know this girl, it was a relief for an experienced Seraph to come and talk to me.

"Uhm, actually this place is so incredible, I'm wondering if it's really okay for me to be here."

When I said that, the second-year girl replied, "Yeah, I can understand the feeling. Everyone gets like that the first time. But *you* certainly don't have to be nervous, Misaki. In fact, Domestic Arts students are always coming in here if they have errands to run. You don't need anyone's permission."

She gave me an affable clap on the shoulder.

"Of course, good manners are important. You shouldn't do anything rude. However, for the young ladies, it's a normal, everyday sight to have Domestic Arts students around, so no one'll notice. Well, they might notice you a little more than the others, but the point is, the Societal Arts students won't be at all bothered by you walking through their classroom building."

"For sure?"

"Definitely. In fact, a lot of maids come to greet their mistresses around this time, so you might actually stand out more if you keep hanging around here. See?"

I looked where she pointed. While I'd been frozen in fear, a plethora of students in maid outfits had begun crisscrossing the magnificent hallway. Even as we spoke, a steady stream of Domestic Arts students was entering behind me and going past.

And, if I really thought about it, a maid's uniform actually began to feel really fitting for this scene. Why *wouldn't* such a surreal and sumptuous place have maids everywhere you looked? It was only natural.

"I guess it's normal after all."

All my tension vanished. There was no need for it.

"Misaki, have you never been to the Societal Arts building before?" the girl

asked, surprised.

“I’m afraid not. This is my first time.”

There was an element of the building being a little daunting, but mainly it was just that the older Seraphs at the Sky Salon tended to meet their mistresses there, so I’d just followed their lead. Not to mention that I had to get to the salon early to clean and get things ready for Himeko’s arrival, so I really didn’t have time to go to her classroom anyway.

I didn’t know how they did things in other salons, but in the Sky Salon at least, going to welcome the mistress outside her classroom wasn’t the done thing.

“All right, then. I’ll be your guide, if you like.”

“You will? Thank you so much!”

This Seraph I don’t even know is being so nice to me. Maybe being recognized everywhere I go isn’t so bad after all.

“I don’t mind one bit. We’re headed the same way, after all.”

“Really?”

“Yup. My mistress is in Lady Himeko’s class,” she said proudly.

“That’s a happy coincidence.”

“It also means I’m always hearing about Lady Himeko. Ever since she made you her Seraph, she’s been way more cheerful and talkative than she used to be, apparently. She’s also been joining in with the others bragging about their Seraphs.”

“Wow.”

So that’s what Himeko gets up to in her classroom.

“Anyway, while we’re chatting here, time’s marching on. Let’s get moving.”

“Okay. Erm, what’s your name, by the way?”

After all her help, it felt rude to not even know who she was. Plus, I’d inevitably end up telling Himeko later that someone was friendly enough to show me the way, and if I couldn’t even say who it was, she’d probably wonder what was wrong with me.

I didn't think I'd ever be on the Kokonoe twins' level, but it couldn't hurt to start learning more information about the other people on campus.

If her mistress really is close to Himeko, though, maybe she's offended that I didn't know her name. Maybe it would have been better to secretly ask someone else afterward. It'll be so embarrassing if I've met her before and forgotten.

Oh, this is why they have the "debut" system, right? If I'd memorized all the salon members I met that day, maybe I wouldn't be in this situation. Boy, personal data is more crucial here than I expected!

"My name is Mari Sakuchi. You can call me Marie."

"Marie, was it?"

It looked like Mari—or Marie, rather—wasn't particularly bothered by my question, at least. As she told me her name, she put a mischievous finger up to her lips.



During my first foray into the Societal Arts classroom building, I saw a surprising phenomenon.

The first-year students' floor wasn't too crowded, so it didn't stand out all that much, but when we went up to the second-years' floor, it hit me right away. Students in maid uniforms were all standing neatly in a line by the window near the entrance to every classroom.

As I followed Marie, I quietly asked a question from behind. "What are those girls doing?"

"Oh, they're waiting at the stage door."

"Like at a theater?"

"Exactly. They stand to the side and wait for their mistresses to leave the classroom."

"Really? They don't go and ask someone to tell their mistress they've arrived?"

When we'd gone to see Mei, Aoi had asked a nearby student to get her. I was thinking we could do the same.

Apparently not, though. "Nobody really does that. If our mistresses call us here on a specific errand, we go in through the back door and make a beeline for their desk."

"Oh, I see. There's a back door for that, huh."

"There's particular etiquette for that as well, of course. If the back door is closed, you knock twice before opening it. Then, even if there's no one nearby, you politely announce yourself and bow before stepping into the classroom. Then you go straight to your mistress without looking around at anyone else."

"I didn't know about all these rules."

Marie was kind enough to give a visual demonstration of how to do it. Now that she'd explained it, it did seem silly to expect the Societal Arts students to play messenger for us.

"Well, they're sort of like house rules. You won't learn about them in class. The reason you haven't been taught is probably because you've never been called here by your mistress before. If the time came, I'm sure she'd have told you all about them."

"But if they can go in through the back door, why is everyone waiting out in the hallway?"

Couldn't they just go straight in, I wondered?

"Simple. The Societal Arts students haven't finished homeroom yet, so waiting's the only option."

"Huh? Really?"

Now that I looked around again, every single student out here was from the Domestic Arts program. I couldn't see a single one of the ladies.

"Since there are always students who come here to greet their mistresses, the Societal Arts students' schedule runs about ten minutes behind ours."

"Wow, I had no idea."

It makes sense, though. That's why Himeko always arrives later than me to the Sky Salon. It's not that she's intentionally taking her time.

"There are also a few rules to keep in mind while greeting your mistress. Oh, Lady Himeko's class is over here, by the way." She looked up at the sign.

"Ah, so it is."

There were already a few students waiting outside Himeko's classroom. With a quick nod to them, Marie took up her place beside them. I followed suit and stood next to her.

"It's nothing too complicated," she continued. "You line up by the window near the entrance. That's to avoid getting in anyone's way if they're trying to walk past. Also, everyone lines up in the order they arrived. Once you're there, you stand up straight and fold your hands neatly in front of your lower body while facing straight ahead. When homeroom ends, nod politely at the teacher and students as they come out. When your mistress comes out, bow deeply and let her know you're there, then walk over to her side to say hello properly once you're sure it won't block anyone's path. That's the general idea."

"Got it."

Were these all unwritten rules as well? Without Marie to teach me, I'd probably have bulldozed right through them.

"What you do after that depends on what you've arranged with your mistress, but first you might want to say she must be tired after all that work, so you'll gladly hold her bag for her. Most ladies won't make you hold their bag, but it's still polite to offer."

"Understandable." I nodded again.

"Is Lady Himeko strict about that kind of thing?"

"No," I replied quickly. I was about to underline just how little she minded, but I paused to think first.

Well, I suppose she probably doesn't want a reputation of being a really tough mistress.

"Lady Himeko's very kind. She never really says anything mean."

“That’s great to hear. My mistress is a real stickler for perfect manners. She’s always nitpicking how I talk.”

Marie lifted her hands up slightly and sighed as if to say she was sick and tired of it.

I chuckled. She didn’t look like she was actually annoyed by it; it was the kind of complaint you see from someone who’s forged a really good master-servant relationship. It was honestly quite amusing.

“I think the ladies will be out soon. We passed a lot of time while chatting.”

Marie adopted a focused expression and stood perfectly straight. Folding her arms in front of her, she was so still that she looked like a beautiful painting.

That must really come with experience. Even though she’s been showing me her more fun, casual side, when the time comes, she can switch to full-on maid mode.

Imitating Marie, I stood with more precise posture than usual and waited for Himeko to arrive.

Not long afterward, the bell rang, and I could hear a lot of activity in the classroom. It sounded like homeroom had ended. This was followed by the noises that came with bags being placed on desks, things being tidied away, and smatterings of conversation.

I wonder when Himeko will come out? Will she be surprised to see me waiting for her? She won’t just play it off like it’s nothing, right? I mean, I doubt she’d do that.

As I was thinking that, the door quietly opened.

The person who came out first appeared to be the homeroom teacher. She wore a tight skirt and a floral blouse. With a scarf wrapped around her neck, she looked pretty stylish. Her brown hair hung down to her back in pretty curls. Overall, she looked completely the opposite of the more understated Ms. Hiyori.

She was obviously used to seeing students waiting outside her classroom, so almost as quickly as we all nodded at her, she returned the greeting. It looked

like she was going back into the classroom after that, but she took three steps before suddenly backtracking. In an instant, all the students waiting, not just me, grew tense and trembled.

“My oh my, I thought I saw an unfamiliar face. You’re Misaki, if I’m not mistaken.”

Apparently, I was the reason she’d come back.

“Yes, erm, that’s me.”

She’s so close. She’s staring at me from right in front of my face.

Reflexively, I looked away.

“I see, I see. I’d been so hoping to see the one Himeko picked as her Seraph.”

She scrutinized me from every angle, not holding back at all.

“You definitely don’t seem like the meek, obedient type. You had an arrangement before you even joined the school, though, right?”

“Erm, yes. Exactly.”

I’d almost forgotten, but that was our story for the world at large.

“Well, well, well.”

She looked at me, somehow puzzled. *Is there something weird about me? I’m pretty sure it hasn’t been found out that my contract’s only a temporary arrangement.*

Even so, I was shaking inside.

Suddenly, the teacher grabbed hold of my skirt and lifted it up.

“Huh?! What are you doing?”

In a panic, I pushed my skirt down with both hands.

“I heard you and Himeko went shopping for underwear together, you see. I just wanted to know if that’s what you had on today.”

“What?! I don’t get it! I don’t get it at all!”

Admittedly, I *was* wearing that expensive lingerie right now, but that didn’t mean I wanted to show other people. *The only one I’m happy to show is*

Himeko!

When I frantically objected, the teacher let go.

“Hahaha, I just wanted to check, that’s all. I wanted to see what kind of girl Himeko chose.”

Smiling, she clapped me on the shoulder.

“A maid who was meek and obedient and nothing else wouldn’t have been enough, I guess.”

She flashed a smile, as if she’d privately come to some satisfying conclusion.

“Sorry for surprising you. Actually, I’m grateful to you as well, Misaki.”

“To me? How come?”

“I taught Himeko in her first year as well, but since she got you as a Seraph, she’s become visibly more cheerful and much easier to teach.”

“Really? She has?”

“Think about it. If one of the students is also the deputy chairman, even I have to be on my guard, right? It also hasn’t been out of character for her to come across as rather tense, so I naturally ended up handling her with caution. These days, though, it’s fine to treat her like a normal student. That’s a huge help. Who knew getting a single Seraph would make such a big difference?”

Suddenly, a voice I knew well came from behind the teacher.

“Excuse me.”

That crystal clear voice was one I’d grown very familiar with. Without even looking, I knew right away that it was Himeko.

Having noticed her as well, the teacher whipped around in a flash.

“Oh, Himeko. I believe you have a meeting with the student council president today, don’t you?”

“Yes, that’s right. Ms. Hanamori, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t put strange ideas in my Seraph’s head. Actually, the bigger question is why Misaki’s here in the first place.”

So the teacher's name is Ms. Hanamori.

"I thought I'd surprise you."

"What am I going to do with you?" Himeko replied. Despite her words, she was clearly happy that I'd come. "For a moment I thought I saw a girl who resembled you, but then when I looked properly, it really was you. If you were trying to surprise me, you definitely succeeded!"

As she spoke, she wrapped an arm around me and gently drew me closer. I didn't try to resist, and soon I was in her embrace, positioned comfortably against her chest. I had the feeling she was trying to save me from Ms. Hanamori's evil clutches.

Suddenly, a series of high-pitched squeals erupted nearby; the Domestic Arts students just couldn't help reacting to this sight. They soon covered their mouths and fell quiet again, but their gazes remained fixed on us. *I forget how much attention Himeko always gets!*

Himeko took one of my pigtails in her hand and softly stroked it. "I haven't even taught you the rules you need to follow here, and you still followed them perfectly. I'm impressed. Clearly you've been studying up."

