

4

# Girls Kingdom

Author: Nayo

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# Characters



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

## Himeko Amanotsuka

Second-Year Societal Arts

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

## Misaki Hotaru

First-Year Domestic Arts



- ◆ 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)**

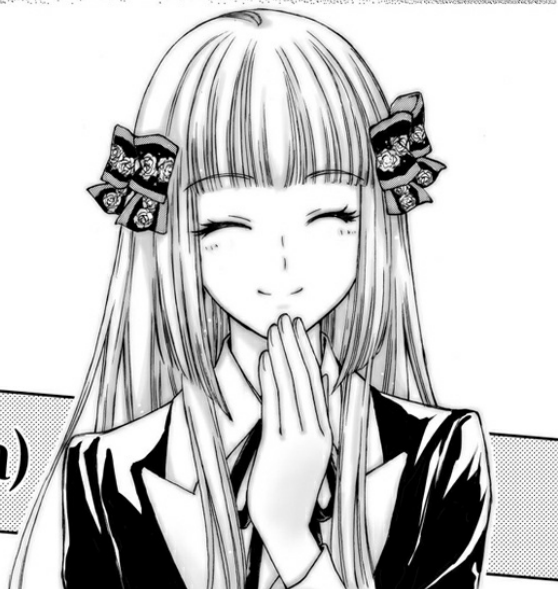
Second-Year Domestic Arts



- ◆ 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



# Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Characters](#)

[Amanotsuka Academy for Girls](#)

[Chapter One: Mask of the Rose](#)

[Chapter Two: The Secret Weapon](#)

[Chapter Three: Sweet Magic](#)

[Chapter Four: The New Member](#)

[Chapter Five: Summer Vacation Begins](#)

[Chapter Six: Melancholy Summer](#)

[Chapter Seven: The Vampire and the Midsummer Sun](#)

[Chapter Eight: A New Bond](#)

[Amanotsuka Academy for Girls Uniform Collection](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



# 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 known throughout the globe.

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: Mask of the Rose

The day after Lady Sakura arrived, there was a moment of panic in our classroom. During homeroom, Sara raised her hand as soon as we'd finished exchanging good mornings with the teacher, then declared that she was now a Seraph and therefore vacating her position as head maid.

Unlike other prestigious roles at the school, being head maid didn't come with any fixed term of office. She was generally chosen from students who weren't Seraphs yet, so if a class's current head maid *did* get a contract, that would usually be the cue to choose someone else. Doing both at once wasn't really practical, but of course they wanted only the most exceptional students to have the "head" moniker. That was apparently how the system had ended up this way.

This meant that there was nothing wrong with Sara's declaration in and of itself. However, she was so good in the role that it was alarming for her to quit out of nowhere. Small shrieks rose up from our classmates. Not to be outdone, Ms. Hiyori practically screamed.

I had never seen an expression like that on our homeroom teacher's face before. Her eyes widened and her mouth flapped open and closed like that of a goldfish.

"Sara," she said, her voice a bundle of nerves, "this seems awfully sudden. I know you've been turning down one proposal after another from ladies asking you to be their Seraph, so why the sudden change of heart? Not that I'm bothered by you becoming a Seraph, of course! It's good news."

Apparently unable to form any more words, Ms. Hiyori put her hands together. It looked like she was praying. *Is it really that big of a shock that Sara's quitting as head maid—or that she's become a Seraph?*

Looking slightly apologetic, Sara replied in a firm tone, "The truth is, my mistress, Lady Sakura, joined the school yesterday, and we immediately entered into the Golden Contract."

"Sakura? Oh yes, I did hear about a new student arriving from abroad. Were



the two of you already acquainted?”

“You could say that. I actually served her for a long time in Britain, so we’re very well acquainted indeed.” She grinned.

Ms. Hiyori hung her head, crestfallen. She appeared to have realized there was nothing she could do about it. “Oh, I see. I didn’t realize you already had a mistress before you even came here. That explains why your knowledge and skills as a maid are superlative. Oh, erm, I’m happy to hear that you’ve become a Seraph, of course! I knew it was only a matter of time anyway.”

She went on, “Quite a few students in this class have already become Seraphs thanks to you, and just as many have become Exousias. It’s been years since a first-year class has achieved such a feat. First years are still in the middle of learning everything they need to know to be a maid, so you’d normally expect exclusive contracts to come later. Your advice and support is what made all the difference. It has allowed everyone to learn surprisingly quickly and forge excellent ties to the Societal Arts students. Since you were the unsung hero behind all that, I knew it wouldn’t be long before you became a Seraph yourself. The day has finally come, that’s all.”

Ms. Hiyori’s acceptance seemed to be growing as she spoke. When she raised her head, her face still showed some trepidation but was far more resolute.

“As a result,” she added, “my own evaluation for the first term was surprisingly positive, and I can expect a proportionally large summer bonus.”

*Right, I see. Just like we get paid more if we become Seraphs, the teachers’ pay goes up based on that as well.*

“So I really can’t thank you enough, Sara. Still, I don’t suppose there’s *any* chance I could ask you to stay on until, erm, at least the end of this trimester? I’m not asking because of my own evaluation or anything like that—it’s just that a lot of students are really eager to get a contract before the summer break. That’s very important for the girls in both programs because it’s a long break, and arranging a contract before that means the maid can visit the mistress’s family and stay with her.”

“A lot of Societal Arts students want to show their future employer the house where they’ll be working,” she continued, “and introduce them to their families.

However, if the vacation starts without them forming a contract, there's a possibility the mistress might rethink the matter and decide it's too soon to rush into one. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that, but it is important to hold on to that initial inspiration and momentum, you know?"

Then Ms. Hiyori doubled down on her entreaty. "I'd really like it if you could help with that final push, Sara. After everything you've done to support this class as head maid, I don't think anyone could do it but you. A new head maid would have to start from scratch, learning about everyone's individual problems and concerns, and they'd never manage that before the break. It's only a month—no, more like three weeks. Could you think of it as one last job to take care of?"

She stared at Sara with an imploring gaze, looking as sweet as a baby animal.

Apparently deciding that it wasn't right to refuse her teacher's plea, Sara replied, "Well, I suppose it might be for the best. I'll grant that there are a lot of girls on the verge of receiving that all-important contract, and passing the torch in the midst of that might have dire consequences. I doubt Lady Sakura would tell me not to. Furthermore, I have friends who I'm certain will be willing to assist, so I don't foresee any problems in this final stretch."

After saying that, Sara turned to glance at Kirara and me. *Her friends who'd be willing to assist—does she mean us? If she's willing to come to us to ask for help, that's quite a change in her mindset! She genuinely sees us as her friends now.*

I showed my assent with a thumbs-up. Kirara nodded, however reluctantly. She had to at least get along with Sara on the surface, since we were trying to get Lady Sakura to join the Sky Salon.

"Fantastic," Ms. Hiyori replied. "Now my evaluation won't suffer at all. Oh no! I mean, my number one priority is for all of you to find wonderful mistresses, of course! But I do have a life of my own, so it's hardly a bad thing for me to benefit from all of your good news, is it now? Yes, that's how you should all look at it."

She flashed an innocent grin. This kind of openness was probably the reason Ms. Hiyori was so beloved. Everyone in the class nodded in agreement with



looks that said, *Sure, if you say so.*



After school that day, Kirara and I had a request to make of Sara.

“Hey, Sara!” I called out as I approached her. “Do you have a sec?”

I knew she’d have piles of work on her plate. With everything she had to do before giving up her post as head maid, she’d be even busier than usual. We were fully prepared to help but sadly couldn’t that day, awkward as that was. That meant we at least wanted to avoid taking up too much of her time.

“Certainly,” Sara replied.

“We’re wondering if you could ask Lady Sakura something.”

“Indeed.”

She’d probably guessed what this was about, so she hadn’t wasted any words. Taking her cue from this, Kirara got straight to the point.

“In the next few days, Lady Kagura is going to officially invite Lady Sakura to join the Sky Salon. If she receives any other invitations in the meantime, we’d like her to hold off on giving a reply. We’re not trying to get a head start before anyone else steals her or anything. It’s just that several salons seem to want her, and it’s going to take the rest of the day to check with them and coordinate.”

“Very well. My mistress is also rather unlikely to commit to joining a salon at such short notice given that she only arrived yesterday. Today I’ll be showing her the areas of the campus that she wasn’t able to see yesterday, so you needn’t worry.”

“Whew, that’s a relief. We’ll definitely make up for it by helping you out, but that’ll have to start tomorrow, okay?”

“That’s quite all right.”

With that, Sara got started with her duties as head maid. It already looked like she was hurrying as much as she could, presumably because she was eager to get back to Lady Sakura as soon as possible.

We were just as eager to get back to our own mistresses.

“Let’s go, Misaki,” Kirara said to me.

“Yeah!”

After a quick wave goodbye to Sara, who looked busy as a beaver, we left the classroom and headed for the Sky Salon without a moment to waste.



When we arrived, Lady Saeko’s Seraph, Matsuri, and Lady Sumire’s Seraph, Mihaya, had already cleaned and tidied the common areas. They were so efficient that they’d already gotten everything ready even though we were only a few minutes late.

We’d recently asked for the common area setup to be left to us, only to be told that we should make sure we were doing everything right for our mistresses first. However, as first years, it wasn’t really right for us to leave the older students to do the grunt work, so our makeshift solution was to arrive earlier than Matsuri and Mihaya and take care of it beforehand. If we did that, all they could do was accept it with a strained smile and an “Oh well!”

*It’s not totally ideal, though. Matsuri’s pay will go down slightly, and it’ll take her longer to pay off her debts, which worries me.*

“Sorry we’re late!” I called to the two older maids as we rushed in. In a hurry to complete our own tasks, Kirara and I split up. I went to Himeko’s private spot and got to cleaning as quickly as I could before arranging the cakes she’d have with tea.

The second I was done, a sound in the distance signaled the elevator’s arrival. Then I heard the voices of Himeko, Lady Kagura, and the Kokonoe sisters. Before going to greet my mistress, I gave the area one last look-over to make sure everything was in tip-top shape.

“Okay, looks good,” I said to myself.

Himeko wasn’t exactly an expert when it came to cleaning, so it was essential that I checked my own work. Even though we had a different arrangement than most mistresses and their Seraphs, I was, at least in terms of appearances, the



Seraph of the school's deputy chairman of the board. My cleaning skills had to be up to par.

Himeko wasn't too concerned, but that didn't mean I could rest on my laurels. I had to reach a high enough standard that I was worthy of being called her Seraph. That came with the territory.

"Good day, Lady Himeko."

"Yes, good day."

When I went to meet her, she gently stroked my hair and cheek. She seemed to be quite fond of the way my slightly wavy hair felt on her hands. As for the cheek caress, I wondered if it stemmed from the way we communicated while in the bath. By now, we'd gotten into the habit of touching each other's bodies. I couldn't really explain it.





After our usual ritual of touching each other, I turned to lead Himeko to her table. Before I could do that, however, Lady Kagura made an announcement, projecting her voice for everyone in the salon to hear.

“Could I ask you all to gather round, please?”

In response, the various members of the Sky Salon emerged from their personal areas and assembled around the center table.

*This has to be about Lady Sakura, right?*

As expected, once everyone was seated, Lady Kagura brought up that very topic. “Thank you, everyone. Allow me to get straight down to business. As I mentioned before, a new student arrived from the UK yesterday. Her name is Sakura Medi Christine, and her family is extensively involved in online streaming platforms, such as ChrisTV, and they’re gradually taking over the world of mass media both new and old. Now they’re expanding into Japan as part of their plan to become a world-leading corporation. I’d very much like the support of Sakura and her family in my own endeavors. It’ll be essential if I want to make my dream a reality. As such, I’m determined to have her join the salon so I can form a deeper connection with her.”

She paused for a moment, then continued, “I’ve received information that our salon is not the only one vying for Sakura. In theory, we could reach out to her right now and recruit her before she has any other options to choose from, but that wouldn’t be wise. Knowing as we do that there are other salons competing for her, we have to engage in a fair fight and ensure that Sakura *and* the salon leaders are satisfied. Otherwise, it doesn’t really count. Naturally, we have no time to sit idly by; we can’t allow another salon to swipe her from under our noses.”

Lady Saeko interjected, “Can I ask a quick question? Out of curiosity, which other salons want her?”

“The first one is the Paradise Palace.”

“Ah, right.”

Lady Saeko let out a small sigh of understanding. Everyone knew about the Paradise Palace’s specific entry requirement, so it was clear right away what

kind of person Lady Sakura was—or how tall she was, at the very least.

“The other is the Gloriana Guesthouse.”

Looking intrigued, Lady Saeko nodded. Clearly she’d heard the name of Lady Rosalie’s salon. “That was set up pretty recently, wasn’t it? Are they trying to boost the salon’s reputation by recruiting the new student from abroad?”

“I don’t know the full details, but the Gloriana Guesthouse *is* themed around British traditionalism, so it’s inevitable that they’d want her.”

“Right, I see. So it’s not just a publicity stunt. In that case, they could put up a good fight.”

She smiled eagerly. If her expression was anything to go by, she was ready to grind them into dust however Lady Kagura wanted.

As if she’d read my thoughts, Lady Saeko immediately turned to me. “What’s with the face, Misaki?”