I had an urge to just give in and enjoy the relaxed sensation for a while, but then I remembered where I was and snapped back to reality. "No, actually it was Marie here. She taught me everything."

Marie promptly spread her skirt out wide to deliver a deep curtsy. "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Mari Sakuchi. My mistress was kind enough to grant me the nickname of Marie, so please feel free to call me that."

"Oh, so it was you, Marie. This is the first time we've ever spoken directly, but I know all about you, of course. I see you here all the time. You're Sari Tsuyuki's Seraph, aren't you?"

"I'm honored by the fact that you know who I am, milady. That's right, I'm the Seraph of Lady Rosalie."

"Rosalie," Himeko murmured, slightly perplexed. It looked like this was the first time she'd ever heard the name. "Right, that must be what you call Sari."

Sari Tsuyuki is Rosalie, and Mari is Marie. I'm starting to guess what kind of salon Marie might belong to.

All of a sudden, a lone young lady appeared from the classroom, dashing out like the wind. "Marie, stop, please! I've told you not to call me that outside of the Salon!" With lightning reflexes, she put both hands over Marie's mouth. Holding them there, she put on a smile. "My apologies, Lady Himeko. Mari is always blurting out such silly things."

With her beautiful, lustrous black hair, the lady contrasted greatly with Marie. Apart from a one-sided crown braid, it was perfectly straight and hung to her shoulders. Looking at her bright-red, bashful face, I didn't see the strictness Marie had described at all. Instead, she seemed like a sweet and sensitive mistress. Atop her head was a glimmering tiara adorned with pink gemstones in a rose motif.

She must be the head of a salon, then.

"Mmph!"

Marie tried to object, but Lady Sari kept her hands pressed so over her mouth that whatever she was trying to say, I couldn't make it out.

With a hint of a smile, Himeko nodded. "I think it's fine. You've just become the head of a salon, haven't you, Rosalie? Using a new name makes sense as a way to highlight your salon's unique flavor. It's nothing to feel awkward about."

"Well, no, I suppose not. I'm just not used to it yet. It's still kind of embarrassing."

Her cheeks turning even redder, Lady Sari—err, Lady Rosalie—started poking Marie in the shoulder reproachfully. Now that the hands blocking her mouth were out of the way, Marie gasped for breath.

"I agree, Lady Rosalie," Marie added. "You chose these names, so we should start using them with each other more often. No need to be shy!"

For good measure, she reeled off as many words of encouragement as she could, always repeating the name. "I think your nickname is so cute, Lady Rosalie!" and "The name Lady Rosalie really suits you!" and "I find it an honor to call you Lady Rosalie!" gushed forth relentlessly.



Lady Rosalie! ~~~

Stop it, please!
Not so loud!

???

Finally, Lady Rosalie buried her face in her hands and sank to the floor. “All right. I get it. I’ll get used to being called Rosalie, so please, just let me be for now.”

“Certainly, milady.” Marie nodded in satisfaction.

Squeezing Marie’s hand tightly, Lady Rosalie raised her crimson face. “Lady Himeko, I’m sorry about all this. My Seraph’s not a bad maid, but she doesn’t always know how to tailor her behavior to the situation. I’ll give her a proper talking-to later, so please forgive us.”

“No need to apologize. To me, she looks like a Seraph who really cares about her mistress.”

Hearing this, Lady Rosalie mustered a half-smile. “You don’t have to say that, but it still makes me happy. In any case, we’ll be going now. See you tomorrow.”

“Yes, goodbye.”

With that, Lady Rosalie and Marie retreated swiftly like an ebbing tide, and soon they were gone.

Ms. Hanamori, who had quietly watched this exchange, lightly clapped both Himeko and me on the shoulder. “It looks like some beautiful new friendships are being made. Yes, that’s just how student life should be. Anyway, I’m heading to the staff room now. Take care!”

As she left, Himeko heaved a small sigh and called behind her, “Remember what I said about not putting any funny ideas in Misaki’s head!”



When we entered conference room one, we found that Lady Angelica had arrived before us and had already gotten everything set up. Although it seemed plain at first glance, as you’d expect from a conference room, looking closely, it had a splendor well beyond the norm. The wall tiles and the engraving on the pillars really stood out. Even the table and chairs appeared to come from a high-class brand.

“Good afternoon. Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

Lady Angelica had been gazing out the window. She turned around and welcomed us with a warm smile.

A worry ran through my head. *Is daylight safe for her?* It was a needless thought, of course. She was clearly fine, or she wouldn't have been hanging around during the day like this.

The scent of early summer floated on the breeze that entered through the half-opened window, tickling my nose. On the table sat binders that I assumed were filled with relevant documents, along with everything that would be needed for serving tea.

"Please, take a seat. I'll make the tea, so feel free to relax."

Then Lady Angelica set about making the tea herself.

"I'll do it!" I declared in a panic, attempting to take the teapot off her hands.

She gently prevented me from doing so. "It's all right. You made such delicious tea for me the other day, so today I want to return the favor."

"But you shouldn't have to do that!"

She giggled. "Just watch."

While speaking, she briskly continued with the preparations. Her manner looked very experienced indeed.

"I've lived on my own for a long time. Don't worry, I'm more than capable."

Thinking about it, I'd never seen Lady Angelica with a Seraph or heard anything about her having one.

"I suppose I've never found someone I had the right affinity for," she explained with a touch of melancholy. "There haven't been any students who have really taken my fancy, and people tend to shy away from me a bit, so no one has actively approached me."

If you were to ask me, I'd have said this was because of the powerful aura she exuded. She was absolutely beautiful to gaze at from a distance, which made you want to get a closer look, but actually getting close left you so dazzled that you had to look away.

Now that I knew who, or what, Lady Angelica really was—an undead being rather than a human—it all made sense. To people who had no idea, though, she seemed to have the inaccessible air of a celebrity, and that was enough.

“On the plus side, it’s made me a bit of a whiz when it comes to making tea.”

The tea she served left me stunned at the delicate balance of bitterness and astringency. It was incredibly delicious.

“This is amazing,” I told her. “Way better than mine.”

“No, don’t be silly. I definitely think the tea you served me tasted much nicer. It does just come down to feelings, but seeing someone take great pains to prepare something for me always makes my mouth water.” She looked at me with a smile, then turned to Himeko. “You agree, don’t you? When Misaki does something for you, no matter how small or trivial, it tantalizes your taste buds and makes you really happy, right?”

“Oh. Yes, absolutely!”

Himeko appeared slightly confused at being brought into it so suddenly, but she still gave a heartening reply. “Anyway, that’s enough about the tea. Why don’t we move on to the main topic?”

Clearly hoping to avoid being toyed with any longer, Himeko picked up one of the binders.

“Certainly,” Lady Angelica replied with a chuckle, looking satisfied.

She opened another of the binders. One had been provided for me, too, so I peeked inside. There I found a collection of pages filled with information about the young lady who was transferring to the school. It was a full personal profile in the style of a resume.

This must be Sara’s mistress.

The pages had been photocopied so it was all in black and white, but a photo of her face had been included. When I saw it, I reflexively let out a gasp of wonder. It was like cuteness and beauty were in perfect coexistence. She was on the cusp of turning from a girl into a grown woman, but with plenty of youthfulness still there. Yes, that was the impression this photo gave me.

She had defined features, with large eyes that showed a strength of will and a straight nose. Her long pigtails, tied with cherry-blossom-patterned ribbons, hung from just above her ears.

“This is Sakura, the one who’s transferring to Amanotsuka Academy. Himeko, this is the first time you’ve seen what she looks like, right?”

“Yes, I’ve only heard her name before. She looks really cute.”

“I quite agree. She’s an incredibly cute girl.” Somehow, Lady Angelica’s reply sounded laden with implications.

“Anyway, there are no problems as such. I just wanted to touch base with you because her transfer date has been moved up a little and we finally have all the official documents. Misaki, could you look through those as well, please?”

“Erm, yes! Sure thing!”

I felt sort of like I was prying, but if she’d told me to look, it had to be okay. Plus, my binder was thinner than Himeko’s, so I’d probably only been given the parts I was allowed to see.

“Well? Did anything stand out to either of you?”

What kind of a question is that? I mean, I can’t say that absolutely nothing stood out.

I was still busy pondering whether I should really say it or not when Himeko jumped in first.

“Ah, I see. Her arrival might cause a bit of a storm at the academy.”

“So you agree, then. I thought you might.”

“Yes,” Himeko replied vaguely.

I didn’t know what would cause a storm or how, but both of them had clearly reached the same conclusion.

“How about you, Misaki?”

Here goes. If they’ve both agreed on that, I guess it doesn’t matter what I say.

“Well, mostly I was thinking that Lady Asuka—or actually Mei, really—might want to invite her to join the Paradise Palace.”

To put it bluntly, Lady Sakura was not a tall young lady. If this data was still accurate, she was four foot seven, which made her a perfect candidate to join Lady Asuka and Mei's salon. Combining that with her sweet appearance, Mei would want to snap her right up for sure.

"Heh, exactly. Rude as it may be to say it, Sakura is rather short, so Mei is certain to approach her. And don't you think Kagura might do the same?"

"Huh?"

It seemed they were both in agreement that Lady Kagura would ask Lady Sakura to join the Sky Salon too.

"Sakura's family runs a company that operates a specialized streaming service. They broadcast all kinds of programs that can be viewed not only within the UK, but across the world thanks to the power of the internet. That makes them quite influential, so Kagura would probably see her as an important connection to make."

Adding to Lady Angelica's explanation, Himeko said, "Advertising and publicity are essential to Kagura's plans, after all. If she can get to know TV stations or digital broadcast companies, it's only beneficial for her."

"Right, I see," I replied.

In the future, Lady Kagura was planning to start her own sporting goods manufacturer. She intended to expand by way of an exclusive promotional contract with Lady Minako. To get her business on the right track, getting her name out there had to be priority number one. It sounded like that was the reason she'd invite Lady Sakura to join.

"So it'll be a battle between Lady Kagura and Lady Asuka, just like when we had the Salon Struggle."

"Essentially, yes," Lady Angelica said, not quite denying it. "The problem is, there's a mechanism for taking over a salon, but not for stealing an individual member."

"Huh?"

"Until now, even when someone was asked to join more than one salon, it's

never really come to blows. Salons tend to have a particular atmosphere that people either fit into or don't, so even if someone got several invitations, things always seemed to work out. Kagura's salon is a little different from the others, however. She's collected a lot of people with particular goals in mind. Her personnel, you might say. Of course, everyone gets along really well, so the element of everyone fitting in is still there, but her highest priority is whether the members are the staff that Kagura wants to have."

"Meanwhile," she continued, "the Paradise Palace has a clear membership criterion, and Mei will do all she can to seek out those who meet it and offer them a place. I don't think either of them will back down. That means words alone won't bring the matter to a close, and the fight could be dragged out for quite a long time."

"Oh," I replied nervously. "I see, yes."

It sounded like this could cause quite a problem. The two salon leaders didn't get along too well. They were pretty much like oil and water. It hardly helped that Lady Kagura had the Kokonoe sisters there fanning the flames with their treatment of Lady Asuka, so they were unlikely to suddenly start getting along.

Is it really that bad, though?

"The reason the Paradise Palace wants Lady Sakura is more because of Mei's insistence, right?"

"Yes, true," Lady Angelica agreed. It sounded like Mei's love of petite young ladies was well known.

"So if you can get Lady Asuka to talk Mei out of it now, maybe there's still time."

"That would be ideal, but if Asuka knows Kagura wants her too, she won't just hand her over."

"Oh. They really don't like each other, do they?"

"It's less that and more that Asuka has a fierce sense of rivalry. Part of it goes back to the fact that Asuka's family business is competing for market share with one of the Mikage Group's companies, so they've had an adversarial relationship with Kagura's family for many, many years."

“Gosh.” *So it’s pretty deep-rooted, then.*

“That’s where things stand. We need to find a solution now, while there’s time. Actually, there’s one other problem.”

Himeko arched her eyebrows. “There’s more?”

“This came as a real surprise to me, honestly, but there’s actually another salon vying for Sakura as well.”

“Another one?” I murmured.

Well, she’s an international student, really beautiful, and from a prestigious family. I guess no surprise that the salons are eager to bring her into the fold.

However, Himeko wasn’t so convinced.

“Is this confirmed information?” she asked with an unexpectedly serious expression.

“Yes. The head of the salon in question asked me directly when Sakura would be arriving.”

“But her arrival hasn’t even been publicly announced, has it?”

“No. We wouldn’t have informed the wider student population when her arrival date wasn’t set in stone and none of the preparations had been made yet. I quietly checked with the teachers and none of them had told anyone about it.”

There was something foreboding about this. An unsolvable mystery? Or a leak somewhere that needed to be plugged?

“The fact that Sakura is coming isn’t a secret in itself, so it’s possible this salon leader heard some other way—perhaps someone Sakura knows here at school. However, according to my information network, this salon leader isn’t connected to Sakura in such a way.”

“Who is the salon leader?” Himeko asked.

Lady Angelica waited a moment before answering. “Sari Tsuyuki.”

“What?” Himeko replied, shocked. “It’s Sari? As in Rosalie?”

I could understand her surprise. This wasn’t a name I’d expected to hear

either.

“Yes, Rosalie is the name she uses inside the salon. The salon is called the Gloriana Guesthouse, and it was set up at the start of this school year with a motif of British traditionalism. Based on the salon’s theme, it’s not at all surprising that they’d want Sakura to join. The question is where on earth she found out the information.”

“That *is* quite concerning.”

Both Lady Angelica and Lady Himeko were lost in thought for a moment. It sounded like Himeko hadn’t talked to Lady Rosalie about the new student either.

“Anyway, that’s where Misaki comes in.” Lady Angelica looked at me with a meaningful gaze.

“Me?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t ask anything too taxing of you. I just want you to talk to Sara a little.”

“You do?”

“Yes. You’re her friend, so you might have heard already, but when Sara lived in Britain, she used to serve Sakura.”

“Oh!” I replied awkwardly. “I had no idea!”

Since Himeko was there, Lady Angelica had spoken as if this might be the first I’d ever heard about Lady Sakura. Himeko didn’t know the full details of what had happened with the ghost scare. If I didn’t maintain the facade, she’d find out that I’d broken the rules and gone wandering around at night. *I’ll have to thank Lady Angelica later.*

“Related to what we just discussed, I’d like to know if Sara’s spoken about Sakura to anyone else. It would also be great if you could get some more specific information about Sakura herself.”

“What kind of information?”

“Hmm, let’s see. I mostly want to find out about her personality, I suppose. If she’s going to get caught up in a whirlwind of drama the moment she arrives in

Japan, it would be great to know how she'll react to that. If she will be amused by it and accepts the system we have here, that will be fine, but if not, we might need to use our influence on the competing salons."

"I see."

Is Lady Angelica always doing this—looking at the school as a whole and giving out orders to help things run smoothly? Even though she's a vampire, there's no denying she's working hard for the school's benefit. She's definitely a great student council president.

"I was surprised that Rosalie knew, but I don't think she'll cause a big problem. For now, let's just wait for Misaki to report back."

"Yes, that sounds like a good idea."

Both ladies closed their binders, indicating that the topic of Sakura was closed.

"Misaki, that reminds me," said Lady Angelica.

"Yes?"

"Could you tell Sara the date Sakura will be arriving?"

"Are you sure that's all right?"

"Definitely. She'll probably hear about it in a letter or some such anyway, but why don't we tell her first and surprise her?" A mischievous smile appeared on her face. She gave a wink. "She'll be coming on the first of July. That'll be when she moves into her dorm room, then she'll start attending classes the next day."

"Got it. Sara's going to be really happy. I just know it."

"Yes, it'll be a big load off her mind."

This meant it was a little over two weeks until Lady Sakura would be here. Hearing that would definitely calm Sara's mind and finally start putting the ghost business to rest once and for all.

"Now, I have one more topic to bring up."

Himeko tilted her head. "Oh, really? What is it?"

Clearly, Himeko hadn't been aware that there was anything else.

“Yes. It’s almost time for the Little Princess to be chosen.”

“Ah, it is around that time of year, isn’t it?”

Lady Angelica had used a term that wasn’t familiar to me. I wondered how many more concepts there were specific to this school outside of Seraphs and Exousias.

“This may be a little unorthodox,” Lady Angelica said, “but I think Misaki would be a good candidate.”

“Misaki? I see.”

Wait! Hold on a minute!

“Yes. Since she became your Seraph, she’s received a lot of attention. I don’t think it would be odd for her to be given the title.”

“Hey, could you please slow down?” I interjected in a panic. A voice inside had me whispered—no, *screamed* that if I didn’t say something, it could spell disaster. “What is this ‘Little Princess’ thing, anyway?”

Even without asking, I had a feeling it would be nothing but trouble.

“The title of Little Princess is essentially an award given to a first-year student.”

“What kind of award?”

“So, I’m sure you’ve seen the two girls sitting next to me when I have tea in the courtyard.”

I thought back to the people I always saw there next to Lady Angelica. One was a pale-skinned, dreamy-looking girl who seemed the very definition of a lady, while the other was lively and came across like a dependable older sister.

“Those two have the titles of Princess and Knight. The Princess is chosen every year to serve as a role model for the other students, while the Knight is an escort chosen by the Princess. The pair are involved in various school events.”

“We have a head maid in our class, which is kind of similar. It sounds like the Princess might be the Societal Arts version of that, kind of.”

“It’s not far off. And the *Little* Princess is essentially a Princess in the making—

in theory, at least. Recently it's been a title awarded to the first-year student who stands out the most. The Little Princess hardly ever gets chosen to be the Princess, so it's not treated as too important a title."

This is too much. Giving that title to someone from the Domestic Arts program sounds more than a little unorthodox. It would make me stick out like a sore thumb!

"I get the feeling it's more than just a title. You don't just get the award and then go on your way, do you?"

Lady Angelica responded with a devilish chuckle. "You're a sharp one, Misaki. Whoever's awarded the title of Little Princess is a candidate to be the next Princess, even if that's unlikely in practice, so you act as the Princess's assistant."

"But I can't do that. It's too big a responsibility!"

"Really?" Himeko said. "I think you'd be good at it."

Though she was apparently enthusiastic about the idea and tried to encourage me, she didn't quite get it.

"Listen, Himeko. If I take on a huge role like that, I'll have way less time to take care of you. You realize that, right?"

Her face darkened. It looked like she hadn't thought of that until I pointed it out. "Lady Angelica, I'm terribly sorry, but Misaki will have to decline. Perhaps it would be better to choose from among the Societal Arts students as usual."

She'd done a full 180 in the space of seconds.

Sighing, Lady Angelica replied, "Fair enough. I thought it might be good to give to Misaki. It would be a breath of fresh air at the academy. It's not every day that someone of the caliber to become Himeko's Seraph turns up."

"I see what you mean, but it's still a no." She wrapped an arm around me, pulling me in close as if to say she'd never let me go.



Thank goodness. Himeko's firmly against it.

“Understood. I thought I'd float the idea, but forget I said anything. That said, if you ever change your mind, Misaki, we can definitely give you the title, even if it means a change to the system.”

I let out a reluctant grunt and held up my arms in an X shape to emphasize that it was *never* going to happen.

I didn't know if she was amused by this gesture or if she just found it ridiculous, but either way, Lady Angelica put a hand up to her mouth and giggled softly.

Chapter Four: Sara's Past

Embodying the relaxed after-school vibe, I tried to make my invitation sound as casual as possible, figuring she probably wouldn't refuse.

"Sara, are you free after school today? Why don't you come and have tea in my dorm room? It'll be fun!"

I'd decided today was my lucky day, albeit based on nothing in particular. After posing the question, I also reached out to take her hand.

Instead of taking it, she kept walking, forcing me to follow. "Frightfully sorry, but I have mountains of work to do as head maid today, so I'll have to say no. Surely you have to attend to your mistress as well. I'd suggest you go to her as quickly as possible rather than dilly-dallying here. Lately I get the feeling you're getting so comfortable at this school that you're slacking a bit. There's a real danger in that. To avoid careless mistakes, you must never forget the fundamentals—that's what I always say. Furthermore, you must always stay focused on—"

"Wait! Stop!"

Fretting, I grabbed Sara's shoulder to hold her back. All I'd wanted to do was invite her over for tea. How had I ended up being lectured about my own failings?

Come on! I have to do what Lady Angelica asked, and either way, I want to tell her that Lady Sakura is coming. Why is this so hard?

"Would you mind hearing me out, at least?"

With a small sigh of irritation, she replied, "Certainly. Please, go ahead."

Just you wait, Sara. Soon you won't be sighing. You'll be hanging on my every word.

"First of all, I have permission from Lady Himeko, so don't worry. Also, I wouldn't say I'm slacking at all. The Kokonoe sisters aren't giving me a

moment's rest—it's all study, study, study. The only place I'm slipping a tiny bit is in the classroom. It's all good. I'm working hard as a Seraph and trying to reach the next level."

That's the lecture refuted. Now onto the main point.

"Anyway, I asked because I heard some really good news from Lady Angelica and Lady Himeko, and I think it'll pique your interest. I thought it would be good to invite you over for tea and talk about it."

One of Sara's eyebrows started twitching. I hadn't even brought up Lady Sakura by name, but it looked like she had an inkling.

"What's this about?"

I chuckled furtively. "Sounds like you're curious. To hear the rest, you'll have to come to my room."

When I added a wink, Sara made a face that suggested she was very reluctant indeed. *Oh no. It looks like I still haven't ensnared her after all.* Time was of the essence here. It was vital to tell Sara about Lady Sakura's arrival before the news spread beyond the small circle who knew it so far.

Time to bring out the big guns.

"Sara, listen." I drew closer and whispered in her ear, making sure no one else could hear me. "The good news is about Lady Sakura."

She gasped sharply and gazed at me with widened eyes. I took her hand without another word.

However, she still resisted. "I'm exceptionally curious to know more, but as I said, I have work to do. I can't just drop it all."

"Hmm... All right, then. I'll help you. Kirara, you'll help out too, right?" I turned to Kirara to get her agreement.

Kirara, who had been quietly watching my efforts, nodded and said, "Yeah, let's do it. If we all work together, it'll go way quicker."

I'd decided to ask Kirara to join me partly for moral support and partly to bring us all closer together as first years. As a consequence, she would learn about Lady Sakura's arrival too, but that meant I could recruit her to wheedle

some information out of Lady Kagura.

“Very well,” Sara replied. “I accept your offer for assistance.”

At that, I gave a little silent cheer.

We set about trying to get Sara’s work done as quickly as we could. It turned out she had far more on her plate than I could’ve imagined. She had to check the classroom supplies, arrange the schedule for the room duty rotation, counsel other students and coach them in the basics, and more. If any complaints or requests came from the ladies, she had to put appropriate measures in place, check whether they were effective, and run around to give reports on the results. If there were any students who looked like they were close to getting a Seraph or Exousia contract, she had to carefully advise them.

The average student definitely couldn’t have managed all this. It was all possible because of her experience of serving Lady Sakura.

Sara could probably take credit for the fact that our class had an exceptional number of Seraphs and Exousias at this point in the school year, even excluding me and Kirara. In a typical year, students would start getting contracts from the start of the second trimester, but Sara’s work as head maid had been surprisingly effective. Actually, Sara herself had also received numerous heartfelt appeals from ladies asking for her to be their Seraph. Seeing how well she worked, that only made sense.

It took an hour before we finally reached a stopping point. *If it took this long with three of us, how late must Sara keep going every evening when she’s on her own?*

“Wow, Sara. You work way too hard. I’m at least twice as worn out as I am after an evening in the Sky Salon.”