I stifled a shriek. “Oh! Uhm, nothing! Nothing at all!”

“So far, we’ve only heard about those two,” Lady Kagura said, “but we can’t rule out the possibility of there being others. That’s why I’m making arrangements to oust any salons that are planning to invite her and make them all agree to a fair fight. Kirara!”

“Yes, milady.” Hearing her name, Kirara stood.

“I’d like you to immediately visit all the other salons and find out if they’re planning to invite Lady Sakura to join them or not.”

“Understood. Leave it to me.”

“I’d like everyone else to learn about Lady Sakura and prepare to show her hospitality she’ll appreciate when she comes to visit us.”

With a light nod, Lady Kagura broke up the gathering. Then she called on Kirara alone, probably to give her more specific instructions for the salon tour she was about to embark on.

*It would be nice if I could go with her and help.* No sooner did I think that than Himeko called my name in a hushed voice. When I turned to look, she was

peeking her head out of her personal area and subtly beckoning with her hand.

If she was acting this way in the Sky Salon, there was only one explanation: she didn't want Lady Kagura to know what she was up to. Trying not to draw too much attention, I hurried over to her. She pulled me around the corner to ensure nobody could see and drew her face close to mine.

"I want you to go with Kirara."

"I'm totally happy to do that, but—"

*But you don't have to be so secretive*, I wanted to say, but Himeko interrupted me. "When you get to the Mauve Manor, I want you to find out what Shion's intentions are."

"Oh, right!"

It was starting to make sense. Himeko suspected that Shion, a Societal Arts student who was like a sister to her, was the one who had fed Lady Rosalie the information about Lady Sakura. We didn't have any proof yet, and it wasn't directly related to the battle for Lady Sakura's membership, so I could see why she wanted to keep it quiet for now.

"All right. When I get to the Mauve Manor, I'll find an indirect way to ask her."

"No, that won't do," Himeko replied, rejecting my plan in a surprisingly firm tone. "You need to ask her directly. Otherwise she'll just dodge the question, and maybe even get angry at you for putting on airs."

"Oh. Yeah, I really don't want that."

She wasn't exactly approachable at the best of times, so if she actually got angry with me, I'd have to run and hide.

After groaning, I continued, "How should I ask her, then? Something like 'You didn't give Lady Rosalie any information about Lady Sakura, did you?'"

"Even more directly than that. 'When you gave the information to Rosalie, what was your intention?' Something along those lines."

"But that's *really* direct!"

This was a high hurdle for me to get over. Too high, in fact. I'd be accusing her



out of nowhere. If I said that right to her face, she'd get angry for sure.

Himeko gripped my shoulders. "I know it won't be easy, but if you don't phrase it like that, she won't open up. Besides, I'm almost certain that it was her. If you'd like, you can preface it by saying I wanted you to ask. That way, even if she gets annoyed, the brunt of it will be aimed at me."

It was clear that Himeko wouldn't take no for an answer. As scared as I was, her orders were clear, and I couldn't disobey.

"Fair enough. I'll do my best."

"Thanks." She gave me a gentle hug and stroked my head.

We went back out into the main area, where Lady Kagura was about to see Kirara off.

"Kagura, do you mind if Misaki goes with her?" Himeko asked. "I think visiting the other salons would be good experience for her."

"That's absolutely fine. Kirara, take Misaki with you."

"Yes, milady," she replied with a hint of a smile. It was no surprise that visiting every salon on her own had felt like a lonely prospect.

Himeko put a hand on my back. "It's all up to you."

"I'll take care of it."



After Kirara and I got in the elevator, I heaved a small sigh. I'd told Himeko that I'd do my best, but actually facing Lady Shion and pressing her for an answer like that would take all my courage. When I pictured it, she grew so enraged that she instantly shot me a Medusa-like glare that turned me into stone.

*That's way too plausible. I guess I'll have to ask her from a safe distance and try to avoid her gaze as best I can.*

Just imagining it made me sigh again. Looking at me, Kirara noticed something was up. "Did Lady Himeko say something to you?"

"No. Well, kind of. She gave me a little task to do that's like being thrown into

a beast's cage during feeding time, or poking a hornet's nest."

*I guess I can tell Kirara, right? She'll be going into the Mauve Manor with me anyway, so she'll hear what I ask Lady Shion. Better to tell her now than have her try to stop me when I come out with something so weird.*

"There's something I have to ask Lady Shion. Something I have to tell her, really."

"Wow, that sounds tough." She looked at me with pitying eyes.

"Yeah. Basically, Himeko's convinced that Lady Shion is the one who gave Lady Rosalie the information about Lady Sakura."

"Oh, really?" she asked, surprise written on her face.

"It's just Himeko's deduction right now, but she's pretty confident."

"Why would she do that, though?"

"Even Himeko doesn't know. That's why I'm supposed to ask her directly."

"Huh. That's going to take some courage, all right."

Still looking very sorry for me, Kirara took a step back. *Hah. She should know that she doesn't get to run away either.*

I grasped her sleeve and grinned broadly. "You know you'll be coming in there with me, right?"

The breath caught in her throat. "Right. I knew that."

She nodded, looking very unhappy indeed.

When we got off the elevator, I asked, "Where are we going first?"

*This feels just like the time we left to do our debut.* In retrospect, it felt like a waste that I'd gone to all the salons without even realizing what the point was behind the whole thing.

"I've been instructed to head to the Paradise Palace first. Otherwise, there's a chance of Mei taking action before we get there."

"True. Mei seems to have a sixth sense for short girls. Even without any advance knowledge, she probably felt her presence."

We glanced at each other, then quickened our pace and made for the staircase leading to the Paradise Palace.

I didn't *really* think Mei would already be on her way to recruit someone who had literally arrived yesterday. And yet, as we climbed the spiral staircase, we heard the clacking of regular footsteps in the other direction.

*No way. Surely not.*

Kirara and I made eye contact, both thinking the same thing—right before we saw Mei walking down toward us.

*It has to be a coincidence, though, right? Lady Asuka must have sent her out on an errand, or she's going to buy something.*

She smiled and spoke with a soft, lighthearted voice as if she was going on a picnic or something. "Oh, it's you two. Good day! If you're here, does that mean you want to see Lady Asuka?"

Kirara and I froze. An alarm bell rang in my head. *This is bad.*

Clearly, Kirara was on the same page. Together, we silently moved up and stood on either side of Mei, smiling back at her with a hand each on her back.

"We do, actually," Kirara said. "We need to see her right away. It's something very important, in fact. Her Seraph absolutely *must* be there beside her."

Kirara did all she could to underscore just what a momentous, crucial conversation this was going to be.

"You don't mind coming back upstairs with us, do you?" I added.

Little by little, we moved our hands, gradually rotating Mei's body.

As we turned her around, she looked at me and said, "I'd love to, but I have an utterly urgent task to attend to as well."

Our doubts changed into certainty. If something was that critical, it was either a special request from her mistress or a journey to go and recruit a lady who fit her precise preference. It probably couldn't be anything else.

"Oh, really?" I asked.

"I don't think you'll be late even if you listen to what we have to say first,"



Kirara said.

“This is quite awkward. I’m curious about what would make you be so insistent.”

It looked like we had won. Mei gradually began to make her way back up the stairs.

“It’s just that it’ll be relevant to you too, Mei,” I told her.

Rather than letting go of her, we decided to keep a firm grasp and lead her back without giving her a chance to escape.

When we arrived at the Paradise Palace, we entered with her. It was the second time I’d been here, but the interior design still reminded me of, well, a kindergarten, to be honest. Bright shades of red and yellow were everywhere, and wooden building blocks were piled up as decorations. The tables and chairs were clearly smaller than the norm.

This was related to the Paradise Palace’s strict rule that all its members must be no taller than four foot nine.

When we went a little ways inside, a scene spread out before us featuring Lady Asuka, the head of the salon, and Lady Erisu, who managed a restaurant on campus. A little farther away were some other girls who honestly looked like cute little children playing together. It was tough to see them as anything else.

Seeing Mei, Lady Asuka bluntly said, “Oh, you’re back early. Did she agree to join?”

*So Mei really was on her way to invite Lady Sakura to join the Paradise Palace.*

Then she noticed us and scowled. “I see you’ve adopted some strays too.”

My eyes met hers dead-on. Since I was there representing Lady Kagura, I smiled and gave her a suitable greeting. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Lady Asuka? I hope you’re doing well.”

“Don’t ‘I hope you’re doing well’ me! You must have come here with some ulterior motive.”

Snarling, she waved her hands to shoo us away. It wasn’t exactly a look befitting of a fine lady, but combined with her small stature, it still looked

absolutely adorable.

“Squee!” Mei exclaimed forcefully all of a sudden. For some reason, she was staring up at the ceiling with a look of ecstasy. Then she whispered in my ear, “Very nice, Misaki! I hardly ever get to see Lady Asuka make such a cute gesture. That alone has made it worth coming back here with you!”

“Oh. Uhm, great.”

“Inside the salon, she works really hard to convey the image of a leader, so she rarely shows the cracks in her armor. I always wish she’d act more like a child—throwing tantrums, asking me for piggyback rides, crying, and so on. Don’t you think that would be lovely?”

“Well, erm, I don’t really have an opinion.”

Lady Asuka was definitely cute, but I sadly didn’t even come close to sharing Mei’s perspective, so I wasn’t sure how to answer.

“Mei,” said the lady herself, “stop gabbing about me and come over here. Then explain to me why you’ve brought those two with you.”

“Certainly, milady!” With graceful movements, she walked over and stood by her mistress’s side. “As it happens, I don’t know yet either. We bumped into each other when I was on my way down the stairs, and they basically forced me to come back here with them.”

“My, you have some nerve! Not only have you turned up unannounced, but you’ve strong-armed my Seraph too!”

She began to give off a threatening aura like that of Lady Saeko or Lady Shion. However, Mei was staring at her with a look of extreme glee. It was clear that she was relishing the opportunity to observe a rarely seen side of her mistress.

I knew Lady Asuka was trying to be scary, but in the end, her petiteness made her too delightful for it to work.

“I’m really sorry,” Kirara replied, “but we have some business we wanted to bring up.”

Our completely unflinching reactions seemed to leave her bewildered for a second. “Huh?”

With all due respect to Lady Asuka, we were here on an errand for Lady Kagura. Our mission had to take priority.

“Fine,” Lady Asuka said after a moment, pulling herself together and sitting down again. “What is it, then?”

Kirara and I looked at each other and nodded, then Kirara broached the topic.

“You see, Lady Kagura is planning to ask the new international student who arrived yesterday, Lady Sakura, to join the Sky Salon. We’ve come to inform you of that and find out where you stand.”

“Excuse me?!” Mei exclaimed. “That’s not fair! Why is Lady Kagura so keen on having her for the Sky Salon—for herself? Everyone can tell that she’s perfect for the Paradise Palace!”

Setting aside the question of how all these people had gained such detailed knowledge in the span of a day, there was no denying that Lady Sakura fit the bill. One look at her was enough to know that. When Mei set her sights on someone, there probably weren’t too many salons that would try to compete with her.

Kirara replied, “That’s up to Lady Kagura to decide, so I’m afraid I have no answer for you.”

After hearing those words, Mei couldn’t say much either. She bit her lip in frustration and grumbled, “I made a tactical error. When I met you on the stairs, I should have kept going.”

Mei had a point. We had run into her at a very critical moment. That was why we’d been so forceful in getting her back to the salon.

In the end, we’d successfully done our duty and informed Lady Asuka of our salon leader’s plans. If Mei rushed ahead now, it would look like she was trying to gain an unfair advantage while Lady Kagura was hoping to get everyone on a level playing field. That would be quite bad for Lady Asuka’s reputation, especially given the well-known feelings of rivalry she had toward Lady Kagura. She’d surely want to avoid any appearance of impropriety at all costs.

“It’s too late, Mei,” she admitted. “They have Himeko on their team, so they’ll always beat us to the punch when it comes to information.”

Lady Asuka tried to pat Mei on the head to console her. At least, that was what it looked like. She couldn't quite reach, so it ended up as more of a clap on the shoulder.

"No need to count ourselves out just yet, though. If she's sent you two to give us advance notice, that means she hasn't actually approached the girl, right? Am I right in thinking she wants to arrange a fair contest to decide which salon gets to have Sakura?"

"Exactly," Kirara replied. "My mistress knew as soon as she saw Lady Sakura's profile that the Paradise Palace—Mei, more specifically—was likely to go after her. Also, given that there's at least one more salon who wants her—"

"Oh, is there?" She arched one eyebrow and sounded quite surprised. "Has word traveled about her that quickly when she's only just arrived from abroad? All I know is what I heard about her from Mei. Is she famous or something?"

"Erm, in a way."

Kirara looked a little lost when it came to answering that question. Lady Sakura belonged to a British aristocratic family who operated a media empire, so in that sense, she was famous. However, in Japan there were still few people who had heard of her. In spite of that, for reasons we still couldn't be sure of, Lady Rosalie had learned about her and already made an attempt to get closer to her Seraph, Sara. Maybe it would have been most accurate to say that Lady Sakura had somehow become famous without knowing it herself.

"I heard all about Lady Sakura from my friend Sara and spoke to Lady Kagura about her. I can't tell you how anyone else got their information, but we've gathered from Sara that one other salon is definitely going to approach her. That's why Lady Kagura wanted us to come. We're visiting all the salons to make sure that everyone with an interest in Lady Sakura can have a fair chance of getting her."

"Hmm. Well, Kagura has her own reputation to uphold, so if that's what she's learned, I suppose she has no other way to proceed. Maybe it'll work in our favor. Instead of sneaking around, we can go toe-to-toe with each other. In which case—Mei!"

In what looked like an unusual move, Lady Asuka put an arm around Mei and



pulled her closer.

“We don’t plan on losing, do we now?”

“No! No, of course not!”

Mei, who always walked around half-lidded, was now in a state of wide-eyed shock. She looked like her nose might start bleeding at any moment.

“We’ll gladly take you on fair and square,” Lady Asuka declared. “I’m looking forward to it. I was waiting for the next Salon Struggle to exact my revenge, but if I can do it sooner, then that’s even better. The Kokonoe sisters may have tricked us, but Mei was *not* defeated.”

It was no wonder she was so full of confidence. During the Salon Struggle, Mei had done everything perfectly. When it came to Domestic Arts students, her skills were the best of the best.

“I’m so glad you’re in agreement,” Kirara said in response. “In that case, we’ll be on our way.”

*Phew. One salon down.* Relieved, I went to stand up, as did Kirara.

However, with an ominous tone, Lady Asuka stopped us. “You’re not leaving so soon, are you?”

My imagination ran away with me for a moment. What was she about to do, hold us captive?

Lady Asuka made us sit again with a scheming smile on her face. “What kind of salon leader would I be if I let guests visit the Paradise Palace without showing them proper hospitality? My reputation would be in ruins. We’ll serve you some delicious treats, so stay here and relax for a while.”

“Thank you for the kind offer, but we’re not deserving of your hospitality!”

“Exactly!” Kirara agreed. “And we have several other salons to visit, so—”

Our attempts at politely refusing were flatly denied. “Oh, don’t worry. I won’t take up too much of your time. Mei, get serving.”

“Yes, milady. Leave it to me.”

With graceful movements, Mei walked over to what looked like the kitchen.

“Is the discussion over for now?” came a sweet voice with a hint of a lisp. I knew its owner well.

When I turned to look, Lady Erisu had come over to us, as if trading places with Mei. She still looked like a beautiful porcelain doll. Her soft blonde hair was tied with a large ribbon and two rose-shaped accessories, making her look all the more doll-like. Unbelievably enough, Lady Erisu owned a restaurant on campus that was staffed by her three Exousias. At one point, it had been struggling to drum up business, but it was doing much better now, as reflected in Lady Erisu’s radiant smile.

“Good day, Lady Erisu.”

“Yes, good day, Misaki.”

She came and sat down next to me of all people. A gentle floral aroma wafted toward me; it was so sweet that I had to fight the urge to bury my face in her neck and get a good sniff.

Looking closer, I saw that she had some cake crumbs around her mouth. Those must have been the source of the sweet scent.

*Her Exousias are probably at the restaurant, so I guess it would be fine for me to point it out. Even if she’s not my mistress, as a maid, I shouldn’t just leave the crumbs there, right?*

“Lady Erisu, you have something around your mouth.”

“Really? Where?”

She nonchalantly turned toward me, lifting her chin. *She’s a mistress all right. To her, it’s the most natural thing in the world for me to clean it off.*

Still, it made my heart race for her to present her lips to me so vulnerably.

“Excuse my fingers.”

Forcing myself to keep steady so I wouldn’t be admonished for my trembling, I wiped off the cake crumbs with my thumb.

*Her skin is so velvety smooth! It’s just like a child’s! Wait, that’s not what matters right now.*

Touching her for too long would have been weird, so I moved my hand away, then licked up the crumbs.

Lady Erisu laughed bewitchingly and cocked her head, staring straight into my eyes. “So audacious! Aren’t you embarrassed to be eating something that was stuck to my face?”

*I know she’s making fun of me, but when she pulls such an adorable gesture, I can’t help grinning.*

“Hee hee. I’ll have to tell Himeko how bold you were with me.”

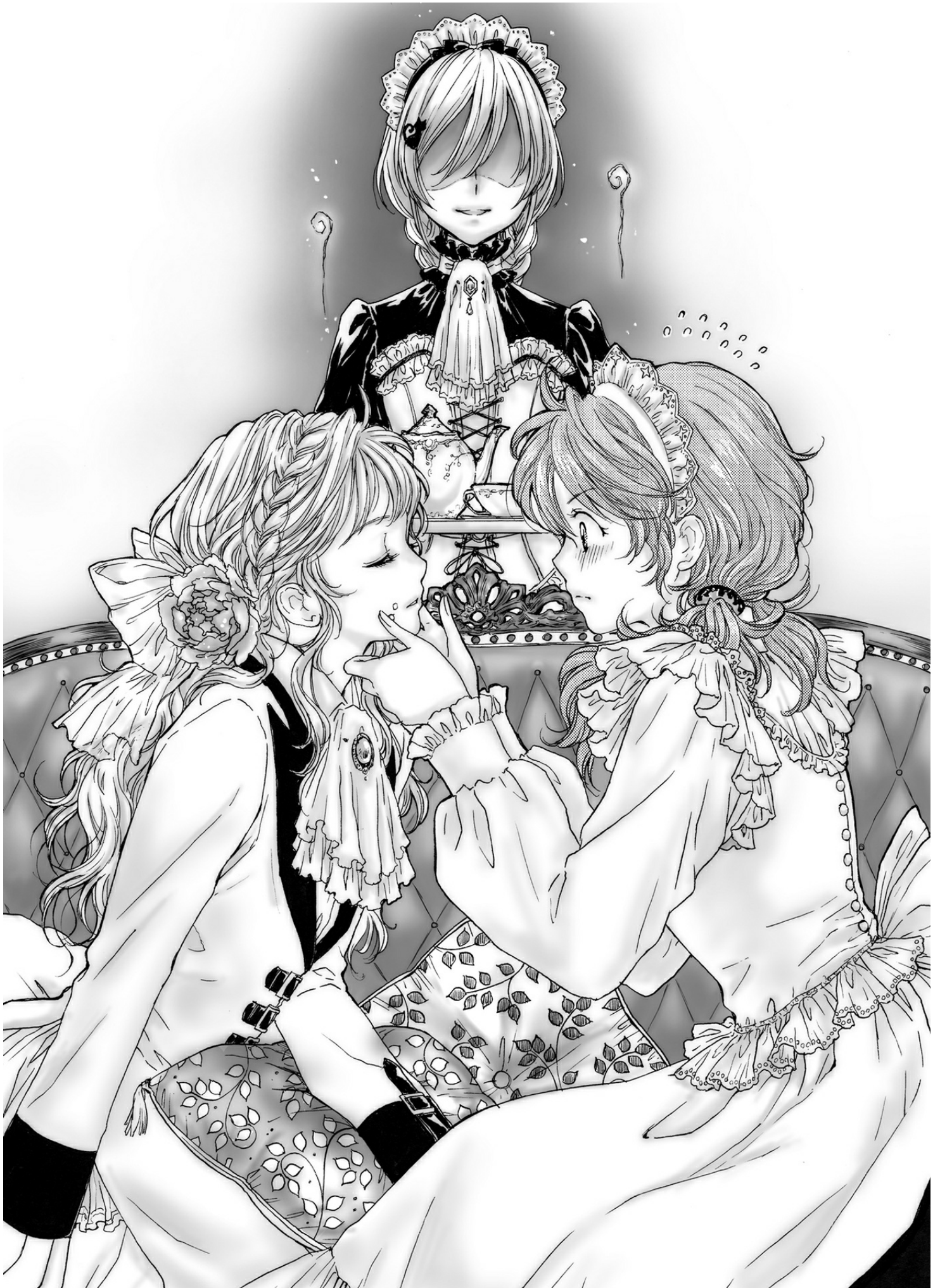
“Wait! Lady Erisu!”

*Oh no. I forgot how fond of pranks she is. There was that time she kissed me right in front of Himeko. Now I’ve given her an opening and gotten myself into a whole mess!*

“Misaki,” said a low voice from behind. “Are you enjoying getting up close and personal with Lady Erisu?”

*Yup. I knew it.*

I immediately knew it was Mei’s voice, but I’d never heard her speak in such a deep rumble before.





“Uh, erm, nothing weird’s going on. It’s perfectly innocent.”

“Don’t worry. Lady Erisu’s very kind. When I make a mistake, she always helps out with my punishment.”

Shooting a resentful glare my way, she placed a tray down on the table.

*This is nuts. Today I’m seeing a lot of sides of Mei that I’ve never seen before, and I really wish I weren’t.*

“I promise you, it’s not whatever you’re thinking. She just had some crumbs around her mouth, so I cleaned them up.”

“Oh, believe me, I know that. But it’s unbearably disappointing that I couldn’t be the one to do it.”

Mei let out a sigh so heavy it was like she was expelling all the air from her lungs. She wasn’t kidding about being disappointed.

Lady Asuka clapped her hands, putting an end to this funny business. Clearly, she was used to this kind of thing by now. “All right, now stop talking nonsense and serve the tea.”

Groaning, Mei replied, “Milady, could you leave some crumbs around *your* mouth at some point?”

“Me? I would never do such a thing!”

I had a memory of her doing exactly that during the Salon Struggle, but I figured now wasn’t the best time to bring that up.

At her mistress’s urging, Mei reluctantly served the tea and accompanying confections. She presented us with Swiss rolls that were filled with decadent amounts of cream encircled by a drizzle of colorful fruit sauce and served on small plates with exquisite patterns.

I was impressed by the effort that had gone into the presentation. *You can really make store-bought cake look like something special.* The apple tea served alongside it had a wonderful aroma as well, giving it a soothing effect.

“Eat up,” Lady Asuka insisted in a cocky tone. “Don’t be shy.”

*Is she proud of finding a really good store or something? If it’s not sold on*

*campus, maybe she had to order it in specially.*

“I’ll give it a try, then.”

“Me too,” Kirara said. “Thank you.”

We exchanged glances, each of us no doubt conscious of how rude it would be *not* to have any when it was right in front of us, and dug in.

Given how yummy it looked, my expectations had already been raised. When I put a piece in my mouth, however, I was blown away.

“This is incredible!”

The words tumbled from my lips before I could stop them. It applied as much to the quality of the sponge as it did to the richness of the cream. Obviously, no expense had been spared in the making of this Swiss roll. The store was either selling it at a loss or at a staggeringly high price to compensate. Either way, no regular store could have sold something like this.

I cut off another small piece and added some of the surrounding sauce. The fruit added new layers of depth to the flavor. I couldn’t get enough. A sip of apple tea was just what I needed to cleanse the palate as well, allowing me to enjoy the refreshing flavor again and again. The combo was incredibly well thought out.

*I have to get some of this for Himeko too. Hopefully they’ll tell me what store it’s from if I ask.*

As all these thoughts were running through my head, Lady Asuka interrupted with a question that blew my mind. “So, how are you enjoying Mei’s homemade Swiss roll?”

“What? Mei made this herself?”

“She did indeed!” She added a haughty laugh.

“But this *has* to be store-bought. Even the shape of it is absolutely perfect. There’s nothing about it that looks handmade at all.”

“Why are you so surprised? Mass-market products are often made to *look* like they were manufactured, but sweets are handmade as a rule. If you can’t tell, then the maker is just that skilled.”

“You must be right. I’m sure you know more about it than I do. Either way, aren’t her skills on par with the pros?”

Seeing as they were serving them at a restaurant, the desserts made by Lady Erisu’s Exousias were also far beyond the ordinary level a student would normally be capable of, but Mei’s confections were a whole different ball game.

Having regained her usual composure, Mei lowered her head elegantly. “I’m honored by your praise.”

Next to me, Lady Erisu was eagerly stuffing her face. “It’s true. Mei’s homemade goods are up to a fully professional standard.”

Was that why she’d come over to us? She wanted to make sure she got some of the Swiss roll too?

“She gives lessons to my three Exousias every now and then. It would be even better if she came and worked for me.”

“That’s not going to happen, I’m afraid,” Lady Asuka interjected. “Mei’s mine.”

The two adorable mistresses were fighting over Mei. It was really cute to watch.

*I never knew Mei was such a fantastic baker, though.*

Looking back, even though the dishes at Erisu’s École Kitchen tended to have some pretty eccentric flavors, the desserts were just plain delicious. It sounded like that was all down to Mei’s instruction.

“Anyway,” Lady Asuka said, “by now I’m sure you’ve realized the point I’m making.”

Despite her triumphant grin, I had no idea what she was getting at.

“No, I’m afraid not,” I replied honestly.

This made her smile even more broadly. “Listen. If a salon asks Sakura to join, she’ll obviously come and visit them. While she’s there, she’ll enjoy some tea as she soaks up the atmosphere. When she comes here, the sweets we serve will be even more delicious than this.”

It finally dawned on me. “Oh. Right.”

“She’s a teenage girl, after all. Tasty treats will steal her heart away; make no mistake. A lot of our members decided to join after sampling Mei’s baking.”

I gulped. “That’s a pretty good secret weapon.”

*The way to a girl’s heart is through her stomach for sure.*

“I’m glad you understand,” Lady Asuka said with a satisfied nod.