“Good job, both of you,” Sara replied without a hint of exhaustion on her face. “With your help, I managed to get it all done a tiny bit quicker.”

My mouth fell open. “A tiny bit? That’s all?”

“I did have to spend a lot of time teaching you how to do everything.”

Kirara frowned. With some reluctance, she said, “Seeing you do it all so

perfectly kind of puts a dent in my confidence.”

No doubt Kirara had watched her parents and studied how to be a maid by following their lead, but that was still just in the realm of self-teaching. By contrast, Sara had worked as a real maid in the birthplace of the profession, the United Kingdom. I didn’t know how early she’d started, but there was no getting around the huge gap in their levels of experience.

“The work of a maid boils down to steady repetition of familiar tasks. Once you’ve learned how to do something once, it’s essential to improve your quality and efficiency. A little elbow grease and I reckon you’ll be a jolly good maid in no time, Kirara.”

“Oh. What about me?” I asked.

“You might do better to refresh the basics first.”

Oof. Well, I am a beginner, so that’s not too surprising. It’s just not a verdict I can be proud of as Himeko’s Seraph. I need to push forward and quickly reach a level Sara thinks is worthy.

“Right! I’ll keep at it. But for today, we’re done. As a reward for our hard work, let’s have a nice cup of tea. Okay?”

“Fine, if you insist. I’ll save the full performance evaluation for another day.”

Kirara and I froze. *That doesn’t bode well. Anyway, we did what we had to do for now, so I can finally tell her about Lady Sakura.*

“Yes, uhm, anyway, let’s go back to the dorm now.”

With strained smiles, we led Sara to our room.



“You’re late!”

The moment we got inside—no, the moment we opened the door, we were greeted by Karen with a ladle in her hand. Akira was there next to her. The plan wasn’t just for Kirara and I to entertain her, but for the four of us to welcome her into our room together.

“I’m so sorry! We were helping Sara with her work!”

“Just hurry up. We’ve been ready for ages.” Karen brandished the ladle less than politely, then turned and headed back inside the room.

I pretended not to hear Sara’s tiny sigh and said, “Anyway, welcome to our room. I hope we can all have a lovely time together.”

Taking her hand, I brought her inside, feeling less like a maid and more like a butler.

“Thank you most kindly. I accept your invitation.”

Perhaps thinking “When in Rome, do as the Romans do,” Sara obediently let me escort her to the living room. I felt like I was pretending to be someone else, but I kept that to myself.

“Today we have a guest from Britain, the land of maids, so we’re making crumpets as a special treat.”

A hot plate and tea set had already been laid out in the living room. Karen added everything that was needed to make crumpets.

Sara’s expression softened when she saw this. “Ooh, crumpets. What a delightful reminder of life back home.”

Knowing where Sara was from, Karen had immediately thought of crumpets, so I’d just left her to it. However, I didn’t really know what they were. I wasn’t even sure whether they were sweet or savory, to be honest.

“What are they, exactly?” I asked. “Are they like the British equivalent of pancakes?”

“They’re less like pancakes and more like bread,” Sara replied. “They rise using yeast rather than baking powder. Lots of little holes develop on the top, giving it a springy texture. It’s awfully tasty when you add butter or maple syrup and it all sinks in through the holes.”

“Mmm, that does sound good! Maybe I’ll try making them for Lady Himeko.”

It wouldn’t hurt to be able to make more delicious treats for her than just donuts.

“You definitely should. You can even use molds to make them into pretty shapes.”

“You can indeed!” Karen interjected. She laid a set of molds on the table with a dramatic flourish. “I have round ones, square ones, star-shaped ones, and heart-shaped ones! There’s also fruit and whipped cream, so pile on as much as you like!”

Karen had arranged a dazzling assortment of toppings on the table. This was the first time we’d held a party in our room, so the four of us had pooled our money so we could really splurge. I was grateful again for my paycheck.

Looking at all this, a smile lit up Sara’s face. “Quite a feast!”

Such an expression was rare for her. I made sure to etch the image into my mind.

“Anyway, sit, sit,” Karen insisted. “Akira and I will cook the crumpets, so you two serve the tea, all right?”

“Got it!” I replied.

“Coming right up,” Kirara added.

Elated at how much better things were going than I’d expected, I officially declared our meager party started.

“Allow me to introduce our guest properly. This is Sara. She’s an exchange student from Britain—and our class’s head maid.”

After I spread my hands in an “over to you!” gesture, Sara took up the gauntlet. “My name is Sara. Thank you most kindly for inviting me here this evening. I never expected to have this opportunity to enjoy a tea party with you all, but I’m eager to make the most of it.”

Sara stood and delivered an impressively graceful curtsy to punctuate her introduction.

That looks so natural for her. How elegant.

Akira had apparently thought the same. “If someone told me you were in the Societal Arts program, I’d probably believe them, you know.”

“That’s purely because I seem foreign and exotic, I’m sure. Japanese people tend to have a great deal of respect for those who are different from themselves.”

“Hmm, maybe,” said Karen. “I don’t think it’s just that. It’s got to be because you’re so beautiful, too. It almost feels like a waste for someone with your good looks to be a maid. On the other hand, it must be a real status symbol for a lady to have such a gorgeous maid accompanying her...”

She began rambling quietly to herself, so I figured it was best to ignore her and carry on. “Either way, Sara’s a Domestic Arts student like us, so let’s show her a warm welcome. The night is young!” I lifted my cup high. “Cheers!”

The three other Japanese girls similarly raised their cups. “Cheers!”

Sara followed our lead, albeit a bit timidly. “Yes. Cheers.”

Just like Sara had told us, the crumpets were incredibly soft and springy. Their flavor erred on the salty side, but adding maple syrup really brought out the sweetness. I could have eaten them all day. Whipped cream and fruit made excellent accompaniments as well. Leaving aside the inevitable calorie-counting worries, they were a treat sure to delight any girl.

“Do you like them?” I asked Sara with some trepidation.

In response, she praised them without a hint of artificial flattery. “Yes, they’re marvelous. Better than any I’ve had back home, honestly.” Then, after a sip of tea, she gazed at me with a serious expression. “All that stands in the way of their true deliciousness are the worries clouding my mind. I can’t fully enjoy them until those are resolved.”

I decided to play with her a little. “Huh? Am I forgetting something?”

She paused. “Misaki, if you used the name of my mistress as part of some sort of practical joke, I can’t promise that I’ll maintain my usual mild-mannered demeanor.”

Sara tilted her head to the side. Her hair fell down and covered her face, and she exuded an unsettling aura.

“Ack! I’m kidding! I remember, okay?”

With a reassuring smile, I hurriedly put Sara’s hair back into order, making it as neat and tidy as I possibly could.

“Very well. Then I’m eager to hear the news you have about Lady Sakura.”

“Who’s Lady Sakura?” Kirara asked. She looked dubious, but I paid that no mind.

“The mistress Sara used to serve in Britain. She’s coming to Japan soon.”

This was probably the first time anyone in the room other than me and Sara had heard about it, so as I spoke, I tried to include them in the explanation as well. The three of them listened in silence, looking quite startled.

“Sara, when was it you told me Lady Sakura would be coming, exactly?”

“Late July. That’s what I’ve heard, at least.”

Which means she still doesn’t have the latest info. Here we go, then. Time to surprise her with the good news.

“Yes, that was the plan. The situation has changed, however. She’ll be arriving on a different date.”

Sara gasped. Her eyes widened and she stared at me, a mixture of fear and hope in her eyes.

That was when it hit me. *My phrasing could mean there’s a delay, couldn’t it?* It wouldn’t have been fun to drag it out a little longer and make her sweat, but I didn’t want to spoil the atmosphere of our tea party. *No teasing. I’ll get straight to the point.*

“She’s arriving earlier than planned. Lady Sakura will be in Japan on July first.”

While Sara sat there stunned, I took her hand.

“Great news, right? You’ll be reunited with your mistress soon!”

“Is this true?” she murmured. Her eyes wavered as though she couldn’t quite believe it.

“Every word. Lady Angelica had official documents and everything. She had a meeting with Lady Himeko about it too.”

It looked like that finally convinced her. Silently—too overcome with emotion to form any words, no doubt—she reached out and hugged me.

“I’m so happy for you. I know you’ve been really missing her.”

So much so that she’d been wandering around at night looking for her like a

sleepwalker. I gently returned her embrace and stroked her head.

Getting a chance to hug Sara is something I hadn't expected. Kind of a side benefit!

We stayed like that for a little while, then Sara suddenly pulled herself together, retracted her arms, and stood up.

"It won't do for me to waste time here. I must go and welcome my mistress." Then she immediately turned and made to leave.

Ack! Maybe she hasn't quite pulled herself together!

I grabbed her from behind to stop her running off. "Hold your horses, Sara. She hasn't gotten here yet. There are still two weeks left."

"Oh, yes, of course. I'm getting ahead of myself, aren't I? Still, if I go to the airport, I might be able to see her already."

"No! You won't!"

Still keeping hold of her, I slowly dragged her back to her seat.

I wasn't used to seeing Sara go to pieces like this. If I'd told my classmates, who only ever saw her in the guise of a perfectly composed head maid, they probably wouldn't have even believed me.

With my hands pressing firmly on both her shoulders, I spoke to her a tiny bit more firmly. "Just sit down and take a deep breath. I know you're excited and you want to see her right now, but you need to stay calm."

Despite her emotional state, she seemed to be listening. She breathed in deeply, then finally stopped resisting and began acting like herself again.

"I do apologize for losing my composure." Sara hung her head in shame.

"It's all good. I can understand how you feel. That's not what you want your mistress to see, though, right?"

"No, certainly not."

I never thought I'd see the day where I was the one giving her advice. I guess Lady Sakura's just that big of a deal to Sara.

At this point, Kirara saw her chance to jump in and ask again. "So just to be

clear, you have a mistress already, and her name's Lady Sakura? Is that right?"

"Yes. I served her for a long time in Britain."

"I could see you had a lot of confidence as a maid, but I didn't think you'd worked as one in the place best known for its maids. Couldn't you have told us all?"

"I didn't intend to keep it a secret, but in spring I recall that our classmates grew rather heated when the topic of your mistress came up, so I decided it might be wise to keep quiet." As she spoke, she glanced my way.

Ah, right. She's talking about when I became Himeko's Seraph.

Kirara nodded, appearing to accept this explanation. "I can see what you mean."

It was true; being a Seraph already on my first day had sort of felt like it put a target on my back. The fear had been real. If she'd announced she had a mistress, it could easily have turned out the same way.

"And that's why you didn't tell anyone about Lady Sakura."

"Precisely."

Well, that's one mystery out of the way. I'm sure there's more, though.

"I bet we all have way more things to ask you," I told her, "but let's keep the party going while we do that. Then you can tell us all about Lady Sakura."

Sara nodded, her eyes gleaming. "Very well. I'll gladly tell you all about my mistress. In fact, there's a lot I'd like to tell you."

Resting a hand on her chest, Sara took a deep breath, then brought her tea up to her lips. Then, with an air of remembering events that were still dear to her heart, she began. Reflecting on her memories of Lady Sakura, she told us her story. As we ate, we gave Sara our full attention.

"I suppose if I'm telling you about Lady Sakura, I ought to tell you a little about myself too. The truth is, when I was a little girl, my life involved sleeping rough in London."

I had to ask about the unfamiliar expression. "Sleeping rough? What does that

mean?”

“It means I was living on the street. I was a penniless beggar.”

I gasped. *Boy, that was close. My teacup was almost up to my lips. I could have just spat tea everywhere!*

“Is that true?” I asked, still recovering.

With a serious expression, she confirmed it. “Yes. I was an orphan, you see.”

“Wow, erm, that sounds pretty serious. I can’t believe it.”

I couldn’t hide my shock at her story taking this unexpected turn. *Is she really comfortable telling us about this? It feels so personal.*

Kirara, Karen, and Akira were also holding their breath nervously. Who could have guessed that asking about Sara’s mistress would lead to us learning she’d suffered so much in the past?

“It’s quite all right. As I’m sure you can tell, this is nothing but a memory for me now.”

“True, from looking at you now, no one would ever guess you had a childhood like that.”

“Indeed. So don’t worry; I look back on it quite fondly, in fact.” Then she continued with the story. “When I was very small, I lived in an orphanage, but it was not an especially good place. As soon as I was old enough to have the wherewithal, I ran away and lived on my own.”

She paused a moment and picked up her cup, taking a slow sip to keep her throat from getting dry.

“A lot of people were kind enough to give me their charity, perhaps due to the rarity of seeing such a young girl begging on the streets. That meant I wasn’t reduced to scavenging through the rubbish bins. Still, a child’s body has its limits. As the seasons turned, this life wore me down more and more, and by winter I could hardly move at all. I found myself huddling beneath a tree, covered in snow, quietly wondering if my time had come.”

I leaned forward eagerly.

“And that’s when she came, right? Lady Sakura was there with an outstretched hand to rescue you from poverty.”

That had to be where this tragic tale ended, I decided. Her mistress had surely arrived like a ray of gentle spring sunshine, changing her life forever.

Sara chuckled. “Yes, indeed. As my consciousness grew dim, I suddenly noticed a girl of about my age standing in front of me. Just as you’ve guessed, that was Lady Sakura. However, without even saying a word, she immediately shook my body, rudely waking me up, then slapped me in the face as hard as she could.”

“Huh?!”

Lady Sakura sounds kind of violent.

“That got my attention in short order. All I could do was stare at this girl, wide-eyed. Then she said the following: ‘For you to be here doing this at your age must mean you’ve run away from home and chosen this path yourself, yes? For that reason, I won’t do anything. If you wish to die, that’s your choice. It’s not my place to interfere. However, if you have the will to live, come to this location of your own volition. I’m just on the lookout for a personal maid, you see. If you can’t do the job, then I’ll dismiss you, but I don’t mind taking you in for now.’ She handed me a piece of paper with an address and a simple map, then disappeared.”

“Oh. Um, she sounds kind of harsh, honestly.”

I’d expected a scene where she embraced Sara in the freezing cold, welcoming her into her bosom like the Virgin Mary.

“Yes, I suppose. She can be strict, but she’s a very kind person. I experienced such confused feelings at the time, though. As I followed the map to her home, I was frustrated and unsure whether I wanted to shout at her or cling onto her for dear life. It was a terribly long journey for my battered body, but I finally arrived. The moment I did, I lost consciousness.”

Looking at Sara, this really did seem like a precious memory to her. A smile kept appearing on her face as she recalled the details.

For us listeners, though, it was tough to know how to react, to say the least. It

was impossible not to feel anxious about Sara's well-being even knowing that she was all better now.

"When I came to, the first thing I thought was 'Ahh, I'm being embraced by the wings of an angel. I've died and God has shown mercy on me. I'm being carried up to heaven.' The truth was that I was lying in a soft bed in Lady Sakura's room with her gentle arms around me. It was a warm, comfortable feeling, the likes of which I'd never experienced before. I flailed about a little, disoriented. It seemed like this woke up Lady Sakura as well. The first words out of her mouth were 'You stink.'"

Sara suddenly struggled to contain her laughter and began to giggle.

The rest of us didn't know how to respond. We all exchanged bewildered glances.

"Next, she said, 'Well, I'm glad you're alive, at any rate. If you've come here, that means you want to be my maid, correct? I'm happy to take you on board. This may seem quick, but I'll give you your first order right now. You've made me dirty with all the mud clinging to your body, so come into the bath with me and clean me up. Yourself, too, of course.' From that day forth, I became Lady Sakura's personal maid."

"Whew. I was worried about where this story might be going, but your first meeting with Lady Sakura *did* have a happy ending."

I didn't know how I'd have coped with things getting even more ghastly, but I was glad I'd listened to the end and learned so much about Sara's past.

That encounter was literally the difference between life and death for her. After something as incredible as that, no wonder she was suffering from mistress deficiency syndrome.

"Lady Sakura also gave me my name."

"Huh? You weren't always called Sara?"

"No. I didn't know my own name. I didn't think it really mattered if I had a name or not, but when I told that to Lady Sakura, she got slightly annoyed. 'Ugh, don't be ridiculous! I can't think of anything more foolish than not knowing your own name. All right, there's no other option. I'll have to share my

name with you. We'll take the first and last parts of "Sakura" and make the name "Sara." From now on, that's what you're called.' It was like a rebirth for me. I had my very own name, and I started working hard for my mistress every single day."

In a manner that suggested she'd reached the conclusion, she quietly closed her eyes and slowly finished the tea left in the bottom of her cup.

Karen brought a handkerchief to her nose and blew it loudly. Through heaving sobs, she managed, "I'm so glad you met such a wonderful mistress!"

Despite clearly being thrown off by Sara's sad story, Kirara retained her strong sense of rivalry toward Sara and was sure to make it known. "Well, uh, I guess you've been through a lot. That doesn't mean I forgive you for treating us like dirt, though!"

"It's like you lived in a whole different world I never knew existed," Akira murmured quietly.

Her story had come as a shock to all of us. We Domestic Arts students had each had troubles of our own, but none of it even came close to what Sara had endured.

I really wanted her to be reunited with Lady Sakura as quickly as possible, but I couldn't do anything to speed it up. At least the date had been pushed up.

"Oh!" I said, a thought occurring to me. "Do you think Lady Sakura changed her plans because she was worried about you being lonely?"

"Preposterous. My mistress wouldn't rearrange her schedule for my sake. I'm sure there was something more important on her mind."

However, in contrast to these businesslike words, a happy smile appeared on her face. That was enough to tell me I probably had it right after all.

It's so refreshing to see Sara with her guard down like that. She looks so sweet.

I decided the best way to get more of that out of her was to keep talking about Lady Sakura. "Are you sure? It must be something pretty important to change the date out of nowhere. She wasn't supposed to arrive until the second

trimester. I bet she really did want to see you again as early as she possibly could.”

“Do you think so?”

“For sure. Is she really as strict as you were saying, even now? I saw a photo of her and she looked really nice.”

“True. She certainly has a side that’s harsh on both herself and others, but she’s also a kind and considerate mistress. To me, I can honestly say that she’s akin to a goddess. She is, without a doubt, the best mistress in the world.”

Sara’s expression grew even more extraordinary. By now, she looked lost in her devotion.

This time, Kirara was the one who took the bait. “That’s a pretty bold statement. The best in the whole world?” She snorted. “Obviously, the number one is Lady Kagura. Not only did she forgive my rude behavior, but she also gave me a chance. In terms of beauty and kindness, no one can measure up to Lady Kagura!”

“My word, Kirara, I had no idea you had such a gift for comedy! I can assure you that you only feel this way because you’ve never seen Lady Sakura. When you do, you’ll be bowled over by her beauty and fall to your knees begging to be *her* Seraph instead.”

Sparks flew between them.



Sara always seems cool as a cucumber sandwich, but when her mistress comes up, she gets really passionate.

This wasn't good, though. If they were busy squabbling, we'd never learn anything else about Lady Sakura.

"Calm down, you two. The best mistress is clearly Lady Himeko, so there's no point in fighting about it. Lady Kagura is beautiful and Lady Sakura looks lovely, but the best-looking mistress of all is definitely mine!"

For a moment, they were frozen in silence. Then Sara let out a sudden chuckle, and Kirara said, "You're a lot more vocal than you used to be, Misaki."

They both stood up, a slightly foreboding air about them.

"It seems I've a need to better convey the nature of Lady Sakura's magnificence!"

"You took the words right out of my mouth! Lady Kagura's the ideal mistress, and I'll make sure everyone gets that!"

"Huh?" It looked like I'd said exactly the wrong thing.

With a strained smile, Karen tapped me on the shoulder. "Misaki, you've joined the club too, haven't you? You're one of those obsessive maids now."

Sighing, Akira said, "I'm jealous. I wish I could serve a mistress who made me feel that way."

"Let me make one thing clear," said Sara. "Lady Sakura comes from a long line of English nobility. That puts her in a class all her own. Her pedigree, her manner, her way of thinking, and her appearance—every aspect is simply perfect. And yet, such a goddess put her perfection aside and showed mercy on a wretch like me. She has the flexibility to challenge the old norms and push the boundaries. The reason she's coming to Japan is to be involved in a business venture here, in fact. She's already looking toward the future and acting boldly. She's far more than just a pretty face!"

Hmm. If so, she should be able to get a good handle on this school and its unique systems.

Kirara resolutely took on the challenge. "The same applies to Lady Kagura,

you know. You're from abroad, so you wouldn't know, but the Mikage Group is a conglomerate with operations all over the country. It's no exaggeration to say that my mistress's family is controlling this nation from the shadows. There probably isn't a single person in all of Japan who hasn't heard the name 'Mikage.' Now their influence has expanded internationally, and it won't be long before their name is on everybody's lips across the whole world."

She went on, "But Lady Kagura isn't going to rest on her laurels and enjoy the security of her family name. She's going to boost the Mikage name even further. She's setting up her own sportswear brand that'll take the world by storm. I know I don't need to explain the Olympic Games to you, but there's something really special about athletes from all over the world competing together, giving it their all mentally and physically. Lady Kagura is planning to dominate the Olympics with her personal brand and the competitors she's raised and supported. Are you getting it yet? My mistress is here to conquer the world, and she won't settle for anything less. It's a little more than just helping out the family business."

With a look of ardent admiration on her face, she posed as if hugging herself.

"Most interesting," Sara replied. "She does sound somewhat superior to other mistresses, but even that plan is merely relying on the Mikage name, is it not? I don't see an especially big difference at all."

Kirara snarled, as did Sara in her own way. They came face-to-face and glared at each other.

I doubted they'd have gotten this heated about themselves, but when it came to their mistresses, it was a whole different story. They each believed their own was the best so fervently that they'd never back down.

Just then, something dawned on me. Maybe against my better judgment, I interjected, "But even the most incredible mistress has to go to school somewhere. While they're at Amanotsuka Academy, how can they or any other lady be superior to Lady Himeko, the deputy chairman of the board?"

I suddenly felt the chill of their icy gazes. Their eyes were directly on me.

"I guess this is where our friendship ends, Misaki," Kirara said coldly.

“A mistress war can be a terrible thing,” Sara added. “There can only be one left standing.”

“Looks like we have to fight for survival.”

The two girls seemed blinded to everything else around them.

“Wait,” I said, my voice shaking. “Hold on. Maybe I spoke without thinking, but just because I think Lady Himeko’s the best doesn’t mean I think other mistresses are no big deal. I think they’re all equally amazing and worthy of respect. So please, snap out of it!”

I couldn’t even believe I’d said what I had. This school really had started messing with my mind.

“Hmph.”

“Hmph!”

With a dismissive huff, they finally did as I asked.

“All right, fine,” Kirara said.

Sara regained her usual composure. “It’s only natural for a maid to think her own mistress is the best, you know. All the more so if you have the position of Seraph.”

“Thank goodness,” I replied. “If we really would have broken off our friendship over this, I would’ve cried for sure.”

Kirara poked my forehead. “You’re always exaggerating.”

I whimpered. *Nope, not exaggerating. I would’ve totally bawled my eyes out.*

“I never knew pride for your mistress could go so far. Why don’t we put all that behind us and carry on with the conversation? Wait, what were we talking about again?” Putting a finger up to her chin, Karen tilted her head.

“Uh, let me see.” After a pause, I clapped my hands together. “That’s it! I wanted to know more about Lady Sakura. Based on what Sara just told us, it sounds like she’s really into trying new things, right?”

“Yes, that’s quite right. She’s capable of developing an interest in anything new and unusual. Occasionally, it can even get her into a spot of trouble.”

“Got it. So she should adapt to this school and its exclusive contract system pretty easily.”

“Indeed. In fact, it would be accurate to say that she chose the school based on that.”

“She did?”

“You all seem numb to it by now, but the idea of students dressed as maids is rather unusual in itself, is it not?” Smiling, Sara shrugged her shoulders.