“But are you sure it’s okay that you’ve shown your hand like this?” I replied. “Now we’ll know to put in extra effort to win her over.”

“Oh, it’s no problem. In fact, that’s exactly why I made you eat some. Listen here!” She pointed at me. “We can win even while showing our hand! That will be the perfect way to get my revenge!”

Her sense of rivalry toward Lady Kagura was as fearsome as ever. *We’d better not sell her short. Even with the Kokonoe sisters in Lady Kagura’s corner, we’ll be defeated if we let our guard down.*

“Mei, our guests are leaving. Kindly show them to the door.” Lady Asuka’s cloying smile said she’d done everything she wanted to and was finished with us now.

“Certainly, milady.”

Mei stood and escorted us out. Her demeanor as a maid was so flawless that it seemed to give her an invisible aura of confidence.

*Do we really have to compete for Lady Sakura with people like this? I think it’s going to be an uphill battle.*

Mei giggled. “I’m looking forward to this. There are plenty of obstacles in my path, but that will only make it sweeter to get Lady Sakura in my grasp.”

Her smile made a shiver run down my spine.

Once we were some distance away from the Paradise Palace, Kirara let out a huge sigh and looked up at the tower that housed it. “Wow, that was a surprise. Just because they’re the second-place salon doesn’t mean they’ll be pushovers, huh?”

I found myself protesting as well. “As if we can compete with Mei!”

She had a huge advantage. If she could make treats that were even more delicious than anything you could buy, it also meant she could tailor the taste and appearance to suit the target’s preferences. I couldn’t think of any way to win against an opponent like that.

“Well, let’s just consider it a win that we’ve learned about Mei’s strength,” Kirara suggested. “We have a different mission for today, so let’s keep going with that.”

“Good point. Finding a way to beat Mei is up to Lady Kagura and the twins.”

We nodded to each other and set out for the next salon: the Gloriana Guesthouse run by Lady Rosalie.



This salon was on the ground floor of the former classroom building. It was also in the farthest corner behind an easily unnoticed door. Since the salon had been set up so recently, the only locations left were presumably remote ones like this. In theory, Lady Rosalie could have initiated a Salon Struggle to get a better spot, but evidently she was either too kind or too lacking in confidence that she’d win.

*I feel like they could pull it off, though. Her Seraph, Marie, seems like a pretty skilled maid. Together, they could probably win a slightly better location than this.*

I didn’t know Lady Rosalie too well yet, but I was sure she was nice. Still, I felt wary not knowing how she’d gotten her hands on the info about Lady Sakura.

If it was like Himeko said, and Lady Shion was the one who’d told her, the next question was *why*. Her connection with Lady Rosalie remained a total mystery. Until all this got cleared up, I didn’t think I’d feel totally comfortable around Lady Rosalie.

“The door’s been cleaned up really nicely,” I remarked.

Matching the rest of the building, the entrance to the Gloriana Guesthouse was a large, antique-looking wooden door. However, it had clearly been treated



very well. Despite how old it appeared, it had no major signs of damage. All I saw was the subdued elegance that came from long years passing.

“It’s even been waxed. You can tell how much Lady Rosalie cares about the details.”

Looking closely, even the doorknob had been polished to a sheen.

Kirara’s face said she meant business. “Whatever kind of person she is, right now she’s Lady Kagura’s rival. We mustn’t forget that.”

“Yeah, true.”

It occurred to me that Kirara hadn’t actually met her yet. If all she knew was what she’d heard from our chat with Sara, it was probably hard to form much of a picture of her. Given how early Lady Rosalie had learned about Lady Sakura’s arrival—and the lady herself—she had probably come across as a strategic person with a vast information network. She would most likely seem akin to the Kokonoe sisters.

“Now or never.” With a tense look about her, Kirara pounded the door knocker three times.

From inside, a voice I was pretty sure belonged to Marie replied, “Coming! One moment, please!”

This was followed by the sound of footsteps rushing over to us. The faint voice of Lady Rosalie chided her, “Come on, Marie! Don’t run inside!”

Kirara looked slightly taken aback. This one moment had probably turned her image of Lady Rosalie upside down.

With a deep rattle, the door flew open. “I’m here! Sorry for the wait!”

Standing in the doorway, Marie wore an amiable smile. As soon as we saw her, we bowed our heads and said, “Good day.”

“Oh, it’s you, Misaki. And this must be Kirara, right?” Apparently she recognized Kirara too.

Her voice trembling, Kirara stood facing Marie. “Nice to meet you. You’re Mari Sakuchi, but you like to be called Marie. Is that right?”

“That’s right! I can guess why you’re here. You’re throwing down the gauntlet, aren’t you?”

She grinned. Even though Lady Kagura hadn’t announced her intentions to anyone, it seemed like this opponent already knew about it.

*Given the way everything else has mysteriously been leaked, it’s not a huge surprise, I guess. But does this mean Lady Rosalie already knew our plans and still hasn’t acted on it?*

“That’s one way of putting it,” Kirara replied. “We’re here to talk about Lady Sakura, if that’s what you mean.”

“Ah, then you’ll need to see my mistress, won’t you?”

Following a polite curtsy, she showed us inside.

“Welcome to the Gloriana Guesthouse!”

After leading us in, she adopted a fairly casual tone as she took us to find Lady Rosalie. “Milady, Misaki and Kirara have come to say hi.”

This salon was going for an air of British traditionalism, so the imported furniture all around us fit perfectly. The place was overflowing with atmosphere. Everything was embroidered or engraved, and it was clear at first glance that every piece was of the highest quality.

Three little chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and electric lights designed to look like candles stood on the tables, giving the room a warm glow with their flickering light. The room wasn’t overly large—it had once been a classroom, after all—but careful positioning of furniture and mirrors made it feel more spacious than it was. You couldn’t have held a dance in here, but all it needed was some girls sitting there in formal dresses to instantly make it look like a banquet attended by noblewomen.

In fact, that exact scene was basically playing out in a corner of the room right now. *They must be members of the salon.* There were two young ladies in luxurious dresses enjoying a refined afternoon tea. On the table in front of them sat a high tea stand with cakes, scones, and sandwiches.

The girls next to them in maid uniforms had to be their Seraphs. They were

efficiently serving their mistresses and nodding along to their conversations.

As soon as the mistresses noticed our arrival, their faces reddened and they slowly cast their eyes downward. *Huh. I get the feeling they're not used to this way of dressing and acting yet.*

"Hmph." Marie put her hands on her hips and quietly scolded them. "This is no good, ladies. We're looking for far more elegant behavior."

"We're trying, but it's still kind of embarrassing."

The other lady turned to her and smiled awkwardly. "Right?"

This was all so charming to witness. I could already tell what a cozy atmosphere they had at this salon.

*Are these the salon's members? Those two mistresses, plus Lady Rosalie?* The salon was brand new, but it already gave a clear sense of Lady Rosalie's intentions.

"Now, ladies, please sit up straight and continue your afternoon tea. We have guests today, so our salon has to make a good impression."

Both of them grinned cheerfully.

"Yes, understood," one of them replied.

"Enjoy your time here, you two," said the other one to Kirara and me.

"Thank you very much," I replied.

"We're grateful for the warm welcome," Kirara agreed.

We both smiled and bowed our heads slightly as we followed after Marie.

While walking, Marie said, "To be honest, I wasn't sure about wearing formal dresses outside of a ballroom either, but that's what Lady Rosalie is into."

"So she always wears a dress like that as well?" I asked.

"That's right. She says getting the look down is the all-important first step."

She led us to the far end of the salon, where a dazzling partition blocked off a corner of the room. When we got there, Lady Rosalie spoke from behind the partition.

“Marie, I need you to wait for a minute. I’m still not ready.”

“What are you blathering about? You’re always ready for anyone to arrive at any time, aren’t you?”

Apparently wondering what was going on, Marie speedily stepped behind the partition. Flustered, we followed straight after her. However, there was no sign of Lady Rosalie.

Undaunted, however, Marie kept going. She proceeded to a large, heavy curtain hanging from the far wall and forcefully pulled it open.





A panicked scream echoed throughout the salon.

“Marie! Why did you open the curtain?!”

Seeing the state of her mistress, Marie heaved an exasperated sigh. “What on earth are you doing, milady?”

“What does it *look* like I’m doing?” came the irritated response.

Curious about what was going on, I peered over Marie’s shoulder. There I saw Lady Rosalie in the middle of taking off a stunning white dress. In her dismay, she’d managed to keep it in front of her chest to cover herself, but her silky smooth back was on full display. The white bustier, with its delicate lace pattern, made her look especially bewitching.

As I gazed at her back, I unwittingly let out a surprised yelp.

“We have guests, Marie! Close it! Now!”

She crouched on the ground and turned bright red as if she couldn’t believe this was happening.

“Oh dear!” Marie replied. “Don’t sit on the floor in a corner like that! Your beautiful dress will get stained. Go on, stand up. I’ll help you get undressed.” She used both hands to lift her mistress up off the ground.

“I’m begging you, Marie!” Turning her back, she objected as forcefully as she could, desperate for us not to see her.

“Very well, milady. Misaki, Kirara, could you wait outside for a moment? I’ll get my mistress changed quickly.”

“Uhm, yes. Certainly.”

Kirara and I nodded mechanically, then escaped from Lady Rosalie’s personal spot.

Shortly afterward, Marie called, “All done! You can come in now.”

“All right,” we replied gingerly, stepping back in.

With a far more composed expression, Lady Rosalie was sitting on a chair in her regular Societal Arts uniform. “Welcome to my salon, the Gloriana Guesthouse. It’s a pleasure to have you here.”

She was smiling as if none of the prior events had happened. *Hmm. I feel like the kindest thing to do would be to let it be, but she is trying to make formal dresses part of the salon's official attire, right?*

I hadn't seen her wearing it properly, but what I had seen made it feel like a shame not to comment.

"That dress really suited you," I ended up saying. "You looked as pretty as a princess. I hope next time I can see you fully dressed in it!"

She let out a sigh mixed with a wail. "I really hoped you'd just pretend you didn't see it," she confessed. Her face flushed again and she lowered her head. "I know it's ridiculous. I don't mind if you laugh at me. What's the point in wearing a ball gown if there's no ball?"

"No, don't be silly! It really conveys the image you're going for with the salon. It's like we've stepped into the world of high society, especially with the other members pleasantly chatting away. You could forget you're even at a school."

Kirara backed me up. "Exactly! Dresses like that are what every girl dreams of wearing. I can't wait until an occasion comes along where Lady Kagura needs me to wear one just like it."

*Gosh, I had no idea Kirara was such a fan of formal partywear.*

"It makes me happy to hear that, but it's still a little bit embarrassing, I suppose."

As she spoke, Lady Rosalie slowly lifted her head. This looked so cute that all of us started grinning, but Marie had the biggest smile of all.

Marie whispered into my ear, "You see how adorable she is? It gets me so emotional that I just want to squeeze her tight."

I'd gotten this feeling the first time I met her as well, but it seemed like Marie enjoyed seeing Lady Rosalie get into awkward predicaments.

"You *do* know I can hear you, Marie! I'm going to punish you later!"

"I'll look forward to it!"

Marie added a little chuckle as she sat down next to her mistress. Clearly, she wasn't worried about her punishment at all.

“Uhm, anyway, the two of you must have come to talk about Sakura, right?”

It looked like Lady Rosalie didn't want to spend any time slowly sounding us out and instead got straight to the point. That meant we didn't have to make any small talk to try and figure out her intentions either.

With a hint of a nervous frown, Kirara replied, “Yes. I'm impressed that you realized when we haven't officially informed other salons yet.”

“Hee hee. I have my own information network, you know. I wasn't told any details, but I found out not too long ago that the Sky Salon was going after Sakura. Of course, I already had an inkling when Sara resisted my early attempt to lure her in.” Lady Rosalie looked crestfallen. “I should have known it was a mistake to approach her out of nowhere. It was only natural that she'd find it suspicious.”

“Didn't I tell you it was better to get closer to her slowly but surely?” Marie interjected.

“But I had secret information nobody else knew—except people like Lady Angelica and Lady Himeko. I couldn't help being impatient.”

“I see your point. It might have gone better if Sara weren't friends with Misaki and Kirara, I suppose.”

“That's true,” said Lady Rosalie, turning back to us. “I didn't realize you were her friend. Last I heard, you didn't get along at all.”

A cold sweat came over me. *Lady Rosalie knows way more than I expected. Whoever's feeding her information, whether that's Lady Shion or someone else, they even know details of our relationship with Sara. How? Does that mean it's someone who sees us a lot?*

Thinking about it, though, Kirara and I were actually pretty high profile at the school. Gathering information about us probably wouldn't have been that difficult for anyone.

It was only very recently that Sara had really become our friend, so it made sense that that hadn't reached Lady Rosalie's ears yet.

“It is what it is,” Lady Rosalie concluded. “So am I right in understanding that

your mistress wants Sakura for her salon as well?”

“Yes,” Kirara replied. “She’s decided to officially invite Lady Sakura to join the Sky Salon. That’s why we’re going around to all the other salons to find out if any of them have the same intention. If there are multiple salons who want her, Lady Kagura decided it’ll reduce the burden on Lady Sakura if we all ask her together.”