“Haha, that’s true.”

No matter how widespread domestic service had become as a profession, there was still something pretty unique about a school where maids and mistresses studied in the same environment.

“So you’ll become Lady Sakura’s Seraph when she gets here, right?” As Kirara spoke, she crammed a bite-size donut into her mouth.

“Most likely, yes.”

“Shame. That’ll be one less thing I can lord over you.”

“Interesting. Is there anything else on the list other than your Seraph contract?” Sara threw this out there with an earnest expression.

Kirara snarled back at her, exasperated. “You don’t know when to quit, do you?”

Sensing that the atmosphere was getting heated again, I frantically tried to calm them down. “Come on!”

Those two really were like oil and water, although I couldn’t have said which was one and which was the other.

“I’m joking,” Sara replied with a smirk.

Now that was unexpected. *Did Sara really make a joke? That’s very unusual for her.* If she was comfortable doing that, though, maybe the ice was well and truly broken.

Happy about this, I moved a little closer to Sara and said, “If she knows about how the school works, does that mean she also knows about the salons?”

“Good question. I suspect she might not, since they’re not officially run by the school itself.”

“That’ll be something new for her to discover when she gets here, then. I think she’ll be getting some invitations to join salons, so I wonder which one she’ll choose. Or maybe she’s the type of person to set up her own instead.”

“That could very well be. Knowing my mistress’s character, I can imagine she’d find the thought of founding her own salon to be most thrilling. However, she might wish to experience membership of an existing one first.”

In which case, maybe she’d actually enjoy having the salons fight over her.

“So, let’s say hypothetically that Lady Kagura invited her to join the Sky Salon —”

“Hold it, Misaki!” Kirara grabbed my arm and pulled me aside. “You don’t seriously think Lady Kagura will ask Lady Sakura to join, do you?”

Even though she was whispering right in my ear, I was sure everyone else could still hear her.

“I’m just saying it’s possible. If she does, though, that means we can hang out with Sara after school.”

“Blegh!” My suggestion, intended as a pleasant one, was clearly repellent to Kirara. “I don’t want to deal with Sara constantly complaining about everything I’m doing wrong *after* class too!”

“I don’t complain, I merely state the truth. The fact that you take it so personally is another point where you have much to learn.”

“Ugh, there you go complaining again!” Kirara started gnashing her teeth.

“Putting my own opinions aside, the Sky Salon is a fine place indeed. I find it likely that Lady Sakura would be taken with it.”

“Really? In that case, even if Lady Kagura doesn’t invite her, maybe I should ask Lady Himeko to bring her in to take a look.” I turned to Kirara. “You wouldn’t mind that, would you?”

She reluctantly shook her head. “If Lady Himeko brought her, I wouldn’t be in any position to object.”

This is working out pretty well. If I can lay the groundwork, there's a good chance Lady Sakura will join the Sky Salon. Are we cheating by getting in there early? It's not exactly a level playing field. Maybe we shouldn't be taking advantage of that.

"You know, the truth is that there might be other salons looking to recruit Lady Sakura too."

Instead of thinking too deeply about what to do, I just went ahead and said it. The Sky Salon itself was probably enough of a selling point, so there wasn't much point in worrying about it.

"Is that so?" Sara asked.

"Yeah. Well, it's not certain or anything, so I couldn't name names; it was just Lady Himeko's prediction. She wanted me to make sure you knew there might be other salons gunning for her."

"Thank you. That's something to look forward to. I believe Lady Sakura will enjoy it even more as a surprise, so I'll keep it a secret as well."

"Yeah, maybe that's for the best. It's not like we can try to sell her on the different salons when she's not even here yet."

With an enthralled expression, Karen put her hands on her cheeks and said, "Listening to all this, I can't wait to meet Lady Sakura. She must be something special if you're so devoted to her, Sara. I bet she's gorgeous too."

"I hope we'll get to meet her," Akira added, similarly deep in thought about the upcoming arrival.

"I'd be delighted to show off my wonderful mistress to you all, so I'll ask her if she'd throw a tea party. Not only is she sweet and lovely, but she's small enough to fit in my arms."

Next to me, Kirara stifled a gasp. Then she murmured, "I think I have an idea of one other salon that'll want to recruit Lady Sakura."

Without even a word out of me, it sounded like she'd already thought of Lady Asuka, Mei, and the Paradise Palace.

Chapter Five: An Ominous Shadow

The following Monday, I reported to Lady Angelica in Himeko's personal area at the Sky Salon.

"As far as I can tell," I concluded, "Sara hasn't told anyone else about Lady Sakura."

Even though I hadn't even informed Lady Angelica that I'd spoken to Sara, she'd arrived together with Himeko and immediately asked for an update. I wasn't sure if she was just guessing that I'd probably taken care of it already or if her bats had acted as scouts or something, but either way, she just knew.

"Fair enough," Lady Angelica replied. "That only deepens the mystery, I suppose. Well, Rosalie's putting a great deal of enthusiasm into her British-style salon, so it's not impossible that she has her own information sources in the UK, I suppose."

Her expression said she didn't find this explanation too convincing.

"I do have one idea, kind of," Himeko offered. "I don't really have any proof, and it doesn't really explain why Rosalie was given the information, but it might help in some way."

Her words were as vague and fuzzy as her troubled expression. It was rare for Himeko to beat around the bush like that. She had an aura that said she'd rather not talk about it, and that she didn't want any further questions even though she was the one who had brought it up.

"I see," Lady Angelica replied slowly. She appeared to have sensed this mood as well, and was likely debating whether to ask for more details or not.

Just then, we heard a bell over by the entrance, signaling the arrival of the elevator.

The words that followed came from Lady Kagura. "Good day."

I could hear Kirara cheerfully rushing to meet her. "Good day, Lady Kagura!"

We all found ourselves listening. “I have news, milady. The British student in our class, Sara, has been keeping quiet about the fact that she has a mistress. Don’t you think that’s incredible?”

She immediately started telling her mistress everything we’d heard from Sara. This was just as planned, so I was happy.

“Sara,” Lady Kagura replied. “That’s the girl who came here with you and Misaki, isn’t it? So she already has experience of serving someone in Britain? That explains why she’s so skilled already for a first-year student. I wonder what her mistress is like.”

“Apparently, she’s called Lady Sakura. And she’s transferring here!”

“Oh, is she Japanese? Or partly Japanese, perhaps?”

“No, I think she’s a pure-blooded Englishwoman. Although now that you mention it, her name does sound Japanese.”

“That’s quite an unusual name for a British person. Hmm, I feel as though I’ve heard it somewhere before. Ayakas!”

When she called the Kokonoe twins’ name, they replied in perfect unison, “Yes, milady?”

“Were you listening to our conversation just now?”

“We were indeed,” replied one of the sisters.

“You’d like us to investigate, I assume,” added the other.

“Precisely. The name really rings a bell.”

“This will be no trouble at all.”

“Researching an international student? We’ll be done in a flash.”

Then we heard the sisters’ footsteps approaching. *I have a sinking feeling about how they plan to investigate.* Surprise, surprise, they soon arrived at the entrance to our section of the salon.

“Just stopping by,” said one of them.

“We’d like to have a quick chat with Lady Himeko,” said the other.

“And Lady Angelica, if that’s all right.”

“How convenient that you’re both here! Heh heh.”

It made sense. Other than the teaching staff, the two people most likely to have information about a transfer student were the two ladies at my table. There was no need to go investigating on their own.

The ladies looked at each other.

“I don’t suppose there’s any harm in it,” Himeko said.

“No,” Lady Angelica agreed. “We don’t need to keep it a secret from them.”

After confirming this to one another, Himeko told the twins they could enter.

They both stepped inside and curtsied. Seeing them carry themselves with such refinement, it was hard to believe they were Domestic Arts students.

“We appreciate it.”

“Thank you very much, Lady Himeko.”

“Misaki, get us some chairs.”

“Yes, coming right up,” I replied. While I was dashing off to get the extra chairs, the twins called out to me as I passed.

“Get us drinks too, please!”

“Royal milk tea would be great!”

“Yes, got it,” I replied to the twins, who just didn’t know when to quit.

For starters, I focused on the chairs. Himeko and Lady Angelica were facing each other from opposite sides of the round table, so I positioned the twins across from each other as well.

“Here, have a seat.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“It’s nice that you took care of it so quickly, but it would have been better if you’d personally held out our chairs for us.”

I groaned. I’d had too little experience serving guests to pick up on that.

“Teehee. You’ll just have to make up for it by serving some extra delicious tea.”

“You’ve raised our expectations!”

Groaning again, I replied, “I’ll do what I can.”

Does this have to happen when Lady Angelica is right here? Well, I guess they pointed it out specifically because she’s here. Deciding this was the Kokonoe sisters being kind in their own unique way, I tried to make up for lost ground with spectacular tea, just like they’d said.

While I was heading off to handle that, the twins whipped out notebooks and started their line of questioning.

“Now, about that foreign student.”

“Could you tell us a little more about her?”

By the time I returned with the tea, it looked like they’d already heard all the key facts. They stared into the notebooks.

“Interesting, very interesting!”

“I can see why Lady Kagura was intrigued.”

When I put their tea on the table, they reached for the cups without taking their eyes off the notebooks. *Was the information about Lady Sakura really all that special?*

“It’s not public yet, so don’t tell anyone else, please,” Lady Angelica emphasized. “Within the Sky Salon is fine, but don’t go spreading it outside of that.”

They finally raised their heads again.

“Of course not.”

“Giving information out for free is a waste.”

“By the way, Lady Angelica, have you ever met Lady Sakura?”

“It would be ideal if we could learn a little more about her personality.”

“I can’t help you there, I’m afraid,” Lady Angelica replied with a chuckle. “But I

know someone who can.”

“You mean Sara? She would know a lot since she worked for her.”

“She’d be on her guard if we started grilling her, though. I doubt she’d reveal anything too personal.”

“No, no, no. Asking Sara would be best, of course, but we have someone right here who knows plenty herself. Don’t we, Misaki?” Grinning, she turned to look at me.

The twins’ eyes gleamed. They stared at me like two snakes about to strike.

“Oh, Misaki, when did you get into the information-gathering business?”

“Has our training finally paid off?”

“Lady Angelica, did you have to sell me out like that?!”

“Well, you know, you’ve been avoiding me lately, so think of this as payback.” She stood up and prodded me in the cheek. “Anyway, I still have student council business to attend to, so I’ll be heading out. The rest is in Misaki’s capable hands!”

“No fair!” I cried.

She grabbed me by the shoulders and sat me down in the chair she had vacated. “Enjoy your evening, everyone.” To Himeko, she said, “Get in touch if there’s anything else.”

Then she made a graceful departure.

When she was gone, the Kokonoe sisters demanded details.

“Out with it, Misaki.”

“Cough up everything you know.”

I felt like I was being interrogated. All I could do was obey; I shared everything I’d heard from Sara that felt harmless enough, leaving out the details of Sara’s personal life, for example.

Afterward, they nodded, satisfied.

“My, my!”

“You had better info than expected.”

“Well done, Misaki.”

“You did a good job of squeezing it out of her.”

“That wasn’t what I was going for,” I insisted.

They started patting me on the head encouragingly, which was all well and good—but when they tried to go for my butt, I hurriedly put my hands in the way.

“Oh, but if you do that...”

“You’ll leave your chest totally unguarded!”

I gasped as their hands bore down on my breasts. I reflexively put my arms in a cross formation to cover them, but of course that meant my butt was an open target again. Deciding it was the lesser of two evils, I gave in and submitted to the butt patting, groaning in disgruntlement.

“Heehee! Don’t be so annoyed.”

“We’re going to give you a present for telling us such juicy details.”

“You are?”

“Yep!”

“Wait here a moment.”

With that, Music Ayaka stood from her chair and dashed off somewhere, then quickly returned holding several notebooks.

“These are for you. Well, not all of them. Half are for Kirara, and then you should swap.”

“Huh?”

I still didn’t get what they meant, so I took one of the notebooks and flipped through the pages. I couldn’t believe what I saw.

“What is this?!” I exclaimed, gawking at the contents.

The notebook was filled with personal data on the young ladies of the academy—their names, dates of birth, hobbies, special skills, favorite and least

favorite things, and so on. The whole thing was full, with each lady having roughly a two-page spread to herself.

It was an unbelievable amount of information. *Does this cover every Societal Arts student in the whole school?*

“Researching it all for yourself would have been best, of course.”

“But you and Kirara are working hard, so we thought we’d help you out.”

“What? I don’t know if I’m comfortable with this.”

It didn’t feel right at all. Terms I’d never really thought about before like “information breach” and “data protection law” flashed into my mind.

“But it’ll be so handy.”

“You might wind up in trouble without it.”

Their tone was like they were telling a ghost story, which only exacerbated my anxiety.

“How? What do you mean?”

“Let’s say Lady Himeko invites a guest over.”

“You’ll have to be thoroughly prepared to welcome them, won’t you?”

I stared back, suddenly afraid they might be right.

“That’s going to be tough if you don’t know what they like.”

“Imagine serving them something they hated! What a disaster.”

“You’d make Lady Himeko look like a terrible host.”

“In the worst-case scenario, you might even ruin her relationship with the guest.”

Groaning, I replied, “That could happen, yeah.” It was far too believable. I could just picture it.

“We’re not telling you to use it for evil.”

“Although you could also study up on everyone’s weak points.”

“If you work it to your advantage, it’ll be a lifesaver.”

“Depending on how you use it, the information in this book could be worth more than gold.”

I let out a whimper.

“Either way, if you don’t start memorizing the ladies’ details, we’ll have to keep going with our lunchtime training forever.”

“If you’d rather gather all the information on your own instead, be our guest!”

“Fine, all right. I get it.”

It sounded like I didn’t have a choice, so I reluctantly took the notebooks crammed full of sensitive personal data.

Himeko raised no objection either. “I think this’ll be a big help for you, Misaki. You should make good use of them for your future.”

For my future? Does she mean it could help me with finding a job?

Applying to companies with a connection to the ladies of Amanotsuka Academy was likely to make things at least a little easier. Even if not, asking Himeko to point me out to relevant ladies and making sure they remembered my face could be beneficial in other ways.

In any case, it occurred to me that losing any of these notebooks would be a catastrophe. As I took them into my hands, I felt like I was taking on an immense amount of responsibility as well.



After receiving the Kokonoe sisters’ notebooks crammed full of personal information, I started looking through them whenever I had a free moment. Kirara did the same, and we often ended up treating it like an English vocabulary study session. We’d open it up and repeat the contents aloud to try and drum it into our heads.

After a few days of that, something unexpected happened. Just before class started after lunch, Sara spoke to us of her own accord.

“Misaki, Kirara, can I borrow you for a second?”

Being interrupted while I was trying to memorize a page of info made me respond with kind of a weird noise. “Bwuh?”

“There’s something I’d like to ask you,” she added.

“What is it?” Kirara replied, closing her notebook.

“I don’t think either of you would have done it. I don’t believe you even know her. Still, I have to ask.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Kirara, moving into the corner of the classroom. Presumably, she figured this might be a conversation best not overheard. “It’s not like you to be so vague. You normally make yourself *very* clear.”

I followed Kirara into the corner, as did Sara. There she finally came out with it. “Did either of you tell anyone about Lady Sakura?”

“Well, I did tell Lady Kagura,” Kirara answered honestly.

This didn’t appear to faze Sara at all, however. “I wouldn’t say that’s a problem. In fact, it’s not inherently a problem for others to know about Lady Sakura, but I’m quite puzzled that I was asked about her by someone with whom I am not acquainted whatsoever.”

“Really? Someone you don’t even know?” I asked.

She nodded. “I believe her name is Risa Tsuyuki. No, that’s not quite right. *Sari* Tsuyuki.”

“Lady Rosalie?”

“You know her, Misaki?”

“I do, but it’s not me she heard it from.”

Sara raised her eyebrows.

“Actually, Lady Rosalie knew about Lady Sakura’s arrival before I did.”

She looked perplexed. “Oh?”

“Yes, it’s kind of a mystery, but apparently she knows all about Lady Sakura and wants to invite her to join her salon.”

“Hmm.” Sara put a finger to her chin and pondered.

“Did something happen between you and Lady Rosalie?”

“Well, she’s asked me to have tea with her.”

“She did?”

“Yes.”

Targeting the lieutenant first to get closer to the general? Sneaky.

This meant Lady Rosalie knew about more than just Lady Sakura herself, though. She also knew that Sara had served her in Britain. She was very well informed indeed.

“Are you going to take her up on the offer?”

Sara appeared lost for a moment, as if this was proving to be a tough decision. “I suppose so, yes. When she spoke to me, Lady Sari—Lady Rosalie—was awfully polite. Her tone was that of inviting an honored guest to visit her. Of course, it’s clear that she hopes to use me to make a good impression on Lady Sakura, but I’m discerning enough to tell that she didn’t have ill intentions beyond that. There was no deception afoot, and her invitation was a serious one.”

“Right, I see.”

“That’s why I’m so unsure as to what to do. It seems reasonable to accept her invitation, but I can’t imagine where she obtained the information about Lady Sakura.”

“Wow, yeah,” I replied, pondering the matter. “I can see your point.”

On the plus side, her intentions were clear as day. There wasn’t some hidden motive that could get Sara involved in some complicated mess.

“Hold it right there!” Kirara demanded, dispelling the downcast atmosphere. “I might as well say this now. Lady Kagura is planning to officially ask Lady Sakura to join the Sky Salon. Putting my personal opinion aside, if that’s what my mistress decides, I can’t carry water for the other team. I realize this is no more than my own personal request, but I’ll say it here and now: don’t go and have tea with Lady Rosalie.”

Wow, impressive. Inside, she had to be fiercely opposed to Sara and her mistress joining us, but she was able to put a lid on her own feelings and fight for what Lady Kagura wanted.

“Oh dear,” Sara murmured with a troubled expression. “It’s a great honor to be invited to join two different salons, but if Lady Sakura herself isn’t here, I mustn’t do anything to suggest I’m answering on her behalf. There is something a tad questionable about Lady Rosalie and how she got her information, but I don’t think she’s a bad person. As for the Sky Salon, I’ve experienced its splendor for myself, so on that front I’ve gathered quite some knowledge already.” She sighed heavily. “What should I do?”

In contrast to her usual confidence, Sara now looked as lost as a bedraggled kitten in the rain. Even someone as collected as her still needed her mistress by her side.

“Well, maybe it’s okay to put it on hold. Like you said, Lady Sakura’s not here yet, so it’s better for you not to give a firm answer. Lady Kagura can’t make a move until your mistress is actually here anyway, right?”

“True,” Kirara interjected. “Lady Kagura’s also aware that there are other salons trying to nab Lady Sakura, but she’s not the kind of person to sneakily get a head start on her opponents. For now, I think she’s at the stage of figuring out a plan to get her once she arrives.”

There was pride in Kirara’s tone. She clearly liked her mistress’s sportsmanlike attitude. No underhanded trickery.

“You raise some valid points. I suppose I shall refuse Lady Rosalie for the time being. I’ll tell her it would be lovely if she extended the invitation again after my mistress’s arrival.”

“Sounds perfect,” I replied.

Sara turned to Kirara. “That being said, if Lady Sakura does join the Sky Salon, then that means I, in turn, would join you there as well. Are you certain you’d be able to accept this?”

It obviously hadn’t escaped Sara’s notice that Kirara had such a burning sense of rivalry with her. Would Kirara really be able to deal with it? It was a

reasonable question.

“Heh.” Kirara smirked. “Naturally, it’d be annoying seeing your face every day, but if you *did* join, I’d be the more senior, experienced maid at the Sky Salon. Whether you liked it or not, you’d have to listen to me when I told you about how things work in the salon, what goes where, and how all the cleaning and tidying should be done. Don’t worry, though! I’d educate you *very* well indeed. Heheh.”

Wow, Kirara’s enjoying this idea far too much.

She’d presumably had Sara on her mind a lot since Lady Kagura decided she was planning to ask Lady Sakura to join. This must have been the only way she’d figured out that she could accept the situation—by being top dog.

“My goodness. Well, should that come to pass, I shall simply ask Misaki to teach me everything instead.”

“Too bad for you,” Kirara shot back. “Lady Kagura’s the head of the salon, and I’m her Seraph. It’d obviously be my job to show you the ropes. Sure, Misaki may be Lady Himeko’s Seraph, but without my mistress’s permission, she can’t do anything in the salon that goes against my mistress’s wishes.”

“I could ask her other two Seraphs, in that case.”

She must mean the Kokonoe twins. I don’t know, though.

“Wrong again. They wouldn’t want to lower themselves to dealing with such a trivial task. They’d tell me to handle it for sure.”

Yup. That’s exactly how it would go.

Sara gritted her teeth. For the first time, she looked like she might be regretting that this looked like a very real possibility.

“Oh no, I’ve got you there, haven’t I? Now I *really* hope you join—and the sooner, the better! If you do, I’ll give you an education you’ll never forget. Ohohohoho!”

Laughing in a boisterous yet refined manner, Kirara returned to her seat.
When did she get so much like the Kokonoe sisters?

“Misaki, if it does come to that, could I please ask you to quietly teach me all

the different bits and bobs in as speedy a manner as you can muster?”

Her tone was quite insistent. With a strained smile, I gave a noncommittal reply. “Let’s see. Maybe it won’t come to that.”

It didn’t look like the discord between those two would be ending anytime soon.



When I got into the bath, the day’s stresses and strains started to melt away.

Since getting those notebooks from the Kokonoe sisters, my brain had been working overtime. Having a moment to fully relax was indescribably lovely.

I dearly wished I could forget all about my work as a maid, but of course that was too much to ask for. I had to report to Himeko about what I’d learned. Once we’d finished scrubbing each other’s bodies, she sank into the tub to soak, and I did the same.

“Lady Rosalie seems really determined to get Lady Sakura, don’t you think?”

As we faced each other in the spacious bathtub, our legs brushed, sending a thrill through me. Her naked body was exceptionally appealing even to me, a fellow girl, and it was right there in front of my face. I didn’t quite know where to look.

“Did something happen?”

While asking this, she poked my feet with her toes. I retaliated as I recalled what Sara had said.

“She approached Sara and invited her to have tea. The weird part is how she knows about the connection between Sara and Lady Sakura in the first place.”

“That *is* quite strange. Nothing about Sara was included in Sakura’s student profile, so she shouldn’t have known they were connected. Not through any normal channels.”

“Yeah. Sara didn’t tell her about it herself, and I didn’t either. How does she know? She must have a really intricate intelligence network or something.”

“That’s possible. I can think of one way she might have found out, though.

Sort of.”

“There is?”

“It’s true that Sakura’s profile says nothing about Sara and vice versa. But if you got a chance to look at both profiles in detail, it would jump out that they’re both from Britain. Then you might figure out that they have a connection.”

“Right, yeah.”

“Normal students don’t get to see that information for obvious reasons. The only ones who can are the teaching staff and a few students in particular.”

“Like you and Lady Angelica.” I couldn’t think of any other students who’d be in a position to look at all that personal data.

“Exactly. Both of us are allowed. There is one other person too, though.”

“Is this what you were about to mention in the Sky Salon the other day?”

“Yes.”

In the end, the Kokonoe sisters had barged in, so the topic had been dropped.

“Well? Who is it?”

Himeko fell silent for a few moments. After steeling her resolve, she told me, “It’s Shion Tsukuyomi—the girl who’s like a sister to me. She could get hold of any information she wanted.”

“Really? How?”

“The Tsukuyomi family is involved with the school’s administration. She doesn’t have direct access, but if she wanted to, she’d find a way to get her hands on it.”

“Still, that doesn’t explain why she’d want to tell Lady Rosalie about any of this.”