“Ah, I see. She could have approached Lady Sakura herself, but she chose not to. That’s the kind of care and concern it takes to run the Sky Salon, I suppose.” She nodded. “All right, then. I want to win over Lady Sakura, but I want to do it fair and square if possible. I’m happy to go along with what your mistress says.”

Hearing this, Kirara patted her chest in relief. “Thank you so much.”

“Incidentally, are there any other salons who want her to join?”

“So far, we only know of one.”

“I could probably hazard a guess,” Lady Rosalie began.

“I’m pretty sure your guess is correct,” Kirara told her.

No one needed to say it. If Lady Rosalie had read Lady Sakura’s profile, it would be obvious that Mei would be desperate to have her.

We all fell into an awkward silence, which was eventually broken by Marie.

“It’s fair enough that we’ll all do it together, but how will we actually decide? What kind of method will we use?”

“First of all, we’re thinking that Lady Sakura will need to visit each of the relevant salons and see what it’s like inside. She needs to meet the leader, talk to the members, and get a feel for the atmosphere.”

“True. The key factor there will be grabbing her interest.”

Lady Rosalie nodded. “Right, yeah.”

“After that we’ll have a combined tea party where Lady Sakura is served the best sweets the salons can prepare, and then she can make her final decision. That’s what Lady Kagura is proposing.”

“Right, I see. She’ll get a thorough picture of what the salons are like and what

kind of treats they serve. This is going to be a tough battle. When it comes to location and members, the Sky Salon is one step ahead. Having said that, our interior decorating is nothing to sneeze at. I think Sakura will take a liking to it. The harder part will be the sweets. Is there a fixed number of items we're allowed to serve? We'll have to devise our strategy based on that."

"It hasn't been decided yet. If you have a preference, I can pass it on to my mistress."

"Hmm, let me think. If the number's too high, she'll have trouble eating them all. It's not a straightforward choice." She grasped her Seraph's hand. "What do you think, Marie? Your opinion is the most important, since you'll be the one making it."

*Does Marie have a talent for making delicious desserts as well?*

"One would be enough for me. There are rumors that Mei's sweets are on the level of a professional patissier, so if we have to serve lots of different things, we'll lose for sure."

"Really? But yours are delicious too."

"Thank you for saying so. Still, it's undeniable that I'm at a disadvantage. But if it was just one dessert, I could really pour everything I had into it—do you see what I mean?"

"I do. In that case, our request is for each salon to serve one thing."

"Got it," Kirara replied with a polite nod. "I'll tell Lady Kagura. To be honest, I think that would be better for us as well. Before coming here, we went to the Paradise Palace and tasted something Mei had made."

"Goodness," Lady Rosalie muttered.

"How was it?" Marie asked.

"It was too delicious to express in words. To begin with, I thought they had bought it from an ultra-high-end store. That's how good it was."

"So Mei really is as skilled as we've heard," Lady Rosalie said.

While Lady Rosalie was our rival as well, she seemed to agree with our judgment that Mei was the one who seemed the most formidable at present.

She continued, "It might not be ideal for her, but perhaps we can overrule her with a majority vote."

*Maybe that is the best way. If we let Mei go wild and make too many things, we won't stand a chance against her.*

"I'll have to report everything to Lady Kagura first," Kirara replied, "and then she'll probably ask me to spread the word about the extra rules. I'll do what I can, though."

"That's perfect. Thank you."

"Anyway, we'll be going now. Thank you for your time."

"Thank you, Lady Rosalie," I added. "Goodbye!"

Since we'd gotten the agreement we needed, we left the Gloriana Guesthouse. Lady Rosalie definitely had someone feeding her information—that much was certain. That aside, though, she was sweet, very open, and sincere.

*Marie seems like a nice, warmhearted person as well. I hope we can form good relationships with the people from the Gloriana Guesthouse. We'll see!*

"That's a big part of our task out of the way," Kirara said. "We've gotten an agreement from the two salons we know want Lady Sakura to join them."

"Right. Yeah, that's true."

After our visits to the Paradise Palace and the Gloriana Guesthouse, Kirara's job was almost over. All that was left was going to the other salons and confirming that they didn't have any interest in the new arrival. It was pretty unlikely that they did. I doubted any of them would be like, *We weren't planning on it before, but since you're asking, why not?* From what I'd heard, jumping on the bandwagon like that could impact a salon's reputation. There were so many unwritten rules and unspoken agreements at this school.

In other words, I could see why Kirara was relieved. Sadly, my work was just beginning, and it was not going to be easy. I had to go to the Mauve Manor and ask Lady Shion if she was the one who was feeding information to Lady Rosalie.

*What happened to all the joy I was feeling just now? My stomach's tying itself*



*in knots!*

Walking behind Kirara, I played the scene in my mind again and again. My face-off with Lady Shion never went well no matter how many times I imagined it. Every single time, it ended with her flying into a rage. The more I thought about it, the worse I felt.



After that, we visited a whole lot of different salons and asked each one if they wanted to recruit Lady Sakura. None of them did.

“That’s pretty much all of them, right?” Kirara said.

It wasn’t *quite* all of them, though. There was one we hadn’t been to yet. It was possible she was intentionally blocking it out.

In a subdued tone, I murmured, “Except the Mauve Manor.”

“Oh yeah. I forgot.” Her face darkened. “We have to go and see Lady Shion as well, don’t we?”

“Yeah. I guess we do. I doubt she’ll want Lady Sakura to join, but there’s no way to avoid visiting her.”

“You’re right. This means I can leave this one up to you though, right?”

“Oh, uh, sure. I suppose so.” I nodded weakly. “I’ll handle it.”

Kirara gave me an encouraging clap on the shoulder. “I believe in you!”



We passed under several arches made of bluish purple roses and emerged into a slightly open space. “Hello?”

The garden made for even more of a spectacular display than when I’d last been there. It looked like this was just the right time for the roses to be in full bloom. Fences entwined with them stood several layers deep in a maze-like arrangement.

As I stood there, enchanted by the flowers, Aoi’s voice came from somewhere nearby. “Oh, welcome.”

Her face peeked out from a corner of the maze. In her hands, she held some

sort of garden tool, while her head was covered by a straw sun hat.

“Misaki, it’s you. Welcome back to the Mauve Manor. Apologies for my appearance. If I don’t tend to everything just right, there will be bugs everywhere. It’s that time of year.”

“Don’t worry about it!”

There was surely no way Aoi was maintaining a garden of this size all on her own, but given how beautiful the result was, the work had to be more intense than I could ever imagine.

“Are you here to see Lady Shion about something?” she asked, smiling as she took off her hat.

“Yes, if that’s all right,” I replied. The nerves were starting to hit me. *This is it. It’s finally happening.*

We wended our way through the maze of a garden. There, at the end, was Lady Shion.

I was pretty sure this was the same place I’d met her before, but the additional walls of roses that had been layered around her gave it a totally different impression.

“Misaki is here to see you, milady.”

“How unusual!” Her eyes glinted as she pierced me with her gaze. “I had the impression you didn’t like me.”

“No! Not at all!”

Despite the warm summer sun shining down on me, I was shivering, overcome with cold as icy as the dead of winter.

“Either way, I’ll gladly show you my hospitality. I’d like to know how Himeko’s doing, for one thing. Sit. Aoi, bring her some rose tea.”

“Certainly, milady.”

If I were to make an obsequious comment about how unworthy I was of sitting at the same table as her, I suspected a gale of thorns would come raining down on me. All I could do was be a good little girl and sit down. Plus, I was

fairly sure the rose tea would be their own homemade creation, and I was a little curious to taste it.

Once I was seated, Lady Shion showed a satisfied smile. “So, what brought you here today?”

“Well, I have some questions for you, if you don’t mind.”

“How intriguing. Go ahead.”

Her grin was absolutely terrifying. If she *had* given Lady Rosalie the information, that meant she knew exactly what our team was thinking and was responding with cool confidence.

“The first question is about Lady Sakura, the new student from abroad who joined the Societal Arts program as a first year yesterday. Do you have any plans to invite her to join the Mauve Manor?”

“I see. Is it safe to assume, then, that there *is* a plan to ask her to join the Sky Salon?”

She wore a look of feigned ignorance—a truly spine-chilling poker face. *There’s no way she hadn’t figured that out on her own. No way at all.*

“Yes. The Sky Salon wants to recruit Lady Sakura, so today we’ve been checking with every other salon to find out if they have similar intentions.”

“Fair enough.” She cast her eyes down and spoke in a measured tone. “Well, I don’t really know anything about this Sakura girl, and I wouldn’t decide to invite her just because you’ve mentioned her now. When it comes to recruiting a new salon member, the early bird catches the worm, right? If I didn’t have the information before now, I’m not really in a position to invite her.”

I desperately wanted to make a comment about her *still* playing innocent, but I held it in.

Just then, Aoi returned with the rose tea. “Sorry about the wait.”

This thankfully calmed me down a little. As soon as I lifted the cup to my mouth, the rich scent of roses wafted into my nose. “Wow, it smells incredible!”

It almost seemed a waste to drink it. I held it there for a moment longer just to enjoy the aroma.

“It uses a variety called the damask rose. You can extract rose oil from it as well. I can give you some if you’d like.”

“Oh, you don’t need to do that. Although if you’re offering, I can hardly refuse!”

“Excellent. Then you shall have some to take away.” Lady Shion chuckled and took a sip of her tea. “Incidentally, are there any other salons trying to bring Sakura into their folds?”

*You’re the one asking me?!* It did occur to me, though, that Lady Shion might have been trying to figure out how much *we* knew. That said, I’d come here to question her directly, so there wasn’t much point in hiding anything. In fact, if anything I said made her flinch, even slightly, that could be valuable information to support Himeko’s theory.

I gulped, then answered her question. “We’ve confirmed that two other salons are interested: the Paradise Palace and the salon led by Sari Tsuyuki—Lady Rosalie—the Gloriana Guesthouse.”

I stared intently at her face, but her expression didn’t change one whisker. Somehow, I was starting to think Lady Shion really *didn’t* know anything. *Himeko seemed so sure, though. She has to be right.*

“I know all about the Paradise Palace, of course, but the Gloriana Guesthouse was set up only recently, I believe.”

*Yep, that’s right! And you can drop the sweet and innocent act! You don’t have to pretend you’ve barely even heard of it!*

Clearly, her poker face was more resilient than I expected. It looked like there was no choice but to go for the direct approach, even if that was a little scary. *Incredibly* scary, in fact.

“Erm, there is one other thing I’d like to ask you, Lady Shion. If you don’t mind.” My voice was quivering, but I had to do this.

She gave me a teasing stare, her eyes wide. “Whatever could it be?”

“Why did you give information about Lady Sakura to Sari Tsuyuki?”

*I said it. I actually said it.* In a state of panic, I hung my head to avoid her glare.

I couldn't bear to see her face right now.

And yet...

"Information about Lady Sakura? What do you mean?"

When I glanced up at her again, Lady Shion had cocked her head to the side. Her expression was completely unchanged.

"You really didn't do it?" I asked.

She bared her fangs in a meaningful grin. "You're being awfully direct. I hope you realize that if you're wrong, you'll be facing consequences from me along with Himeko for leveling false accusations. Are you okay with that?"

This thought was enough to make my blood run cold, but I couldn't let her put me off. Whatever happened, Himeko would be with me.

"Absolutely. Lady Himeko is prepared for that."

Silence fell between us for a few moments.





Then, beaming radiantly, Lady Shion replied, “If you’re willing to go that far, I’ll generously pretend I didn’t hear any of that. To be clear, I have no idea what you’re talking about and had nothing to do with it, of course.”

Her smile held a clear implication that any follow-up questions would be a waste of time.

“Oh.”

Himeko probably hadn’t expected her to give the game away so easily either, but I still couldn’t believe she hadn’t shown even a single crack in her armor. It was pretty impressive, honestly.

My shoulders sagging, I stood up. “Very well. Then I’ll pass that on to my mistress.”

“Please do. Aoi, our guest is leaving. Guests, rather—there are two of them. As a souvenir, give them some rose tea leaves and a few containers of rose oil. Make sure to give them plenty of roses too. Between them, they should be able to carry a lot.”

“Certainly, milady. I’ll pick out some of the freshest blooms.”

Despite my best efforts, all I received in the end were various rose products. *I could look on the bright side and say that at least I didn’t bring her anger raining down on me, but Himeko’s still going to be disappointed.*

I rejoined Kirara, who had been assiduously trying to pretend she was part of the scenery all this time. She gave me a reassuring pat on the head. “You did everything you could.”

As Kirara came close, though, the roses she was holding pushed against me as well—and it wasn’t only their sweet scent that struck me. Some of the thorns were digging into my shoulder.

“Kirara! The rose stems still have their thorns on them!”

“Oh, sorry.”

Aoi turned back to us with an apologetic expression. “My apologies. Lady Shion says I should give roses to people with their thorns still intact. The thorns are what make them roses, she tells me.”

“No need to apologize. They only pricked me very slightly.”

“Still, though!” Aoi chuckled; it was rare for her to be smiling so distinctly.  
“You really worked hard today, Misaki.”

Even to her, it must have been obvious how much effort it took.

“I really did—or tried to, at least. I didn’t stand a chance against Lady Shion.”

“I wouldn’t look at it in such a pessimistic light. Look at all the gifts you got as a result.”

“Well, yes, I suppose.”