“Exactly. I just can’t wrap my head around it. That’s probably why it hasn’t occurred to Lady Angelica as a possible explanation.”

Both of us fell quiet. Lady Shion’s name was one I definitely hadn’t expected to hear. I wondered why she’d do something like this, but I knew it was

pointless to wonder if even Himeko had no idea.

I was the one to break the silence. “Well, you don’t have proof the leak came from Lady Shion, right?”

“No, it’s just a guess on my part.”

“Why don’t you ask her?”

“I’m sure she would just feign ignorance. If she’s using Rosalie to her own ends rather than acting herself, I don’t think she’ll show her cards until the results come to fruition.”

“Oh. Fair enough.” Lady Shion sure was an enigmatic person.

“By the way,” Himeko asked, “is Sara going to take Rosalie up on her offer? Will she go for tea with her?”

“No. She came to Kirara and me for advice, and after we all discussed it, she decided not to go.”

“That might be for the best. Her going could have gained us some information, but she might have ended up caught in a trap somehow.”

Then she said, “Come here,” and pulled me toward her. Waves rippled across the water’s surface, with Himeko’s breasts swaying along with them. I rested against her and she embraced me from behind, holding me tightly. It seemed like she was nervous, so to reassure her, I grasped her arms firmly in return.



“No use worrying about it, I suppose,” she said at last. “If the information really did come from Shion, the earliest she’ll tell us is probably after Sakura joins a salon. We’ll have to ask her then.”

“Sounds sensible.”

As I replied, I leaned back against Himeko, acting every bit the adoring servant. My behavior made her chuckle softly.

Since I’d switched off work mode, Himeko also seemed to decide to let that be the end of that topic. The tension left her, and her hands—even as her arms still held me—started to wander. As they brushed the side of my body, I jumped.

“Hey! That tickles!”

“I’m just checking if you’ve gained any weight. You’ve been eating so many sweets lately. I’m worried about you.”

Her demonic hands continued to mercilessly torment my body.

“I haven’t. I’m working so hard, the calories just fall off.”

I was arching my back in a futile effort to avoid her hands, but otherwise I let her have her way. *I figure helping my mistress relax is all part of a maid’s job. Right?*

“You know, I’ve never really seen you do any exercise,” I pointed out. “Aren’t you worried about your own figure?”

“Oh, not at all. I don’t eat that much, so I can’t have gained any weight.”

“You sure about that? I’ll give you a good feel to make sure!”

“Heh, be my guest. I don’t mind.”

Hot water splashed everywhere as our voices echoed throughout the bathroom. If anyone had been watching, they surely would have warned us it was thoroughly improper, but I didn’t see a problem with it. This was just how comfortable Himeko and I had gotten with each other’s naked bodies. Even as I grew very slightly lightheaded, our game of offense and defense in the bath carried on.

This is kind of a workout in itself, I guess!



After Sara refused Lady Rosalie's invitation, nothing much happened for a few days. Lady Rosalie hadn't given up on winning over Lady Sakura, of course, but she didn't keep trying to hurry things along by going for Sara. From what I heard, she'd told Sara, "I had been hoping to hear a little more about Sakura from you before her arrival, but that's all right. I understand why you're cautious. I genuinely want her to join my salon, though, so I'll invite both of you for tea after she gets here. I do hope to see you then!"

There was no bad blood on Sara's side. She had replied, "When my mistress is here, I'm quite certain we'll be glad to accept. I'll make sure to inform her about it."

It was still unclear how or why Lady Shion was using Lady Rosalie, or if that was even the case to begin with, but one way or another, it did appear to be a serious effort on Lady Rosalie's part. There was no doubt on that front, so there was no reason to disparage her. I was sure that if Lady Sakura did go for her salon, she'd have a great time.

Shortly after that, though, Lady Kagura officially announced to the Sky Salon members that she was making plans to invite Lady Sakura to join, so I couldn't let Lady Rosalie steal her away. I had to give it my all and do what I could to make sure she picked the Sky Salon instead.



Then came July 1st. A clear, blue sky stretched above us without a single cloud. The summer sun's rays were scorching hot on our skin, but we stood by the school's front gate without moving an inch.

"She should be here soon, right?" I asked.

"Yes, it shouldn't be much longer," Sara replied, looking straight ahead. "I calculated the time it should take from the airport numerous times just to be sure."

"What if there's a traffic jam?" Kirara said, attempting to throw cold water on her certainty.

Sara took it in her stride, however. “I included that as a factor.”

There had been no way Sara would wait in her room, of course. She’d woken up bright and early to wait by the gate like a faithful puppy. Kirara and I had decided to join her.

We were purely there as her friends, wanting to meet our friend’s mistress. We didn’t have any plans to start giving her a Sky Salon sales pitch. It was up to Lady Kagura to make the first move, so there was no way we could do anything to spoil her carefully laid plans. To be honest, it wasn’t ideal for us to be there saying hello the second she arrived, but our overeager desire to be the first ones to see Sara’s mistress had won out.

Himeko and Lady Kagura hadn’t told us *not* to either. In fact, Himeko had said she’d be waiting inside the building ready to show Lady Sakura around. Normally that would have been Lady Angelica’s responsibility, but Himeko had taken the job off her hands.

Suddenly, Sara straightened up. “I can hear a car drawing nearer. It must be my mistress.”

Amanotsuka Academy was at the top of a small hill and surrounded by a tall fence, so the earliest we’d be able to see the car was when it approached the area in front of the gate. That was why all she had to go on was the sound.

She was certain, though. “It’s definitely her. There wouldn’t be external businesspeople arriving at this time on a weekend. There should be no cars driving around this close to the school unless they strayed here by accident or had some very specific reason.”

“Fair enough,” I replied.

It sounded like she’d accounted for absolutely everything in her calculations. Through the fence, I could hear the sound of the car approaching. Then a taxi slowly drove into the turning area in front.

“You were right!” Kirara said, looking quite pleased. Even she was excited to meet Lady Sakura.

The taxi quietly pulled up to the entrance and stopped. My view of the back seat was obscured by the bright glare of the sun, but I was pretty sure I could

see a young lady inside.

Sara ran over, recognizing her mistress instantly. “Lady Sakura!”

So much for waiting with dignified poise!

“Sara, wait!” I followed after her, a strained smile on my face. Kirara came with me.

Breathlessly, Sara called her mistress’s name again. “Lady Sakura!”

At the same moment, the car door opened and the girl inside got out. “Honestly, such disgraceful behavior!” she said in perfectly fluent Japanese.

Wait, is she Japanese?

But this thought that flashed into my mind was quickly dispelled. Looking at her, she was clearly different from Himeko, the very picture of Japanese beauty. I could tell right away that she was a Western beauty, dressed in a gown that would have been perfectly suited for a high-class ball. She was the epitome of a fairy-tale princess.

As we’d seen in her profile, she was a little on the short side, but she came across as more mature in person. She exuded the aura of natural-born nobility.

Her blue eyes that were as clear as the ocean took in Sara first of all, then shifted to us, glimmering with curiosity. Her long, narrow, blonde pigtails were tied with pink ribbons, only enhancing how sweet and adorable she looked.

The skin on her slender arms and legs was pale and perfectly clear. I was sure it would be soft and smooth to the touch.

She was beautiful, adorable, and noble. Those were the words that seemed to sum her up. I could see why Sara had ended up suffering from mistress deficiency syndrome. With a mistress as exquisite as this, even being apart from her for a day would have to be painful.



She turned back to Sara. “How have you been?”

“Eagerly awaiting your arrival, milady.” She reached out and pulled her mistress in for a tight hug.

“Honestly, you never listen to me!” Lady Sakura chided, but she didn’t try to draw away. Clearly, she knew how much Sara had missed her. She stroked Sara’s back. “There, there.”

This continued for what felt like five whole minutes.

“Surely that’s enough now,” Lady Sakura said at last, lightly tapping Sara on the hip.

Sara still looked reluctant to let her go, but she finally did so. Smiling, she replied, “My supply of Lady Sakura had run completely dry. I needed it to be refilled.”

“Don’t be daft.” Lady Sakura took her faithful servant’s hand and turned her gaze on Kirara and me again. “Good day. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Are you friends of Sara’s?”

With her free hand, she grasped her skirt, delivering a curtsy so graceful that she looked like a magical fairy. Struck by the full force of her smile, my heart skipped a beat.

“Good day,” I replied, my voice suddenly shrill and uneven.

Kirara was just about able to keep it together, but her eyes were fixed directly on Lady Sakura. “Good day.”

“And, erm, you’re right,” I told Lady Sakura. “We’re Sara’s classmates and friends. We were aware that your arrival was scheduled for today, so we took it upon ourselves to accompany her in the hope of making your acquaintance at the earliest possible opportunity.”

My phrasing was getting uncomfortably formal and convoluted, but that was just how nervous I was.

Kirara added, “We didn’t want to get in the way, but Sara *insisted* she wanted you to meet us, so came with her to wait.”

“I don’t recall saying any such thing,” Sara immediately countered.

“I’m kidding,” Kirara replied, wearing a smile that held no malice. Seeing how joyful Sara was at being reunited with her mistress, even Kirara wasn’t about to pick a fight. She knew the bliss of being beside one’s mistress very well.

“My, my, I’m surprised to see that Sara has made friends she can share jokes with. She’s always been practically glued to me. She even used to try coming with me when I went to the bathroom. It seems like having her come here before me paid off.”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t disclose such private details, milady.” Sara’s cheeks flushed in embarrassment at this interesting revelation.

“You can’t blame me for being worried. I didn’t know how you’d cope on your own. It’s fantastic that you’ve gotten to know people. Now, hurry up and introduce us.”

Some dissatisfaction still lingered on Sara’s face, but after a moment she said, “Very well. These are, well, yes, I suppose I would call them my friends. These are my friends, Misaki and Kirara. They’re both in my class, and they’re in the service of frightfully esteemed mistresses.”

“How marvelous. I hope you’ll both introduce me to your mistresses too.”

“Absolutely,” I replied. I glanced toward the school buildings. “You’ll meet mine right after this, actually.”

“Oh?”

“She’s waiting inside, ready to give you a tour of the school.”

“I see. I certainly shouldn’t keep her waiting. Hopefully it’s all right if we chat a little more while we’re walking.”

“It’ll be no problem at all, I’m sure.”

“Milady, is this all your luggage?”

I hadn’t even noticed her doing it, but Sara had already managed to get all of Lady Sakura’s baggage out of the taxi. *She really doesn’t miss a single detail.*

“Yes, that’s all for now. The rest should be delivered today. All the essentials

are in there, though, so it's fine."

"Then why don't we set off?" Since it was my mistress waiting inside, I took it upon myself to lead the way, trying to be as polite and graceful as possible. I wanted her to get a good first impression of Amanotsuka Academy and of us.

Lady Sakura let out an amused chuckle that I hoped wasn't a reaction to this slightly forced attempt. "I know it shouldn't come as a surprise, since I was familiar with how the school worked when I entered Sara into the Domestic Arts program, but it's still a little strange to see students actually wearing maid uniforms."

"Do you think so?" I replied awkwardly. I was so used to it now that I didn't really think about it, but it *was* unusual to have a school where ladies and maids studied on the same campus.

"Yes, but I'm really excited. I have a feeling I'll get something out of it that a normal school wouldn't give me. Sara—and Misaki and Kirara too—I hope you'll tell me everything there is to know about this place. I want to dive headfirst into my new life here and enjoy it to the fullest."

"Jolly good," Sara replied.

"We'll tell you everything we can," I added.

"This school has a lot of unique systems," Kirara said, "so I definitely recommend you start getting some firsthand experience with them."

"I can't wait."

The eagerness was clear in Lady Sakura's voice as she looked up at the castle-like building towering above her.

On a dazzlingly sunny day in early summer, this new lady made her debut at Amanotsuka Academy for Girls.



Amanotsuka Academy for Girls Uniform Collection





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Uniform





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Uniform





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Uniform

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Girls Kingdom: Volume 3

by Nayo

Translated by Philip Reuben Edited by teiko

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