Everyone at the salon would be thrilled about the rose tea and rose oil, but without the key information I’d been seeking, it was all kind of meaningless.

With a giggle, Aoi replied, “In the end, it’ll be up to Lady Himeko to interpret the conversation you had just now, won’t it?”

“Hmm, that’s true.”

“So all you need to do is report it as accurately as you can.”

I wished I could agree wholeheartedly with her advice, but I still had too much weighing on my mind.



Upon our return to the Sky Salon, Kirara and I were greeted by a chorus of voices welcoming us back. Even though it was pretty late by now, all of the members were still there.

Lady Kagura came forward to greet Kirara at the entrance. She was the one most eager to get Lady Sakura for the salon, so she must have been waiting for her Seraph’s return with bated breath. “Welcome back, Kirara. How did it go?”

“As expected, the only salons planning to recruit Lady Sakura are the Paradise Palace and the Gloriana Guesthouse.”

“Great! What did they say about the method of approaching her?”

“On the whole, they were happy to go along with our idea. However, the Gloriana Guesthouse requested that in the joint tea party, each salon should only be allowed to serve one dish to accompany the tea.”

“That makes sense. If every salon can serve as many sweets as they like, Sakura would get too full. I’ll inform the Paradise Palace about it.”

“Also, we sampled a dessert made by Mei from the Paradise Palace. It was—”

“Hold that thought. We should sit down and go over it all. Ayakas, bring Kirara a drink.”

“Coming right up,” they replied.

“I can’t wait to hear every detail!” their mistress exclaimed.

They walked off toward Lady Kagura’s personal area. Since Kirara had fulfilled her mission completely and got new information about Mei and Lady Rosalie besides, her mistress was sure to be thrilled.

I was the one who might be in more trouble.

“Welcome back, Misaki.”

Himeko greeted me with a kind smile, but I didn’t think she’d be overly satisfied with what I had to tell her.

“Lady Himeko!” I cried, whipping around to face her.

She let out a yelp of surprise. Apparently, the quantity of roses and other items in my hands had come as quite a shock to her.

“Oops, sorry! I got all these from Lady Shion.”

“Even so, it’s a pretty incredible amount. Did something happen at the Mauve Manor?”

“Not really. The opposite, you could say.”

“That’s all right. Let’s go over here and talk.”

She took half of what I was holding and headed to her own private spot.

“The roses are blooming as beautifully as ever,” she said as we sat down. Sniffing them in rapt delight, she added, “They smell wonderful too.”

All I could focus on was having to tell her how little I’d achieved. It made me dejected just thinking about it.

“Is Shion doing well?”

“Yeah. In fact, I’d say the sharp glint in her eye is doing better than ever.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” She nodded to herself, although I wasn’t sure what exactly was so great about that. “Did you ask her why she gave Rosalie the information?”

“Yup. Just the way you told me to.”

“And?”

“I’m sorry, but she didn’t give me anything to go on at all. Not only did she not confirm she’d done it, but I was watching for the slightest change in her expression, and she didn’t even give me that.”

“Oh,” Himeko replied, putting a finger to her chin as if something was weighing on her mind. “Well, could you tell me how she reacted in a little more detail?”

“For sure.”

I relayed my conversation with Lady Shion, trying to include every detail I could possibly remember.

When I was done, Himeko mused for a moment. “Hmm. You were really insistent, but instead of getting angry, she actually smiled?”

“Uhm, yeah. That’s about what happened.”

“In that case, I’m even *more* certain it was Shion who gave the info to Rosalie.”

“You are? How come?” I couldn’t even guess what part of my story had been enough to determine that.

“When Shion smiles, it’s because she’s enjoying herself.”

“That’s kind of normal, isn’t it?”

She shook her head quickly. “No, that’s not quite what I mean. She smiles when things are going even better than she expected. When something happens that’s *really* entertaining. In this case, she knew we would suspect her and had an idea of how we’d act. However, when the moment came, you spoke with far more conviction than she’d expected, and that really tickled her.”

“I see.”

“That’s why she didn’t get angry—and why she gave you so much stuff to take with you.”

“Even so, I didn’t get any proof, right?”

“True, but it’s enough. However else we try to investigate right now, she’ll continue to play innocent. I doubt she’ll reveal her involvement until after Sakura chooses a salon.”

“Why do you think she did it in the first place?”

“I have no idea. All I can say is that she’s probably not trying to get in Kagura’s way. Whatever hidden agenda she has, it’s about me.”

She fell quiet and cast her eyes downward. When she wore an expression like that, there were usually some circumstances I wasn’t aware of. Now that we’d broached the topic, I really wanted to ask for more details, but I was worried about bothering her. *If I were a real Seraph, would she find it easier to tell me?*

“Himeko, if you ever want me to ask Lady Shion anything else, I’m ready anytime.”

That was all I could say right now, but hopefully it was some help to my mistress, at least.

“Thanks, Misaki. If I do, I’ll be sure to ask.”

She smiled at me, and it was enough to make me want to do whatever I could for her.

## Chapter Two: The Secret Weapon

The following day, Lady Kagura got in touch with the competing salons' leaders, Lady Asuka and Lady Rosalie, and decided on the day they'd all try to win over Lady Sakura.

This was one day before the end-of-term exams were due to start, so it was agreed that it would be best to do it when they were finished, during the post-exam break.

In turn, this meant preparing for the Lady Sakura business alongside the exams, but no one seemed overly worried about that. All the Sky Salon members had good grades, and Lady Asuka and Lady Rosalie were apparently near the top of their classes too. *I guess being a salon leader and having respectable grades must go hand in hand.*

As for me, Himeko was helping me study every day, so I was fairly confident I'd get above-average grades. Of course, I couldn't rest on my laurels. I'd have to find as much time to study as I could that night, same as always.

When I arrived at the Sky Salon after school, Lady Kagura was about to leave. "Well then, I'm going to visit Sakura."

She departed with Kirara and the Kokonoe sisters in tow. I gathered that she planned to inform Lady Sakura about the three salons' plan to formally invite her, confirm that she would be on board with it, and explain how she needed to prepare.

The remaining members were busy cleaning up the salon and arranging a private area for Lady Sakura. Naturally, these tasks fell mostly on the Seraphs, so Himeko was having a conversation with Lady Saeko, Lady Sumire, and Lady Inaho about what to serve Lady Sakura at the tea party.

Knowing them, I figured they could get their hands on the finest quality of sweets. Even so, I was a little uncomfortable. After all, Mei's Swiss roll was possibly the most delicious thing I'd ever tasted in my entire life. If she gave that to Lady Sakura, no store-bought sweets we served could hope to compare.

Plus, if Lady Rosalie was getting advice from Lady Shion, she was not to be underestimated by any means.

Part of me wanted to impress this point upon them a little more strongly. If I'd been alone with Himeko, I'd have brought it up, but I *really* didn't feel comfortable interrupting the whole group, especially with Lady Saeko there.

*Is it really okay not to say anything, though?* The worries built up in my mind more and more as I cleaned.

Then, of all things, Lady Saeko called out to me herself. "Hey, it looks like Misaki wants to say something. I'd love to hear her thoughts. Misaki, why don't you come over here?"

I let out a mixture of a gasp and a whimper. "Erm, no, I don't have any thoughts, really!"

She looked at me and snickered. "Oh my, what an amusing sound you just made. Now, just come over here." Beckoning me with a hand, she repeated, "Over here."

When she was being that insistent, I didn't know what she would do if I refused. I solemnly made my way to their table. As soon as I got there, I stood by Himeko's side. That was the safest place.

"So, what was it that you were so eager to tell us? Are you worried about something?"

Lady Saeko was an extremely perceptive person. If I tried to hide anything from her, it would only provoke her wrath. Still, rather than speaking right away, I made eye contact with Himeko.

"It's all right," she said. "Go ahead."

Only once I'd gotten her permission did I begin. "If you're sure you don't mind, I'll tell you what I'm so worried about." I took a breath, then continued, "Basically, when I visited the Paradise Palace yesterday, I was treated to some food as well. What I was served there was incredibly delicious. In fact, it was probably the yummiest thing I've ever eaten in my whole life."

Lady Saeko flicked out her tongue, lifting the corner of her lips into a grin.



“Goodness. It sounds like they served you up something really special.”

“Yes,” I replied nervously. “At first, I thought it was something they’d ordered from outside the school, but it was actually handmade by Mei. I was so shocked. It looked just like it had been factory-made, and if someone had told me a professional pâtissier had made it, I’d have believed them. It was just so perfect!”

“I get what you’re saying.” Lady Saeko nodded; her look said she understood my point very well indeed. “Mei’s confections are often described as being second to none. We can’t compete if we serve something ordinary that comes from a store.”

“Exactly. To beat that, we’ll need something really special of our own, won’t we?”

“Hmm. If Mei’s sweets really are that amazing, I wish I could try them for myself.” Lady Saeko didn’t sound overly impressed.

Responding to that, Lady Sumire smiled gently and said, “I’ve heard the same thing. I’d love to partake too, but it is rather difficult when she’s in a different salon.”

“I’ve tried something she made,” Lady Inaho said. “It went way beyond the level of an amateur baker. But it’s so full of her love for Nekopeko”—that was her nickname for Lady Asuka—“that it would be hard to stomach if I ate it every day.”

A bitter expression formed on her face. Not only had the flavor been impressive, but she’d even been able to taste the emotions that went into making it.

“I guess there is such a thing as too much love,” Lady Saeko replied curtly. “It does sound like Mei’s skills are pretty extraordinary, but to be honest, I doubt they’re all that miraculous.”

Even after hearing the verdicts from me and Lady Inaho, she didn’t seem bothered at all. In fact, she was downright dismissive.

“Huh? Why?” Somehow I just couldn’t make her understand. “You’d know if you tasted it. This is the kind of delicious treat that would win over any girl, I’m

sure of it.”

She chuckled. “I can tell you’re thinking very seriously about this. Kagura will be thrilled to hear that.”

“I’m just determined for Lady Sakura to join the Sky Salon. I don’t know her very well yet, but I really want her Seraph, Sara, to join us here and work with us. That’s my number one reason.”

“Sara’s the girl you brought here not too long ago, isn’t she? So she’s become Sakura’s Seraph. All right, then. I’ll explain how I see it.” All of a sudden, Lady Saeko’s expression looked far more serious than usual. “First and foremost, Lady Kagura assembles the members here with her own personal goals in mind. You know about that, right?”

“Yes.”

“We each have a field that makes us useful. For me, it’s funding. For Sumire, it’s political connections. For Inaho, it’s the food needed for a healthy athlete. For Himeko, it’s securing human resources. You could say we’re all here as Kagura’s business partners. We all enjoy drinking tea together, but that’s not the main objective. In turn, this means that what Kagura’s offering to Sakura isn’t for her to join a salon where we’ll enjoy delicious tea and cakes together. It’s for Sakura to share in her dream—and offer her support in return.”

“So she’s not trying to reel in Lady Sakura with the sweets at all?” I replied, trying to sum up what she’d said.

Lady Saeko tilted her head. “Well, that’s how I see it, anyway. I haven’t checked with Kagura herself.”

“I see.”

“To be frank, though, it doesn’t matter what kind of tasty treats get served or how much our rivals know about Sakura. Kagura is still the front-runner by miles.”

“Oh, really?”

“I can’t say I know too much about Sakura personally, but I know she didn’t come here just for the sake of studying abroad. She’s here to help expand her

family's TV and online streaming business into the Japanese market, and in the future she might even be the one in charge of that arm of the company. If so, she'll be eager to make a connection with Kagura as well. Kagura's upcoming sporting goods brand will be the kind of content that really draws in the viewers, not just locally but worldwide, and it's backed by the Mikage Group, which has many of Japan's most important companies under its umbrella. Why *wouldn't* she want to be close to Kagura?"

"Right, yeah. When you put it that way, it makes sense."

Lady Sakura seemed like a strong-willed individual. If she was fully focused on her own future, she'd no doubt decide that joining the Sky Salon to network with Lady Kagura was the most beneficial option.

Even so, I felt like Mei's confections were amazing enough to make up for that all on their own. We also had no idea how much information Lady Shion had actually fed to Lady Rosalie. Taking all that into account, I still didn't think we could consider it a done deal.

"My, my. It looks like you're still not convinced."

Frowning, I replied, "Well, I wouldn't say that."

What Lady Saeko had said was totally reasonable, but I couldn't help having some reservations anyway.

I thought she might get annoyed with me, but an amused smile appeared on her face. "Personally, I'm seventy or eighty percent certain that Kagura will snatch victory, but if you're still worried, why don't we go the extra mile to make sure? The only downside is that then I'd be ninety-five percent sure, and that would take a lot of the excitement out of it."

"Do you know of something that might beat Mei's baking?"

"Hmm? No, not at all. I haven't tasted any of it, after all. Still, when you attend a tea party, the sweets aren't the only thing you get to savor, right?"

I cocked my head, unsure of what she was getting at. "What do you mean?"

"This tea party is a battle of hospitality in general. Flavor alone won't earn us the win. Here's an idea for what else we could do."

Then Lady Saeko pulled me closer and whispered something into my ear.

Hearing it, I couldn't help exclaiming, "What?! Can we really do that?"

"We absolutely, positively can. It doesn't matter if the sweets are store-bought or handmade, so trust me, this is fair game."

"That *would* draw Lady Sakura's attention, I guess."

"Of course, in this case it would be you and Kirara who hold the key to victory. Talk to each other and decide whether you can do it."

"Okay! I'll discuss it with her!"

Despite my vague reply, the idea was a solid one. Even if we didn't win, I was pretty confident we'd capture Lady Sakura's heart.



"We're back," Lady Kagura called out as she entered.

By the time she returned to the Sky Salon, it was close to curfew. With her usual smile, she went to the central table with Kirara and the twins following close behind.

From the looks of things, everything had gone according to plan and the date of the competition had been finalized. Without even being called, all the Sky Salon members gathered around the table.

"Sorry it took so long. Sakura has quite a busy schedule right now! She's been talking to the other salon leaders as well, you see."

"So, at the very least, she *does* intend to join a salon," Lady Saeko remarked.

"Yes, that much is clear," Lady Kagura replied. "The timing is set for the week after exams finish. On the first day of the post-exam break, each salon will open their doors to her, then all three will throw a joint tea party. Sakura will make her choice after that."

Lady Saeko nodded. "That's the only timing that makes sense. Summer vacation is so soon afterward."

"When she comes to visit us here, I'd like all of you to mingle with her and have a proper chat. Also, just so you're aware, members of the Paradise Palace

and Gloriana Guesthouse will be present too. They won't sit down with her, but they'll be closely observing our words and behavior to ensure we don't violate any rules."

"There are rules?"

"Well, none that are set in stone. We mustn't try to bribe her, for example."

"Fair enough," Lady Saeko murmured, sounding convinced.

"The order in which she'll visit each salon is as follows: the Sky Salon, then the Paradise Palace, then the Gloriana Guesthouse. The sweets at the joint tea party will be served in the same order. This is based on Sakura's request for the highest-ranking salon to go first."

"It sounds like she's a big fan of keeping things fair and impartial."

Puzzled as to how she'd reached that conclusion, I interjected, "Huh? Why?"

"It makes sense if you've ever watched a contest based on scoring points," Lady Saeko said. "The first player always sets the baseline for the others. No matter how amazing their performance is, they'll almost never get a perfect score. If they did, there'd be no room left in the scoring system if the next player turned out to be even better. Right?"

"I see, yeah."

"Which means that with the Sky Salon first in the running order, we become the yardstick and it'll be easier to assign points to the others."

"That's probably just what she was thinking," said Lady Kagura, agreeing with Lady Saeko. "I don't see it as a major problem, however. It might weaken her impression of the Sky Salon a tiny bit, but I don't think she's the kind of person to let herself be swayed by that."

In the end, there were only three salons competing. They weren't being graded out of a hundred, nor was there any scoring system that would be affected by rating the first salon too highly. It probably wouldn't be an issue.

However, looking at me, Lady Saeko put on an affected tone that sounded very concerned indeed and said to Lady Kagura, "Well, I see your point when it comes to the order she visits the salons, but for the tea party, I think it *could* be

an issue.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Think about it. The very next team going after us is the Paradise Palace, led by Mei.”

Lady Asuka may have been the salon’s leader, but Mei was undoubtedly the one who was really eager to win over Lady Sakura, so no one corrected her.

Lady Saeko continued, “I heard all about Mei’s patisserie skills from Misaki. Apparently her handmade sweets are so supremely delicious that they were beyond description. She said they’d be fit to serve to the emperor himself.”

I hadn’t said that at all, but I figured Lady Saeko was exaggerating on purpose.

“True, I’ve heard rumors like that as well.” It sounded like Lady Kagura hadn’t sampled any of Mei’s treats either.

“According to Misaki, no girl would be able to resist Mei’s creations. Sakura will be her captive without a doubt.”

“I mean, I’m sure that would be true of any normal, person, but—”

“Which is why we have a plan!” Beaming, Lady Saeko clapped her hands once; the preamble was over. “Misaki told me she’s *dying* to make the dish we serve Sakura.”

Lady Kagura’s crystal clear gaze shot through me. “Is that so?”

I knew it would come to this. Reluctantly, I stood up.

“Well, I think it would be nice if Kirara and I could do it together. Mostly, I just feel like we’ll make a real impression if we serve her something homemade, not something that comes from a store.”

“You certainly sound confident.” Lady Kagura’s stare remained fixed on me and grew even more intense.

I gulped. “Yeah. I suppose I am.”

The confection Lady Saeko had suggested was something very specific indeed. If we could make that, we’d beat what Mei made—albeit not in the most obvious way. Even if I still didn’t know Lady Sakura that well, I couldn’t imagine

how she'd come away from it with a negative impression.

"Understood. In that case, I'll leave that part up to you. Kirara, work with Misaki."

"Yes, milady."

She didn't even know what we were making yet, and she looked confused, but she agreed nonetheless.

*Having said that, if she's willing to leave such a big part of the competition to me at the drop of a hat, it must be like Lady Saeko said. Lady Kagura thinks the tea party is just a footnote; she'll already have persuaded Lady Sakura to join before that point.*

"Tee hee," Lady Saeko giggled. "Incidentally, I have a favor to ask you, Kagura."

"Certainly. Go ahead."

"During the tea party, I'd like everyone to get a chance to sample Mei's dish."

Lady Kagura paused for a moment. "Very well. I'll ask everyone to adjust their plans so that all three sweets, not just Mei's, are made in sufficient portions for everyone to try some."

"Thank you!"

Lady Saeko was apparently just that eager to give Mei's fabled goods a try.



Since today was our last chance to study before the exams started, I wasn't going to Himeko's place for once. Instead, I was walking straight back to my own dorm with Kirara.

This gave her a chance to ask her burning question. "Well? What is it you're so excited to make?"

"Good question. I'm not sure yet."

"What? Why did you act all confident if you haven't even decided? Besides, what you said in the Sky Salon really made it sound like you already knew."

"Oh, I know what I'm making. I just don't know what it is yet."



“Huh? You’re not making sense, Misaki.” She lightly bumped my shoulder with hers.

“I should have a better idea tomorrow,” I replied vaguely. “I think it’ll be okay.”

“Come on! I still don’t have a clue what you’re talking about!”

She kept looming closer and closer and closer, and as I inched back, I ended up being pushed off the main path. At this rate, the two of us would be running away into the woods together, so I forced her back and decided to explain the concept to her.

“Listen. Here’s what I’m planning to make.”

I didn’t think anyone was eavesdropping, but I whispered it softly into her ear just in case.

When I finished, Kirara exclaimed, “Really?!” Then she pondered a moment. “Hmm. I can see why it would work. We should be able to get the ingredients as long as none of them are too obscure, and I don’t think it would be beyond our capabilities. Are you sure it’s allowed, though? It feels like we’re kind of pushing it.”

“Lady Saeko said it would be absolutely fine. Besides, it’ll be you and I who do the actual preparation.”

“Fair enough.”

It didn’t take much to persuade Kirara in this case. One of the Sky Salon’s senior members had said it, after all.

“Oh, I just had another idea,” Kirara said suddenly.

“You did?”

“Why don’t we ask Mei to make it? It’ll be the best version ever.”

I blinked. “I’m sure it would, but we definitely can’t do that. We’d be revealing our hand to the enemy.”

Kirara chuckled in response to my chiding tone. “I know, I know. Still, if we get a chance later on, we should definitely ask her.”

Still laughing, she ran on ahead.

“Yeah, I suppose!”

I chased after her, thinking about how I would’ve liked—no, absolutely *loved* to try Mei’s version.



My exams didn’t go overly well or overly badly. If I had to decide, I’d say I had a good feeling about them overall, which was all thanks to Himeko.

That applied to all the normal subjects I would’ve taken at a regular school, anyway. I was on my own for the maid-specific subjects exclusive to the Domestic Arts program. Himeko couldn’t help me with those, so I was really being tested on my own abilities.

Having said that, Kirara and I, along with our roommates, had prepared really well for these tests, so there weren’t too many answers I got stuck on.

“Whew!”

After the third day of exams was over, I heaved a huge sigh of relief. I felt like I was lifting my head out from underwater.

Next to me, Kirara did the same. “They’re finally over. Do you think you’ll get good scores?”

“Passable ones, I guess. I doubt I failed anything. How about you?”

“I think I’ll get grades worthy of Lady Kagura’s Seraph.”

She sounded pretty confident. She even smirked and let out a small chuckle.

With one big source of stress out of the way, it was time to focus on the effort to lure in Lady Sakura. Our task now was making the sweet dish that we would serve to her at the tea party. The exact details of what we’d be making had become clear on the first day of exams; we’d then made the necessary arrangements over the following two days and were ready for a trial bake today now that we were free.

“Okay, Misaki. Let’s get going.” Kirara stood up, ready to crack the whip.

“Yeah!”

As I rose from my seat, I looked over at Sara. She was looking back at the same moment, so our gazes met.

“Sara,” I said, “we’re getting Lady Sakura to join the Sky Salon for sure, so look forward to it!”

“Indeed. I’ll simply obey my mistress’s decision, whatever it may be, but I wish you jolly good luck nonetheless.”

Although her words came off a bit cold, there was a kind smile in her eyes.



To make our dessert, we’d arranged to borrow Erisu’s École Kitchen. On one hand, this was technically the enemy’s territory since the owner was a Paradise Palace member. On the other, since we had to make enough of our confection to serve everyone at the tea party, the Sky Salon’s kitchenette would never have been up to the task.

Most importantly, Lady Erisu had also agreed not to tell Lady Asuka what we were making. She said this was her repayment to me for all the help I’d given her in getting her restaurant back on its feet.

Because of the exams, school had ended pretty early, so we got to Erisu’s École Kitchen before it opened. They no doubt had a bunch of preparation to do before opening, but we were grateful to at least be able to borrow their kitchen until they started with that.

“Hello,” I said as we entered.

Someone came to greet us—unexpectedly enough, it was Erisu herself. “Welcome!”

“You’re here early, Lady Erisu.”

She met my surprise with a faux-innocent smile, like a child who’d successfully pulled off a prank. “Our exams are at the same time, but the Societal Arts school building is closer to here, so I was able to get here first.”

“That makes sense.”

“Yukina, Hanaka, Mizuki! Misaki and Kirara are here. Can you show them how to use the kitchen?”

“Yes, milady!”

“Will do!”

“Leave it to us!”

Now that the restaurant was thriving, all three of them wore confident smiles. They even *sounded* more relaxed.

“Follow me, please,” said Hanaka, leading the way. “The first step is disinfecting the surfaces!”

Step by step, we learned the ropes and devoted ourselves to making our confection.

The thing we were making wasn’t overly complicated as such, so it didn’t give us any major difficulties. Of course, we wanted it to be as delicious as possible. Measuring out all the ingredients properly was essential, and that part was kind of difficult. In fact, given how many we had to make, figuring out how much we needed of everything was the first hurdle.

Once we’d gotten past that, the next step was making enough for the people around us so we could do a trial run.

“Thank you for waiting!” I announced as I served the dish to Lady Erisu and her Exousias, who were all seated at a table.

Seeing it, Lady Erisu looked a little bewildered. “I thought the presentation would be a bit more spectacular. It looks kind of ordinary.”

“Hmm, yeah,” I agreed. This was the unavoidable reality. “I guess it is pretty plain.”

“Well, maybe the taste makes up for it.” Without another word, she silently ate a few mouthfuls. Then she murmured, “No, it tastes pretty normal as well.”

The other three followed up with their impressions.

“It’s fairly tasty, right?”

“Yeah. It’s the kind of thing that’s complicated *because* it’s so simple.”

“It’ll be an uphill struggle to beat Mei’s goods with this, though.”

Their feedback was pretty muted, which was no big surprise. They’d eaten

sweets made by Mei countless times, and there was absolutely no way anything Kirara and I had made could measure up.

“Don’t worry, we’re well aware of that. We’re not aiming to beat Mei in terms of taste. This is the dish—it is what it is, basically—so as long as it’s not actually unpleasant to eat, it should be fine.”

All three of them expressed some doubts.

“Really? This is the final version?”

“Are you sure it’ll be okay?”

“It feels like there’s something we’re missing.”

I knew we’d get comments like this. The awkward part was that we’d only ever read the recipe; we hadn’t eaten the real thing. We couldn’t be totally sure that it was supposed to taste like this.

We’d considered seeking out the real thing, but in the end, we’d decided it was better for us to bake it ourselves. That would make it all the more special.

We weren’t aiming to steal victory with the most delicious entry imaginable. That didn’t mean we couldn’t compete, however. With this, we could go toe-to-toe with Mei.

## Chapter Three: Sweet Magic

After the weekend came the first day of the post-exam break. There wasn't a cloud in the sky—just the right weather for a tea party.

Representatives from the three salons assembled on the courtyard terrace often used by the student council members. Representing the Sky Salon were Lady Kagura, the Kokonoe sisters, and Kirara, along with Himeko and me. From the Paradise Palace, Lady Asuka and Mei had come, plus Lady Erisu. Lady Rosalie and Marie represented the Gloriana Guesthouse.

Everyone's personalities were on full display as well. Lady Kagura projected calm collectedness, while Lady Asuka directed an air of intimidation toward her. Meanwhile, Lady Rosalie was practically hiding behind her Seraph, peering out to scope out the situation.

Standing in the center of them all was the student council president, Lady Angelica.

"Thank you all for coming during the break," she began.

Since this was the first time three salons had ever competed for one member, she had volunteered to act as a neutral party. Everyone was happy with this; if one of the salons had taken on the emcee role, they might have been biased. To be completely honest, her job looked like fun. Part of me wished that I could have done it.

Two other outside parties were there: Lady Shion and Aoi. They were standing a small distance away, watching from under the ostentatious frills of a mauve parasol held by Aoi.

No rules had been established about outside observers. If Lady Angelica was there, there wasn't much reason to object to other onlookers. Still, I'd never have expected Lady Shion to come in person.

Lady Kagura didn't look worried about it, but when Himeko saw her, her eyes widened in surprise. This wasn't an expression I saw on Himeko's face too often.

*I don't blame her. Who'd have expected her to show up here, just like that, when she knows we suspect her of leaking information to Lady Rosalie?*

It wasn't exactly a crime, to be fair, even if she *had* done it. It was just sharing some information under mysterious circumstances. Still, we didn't know what her intentions were, which made me wary.

Lady Shion didn't come over to talk to anyone, even Lady Angelica. The latter showed no sign of being ruffled by her presence, so for all I knew, they'd already talked it over beforehand.

"Today, three salons will have the opportunity to court Sakura, our new student from overseas, so please allow me to set the stage. I'm told that the rules have already been agreed upon, so please follow those and compete fairly for Sakura's interest. Sakura, could I ask you to come over here?"

At Lady Angelica's urging, Lady Sakura and Sara emerged from their hiding place. Lady Sakura looked so grand and imposing that she didn't seem nearly as petite as she was; with Sara standing behind her, she honestly looked like a queen.

There was a hint of passion burning in Sara's eyes too. She looked captivated by her mistress.

My first thought was that Lady Sakura looked like she'd fit in perfectly at the Sky Salon.

"I'm glad to hear you have an interest in the salons, which are a unique system we have at this school. A student from abroad will always attract a lot of attention, but I was still flabbergasted to hear that there are *three* salons hoping to recruit you. Were you acquainted with the members beforehand?"

This was quite a probing question, especially since those potential acquaintances were right there listening.

"No, not at all. I'd heard a bit about the school from Sara, but I wouldn't say there was anyone else here I'd call an acquaintance. I was rather surprised as well!"

Her reply came in exceptionally fluent Japanese. *She must have spent a lot of time studying our language and culture.* Sara's Japanese was pretty much



perfect too, but she did use some odd phrases once in a while. Lady Sakura's was so good that I couldn't have distinguished it from a native speaker's.

"I must say," she continued, "it's a true honor to be asked to join three different salons, especially when I only recently learned about the salon system. I'd definitely like to join one of them, so I'm excited about today."

She delivered a curtsy so lovely that all eyes were drawn to her.

*This does seem to rule out Lady Rosalie having an independent personal connection to Lady Sakura, though.*

"I'm told that first you'll visit each of the three salons, and then you'll attend a joint tea party held by all three. At your request, the first one on the list will be the Sky Salon—isn't that right?"

"Yes. I've heard it's the most distinguished salon at the academy, so it deserves the proper respect."

Lady Kagura stepped out and stood in front of Lady Sakura. "It's an honor to be chosen first and be able to start today's proceedings. Everything's ready at the salon, so we can go there right away."

The two ladies looked at each other and exchanged smiles. Was there some deeper meaning behind those gazes? Had they each understood something from it?

"Sounds like an excellent idea," Lady Angelica said. "If there's anything else to discuss, we can do it along the way."

Then she walked ahead, leading the way for everyone else.

At this point, all I could do was pray it would go well.



The Sky Salon didn't tend to get many visitors. The most obvious reason was that it was so far out of the way, but aside from that, it didn't open its doors to just anyone. Some salons were more like social meeting places, where friends of the members came to visit every day, but the Sky Salon was more exclusive. This was due to Lady Kagura's general approach of only having people around in whom she had a vested interest.

Now, though, the Sky Salon was positively bustling. Far more people had entered than I'd ever seen there before. The other members, who had been waiting there, looked pretty shocked. Even Lady Saeko had a strained, awkward smile.

Lady Asuka had come here before because of the Salon Struggle, but Lady Erisu was gazing around with wonder, suggesting it was her first time. I suspected it was Lady Shion's first visit as well, but she remained subdued.

If there was one visitor who made it *very* clear she'd never been here before, it was Lady Rosalie. Squealing with excitement, she clutched Marie's arm and looked ready to dash off into the room. Marie's strenuous efforts to hold her back were all that kept her in place.

"You're all welcome to look around," Lady Kagura announced, "but I ask you to please stay away from the members' personal spots around the outside." Even she couldn't keep from looking a tiny bit overwhelmed. "Sakura, please come with me. I'll give you a tour, then I'll take you to my own space and talk to you a little about myself and the salon, if that's okay."

"Sounds lovely."

"Could the other members please see to our guests?"

She began to show Lady Sakura around, leaving the rest of us to attend to the unusually large number of visitors while trying not to lose our heads.

Their discussion lasted about thirty minutes. Most likely, Lady Kagura had told her in great detail about the company she was planning to set up. When the two of them came out of her private zone, they both had serious expressions. *If I had to guess, she managed to make an impact.*

Lady Saeko came over to us and sighed. "Things seem to have gone swimmingly for Kagura, but out here it's been chaos."

Whimpering, I replied, "Yeah, it has."

The salon was usually so relaxed and easygoing. Even when we had visitors, there was never more than one or two at a time, and it was always clear who should be serving them.

Today, however, we hadn't even known how many would be coming—and it had turned out to be a lot. There weren't enough Seraphs to cover them all, not to mention that three of them were the leaders of other salons, who of course required a special level of attention.

Since Lady Kagura and her three Seraphs had all remained with Lady Sakura and Sara, Lady Saeko had taken charge of everyone else. Sadly, there was no denying that we'd provided shoddy service that in no way lived up to the Sky Salon's impeccable reputation. Insufficient manpower and preparation had collided into a pretty embarrassing display for the other salon leaders.

"I know what you need. More training. Starting tomorrow."

"Yes," I replied sadly. What else could I say? I'd always been kind of lax on that front, so I couldn't exactly deny it.

"Matsuri!" Lady Saeko called. "Over here, please."

"Yes, milady!"

Trembling even harder than usual, Matsuri kneeled at her mistress's feet, huddling up as if she wanted to disappear.



“You were paying attention, weren’t you? You know what went wrong.”

“Yes, milady.”

“I want you to put together a list of possible improvements and have it ready by tomorrow.”

“Certainly, milady!”

From what I could tell, Matsuri had been the only one to actually do a decent job in all the pandemonium, but Lady Saeko was glaring at her anyway.



Next was the Paradise Palace, the salon with the cutesy fairy-tale vibe. It was also famed for its strict membership requirement: all ladies who joined the salon had to be four foot nine or shorter. All the furniture and decorations looked like, to put it bluntly, things from a kids’ playroom. Visiting it almost made me feel like I’d gone back to my childhood.

The place itself wasn’t that big either, and you could basically see it all from the doorway, so no one started rushing around to get a better look.

*Almost* no one.

Shrieking, Rosalie exclaimed, “How cute! Look, Marie! Where do you think they sell such adorable furniture? I want some just like it for our salon! Maybe it’s all made to order? It doesn’t look like a standard size. I’ve heard people talk about this place, but seeing it for myself is amazing. Fully committing to a concept really is important, isn’t it? I’ll have to get over my embarrassment and be comfortable wearing a formal dress in front of visitors.”

Her cheeks were bright crimson. She’d clearly taken a liking to the Paradise Palace.

“Yes, milady, I understand, so can you *please* calm down?”

Considering that Marie had told me her mistress was always criticizing her, the shoe was really on the other foot now. If Marie was the one having to calm *her* down, that was a testament to how euphoric she was.

The discussion here was shorter than the one at the Sky Salon. There was

nothing business-related to talk about, as there had been in Lady Kagura's case, so there probably wasn't much more to cover than how the salon worked. This salon also didn't really have private areas the way ours did, so the talking took place where everyone could see—allowing me to get a rough impression of how it went. My impression was that they got along very well. I wondered if they were bonding over their similar stature. Either way, it was clear that the ice was broken. If not for Mei standing behind them getting ridiculously excited, this would have been the picture-perfect salon scenario. You could have printed it in a pamphlet.



Last came the Gloriana Guesthouse. From what I could tell, Kirara and I were the only ones who had been to this brand-new salon so far. When we all got there, Lady Kagura and Himeko looked around, full of curiosity.

The same young ladies who had worn stunning gowns last time were dressed just as beautifully today as they sipped their tea. The only difference was that this time they were fully confident in all their mannerisms and in perfect harmony with the Gothic environment. They even turned to us and showed elegant smiles. *They must have been practicing hard!*

The sight of them in their dresses was so charming that even Himeko made a comment about it. "Evening gowns can be so pretty, can't they?"

"Oh yeah, you don't really have any dresses like that, right?"

I was familiar with all the clothes in her room by now, and I didn't recall seeing anything that fancy.

"Well, I do, just not in my room. I have them stored somewhere so they're kept in good condition. If dresses like this aren't cared for properly, it can ruin the silhouette. I'm scared of them getting stained as well."

"That makes sense. I definitely wouldn't know how to handle them properly. Not yet. I'd love to see you wearing something like that. You must have done it before if you have some, right? When *do* you wear them?"

"A graduation ceremony or a party afterward, maybe? That sort of thing. You might also wear one at a ball."

“Oh yeah, I vaguely recall you talking about people throwing balls.”

“You seem pretty interested in evening wear. Maybe we should have a dress made for you.”

“No, erm, that’s all right. It would only be wasted on me. I bet *you’d* look like a princess, though!”

“Ooh, then maybe you’re Cinderella. Instead of a glass slipper, why don’t we see if you fit into one of my dresses?”

I was stunned into silence. *The difference in our bust sizes alone would make that absolutely impossible!* I thought, but I couldn’t bring myself to say it. *Though I guess if it’s just a case of fitting inside it, I would, right?*

“Lady Sakura, welcome to the Gloriana Guesthouse!”

In stark contrast to her feverish excitement so far, Lady Rosalie moved with perfect poise as she escorted Lady Sakura. Even though she wasn’t wearing a dress, she embodied the *feeling* of wearing one so well that I could almost see it. She was a Societal Arts student, after all, and now that was on clear display.

“Thank you very much,” Lady Sakura replied.

As if reading my thoughts, Marie silently drew up next to me and whispered, “Well? Don’t you think my mistress is amazing when she acts like this?”

“Yes, she’s wonderful,” I replied honestly, though I was also wondering if it was okay for Marie to be back here with me.

Right on cue, her mistress called for her. “Marie! Come over here!”

Sadly, this broke Lady Rosalie’s carefully crafted composure. I started to wonder if some of her nerves were actually *because* of Marie.

“Coming!”

Marie showed no concern about being shouted at; she leisurely strolled over to Lady Rosalie’s side and stayed close behind her from that point on.

“Apologies for that momentary lapse. I’d like to continue now. Our aim for the salon is to embody a traditional British feel. The interior design is part of that, and while the members are here, they’ll all wear formal dresses.”



“Yes, I see that. It was a surprise when I first arrived, but I think it adds a lovely individual flair. There’s such a tranquil atmosphere as well. I can tell you’ve really put your heart and soul into it, Lady Rosalie.”

“Really? Thank you so much!”

The two ladies continued to chat pleasantly as they walked around the salon. Lady Rosalie looked overjoyed while talking to the newcomer, and if it was clear enough for me to pick up on, I was sure Lady Sakura recognized it as well.



After leaving the Gloriana Guesthouse, we all returned to the central terrace. Next would come the all-important tea party, but first there was a short break.

This time, the number of people gathered on the terrace was even larger than it had been in the morning. From the Sky Salon, Lady Saeko and Lady Sumire had joined, naturally accompanied by their Seraphs, Matsuri and Mihaya. The two young ladies from the Gloriana Guesthouse, whom we’d just seen in fabulous dresses, had changed into everyday wear and come here as well.

I knew that the Sky Salon members had one goal in mind, and that was sampling Mei’s dessert. Presumably, the Gloriana Guesthouse girls had the same motivation.

Needless to say, Lady Angelica was slightly taken aback when she saw the large crowd. “Is it my imagination, or have our numbers grown quite a bit? Anyway, that’s the end of the salon visits. How did you find them?”

“All three of them were a delight,” Lady Sakura replied. “I can honestly say that right now, it’s impossible for me to choose. It’s clear that you’ve all worked extremely hard to make your ideas a reality, and I saw no compromises whatsoever. I almost didn’t feel worthy of entering!”

Lady Sakura’s cheeks were flushed and she was talking at a rapid pace. It was clear that she was genuinely excited. None of this was lip service; she really did like all of the salons.

“I’m glad to hear it. Regardless of which one you join, it’s great that you’ve taken a fancy to all of them. Now, for the joint tea party, we’ll be having another change of scenery. Erisu?”

“Yes, I’ll lead the way,” Lady Erisu replied in her typically sweet and lovely manner.

In the end, the joint tea party was going to be held at her restaurant. With the sheer amount of confectionery that was about to be served, the only places on campus that would be large enough were the various restaurants. Among them, the one with the most suitable atmosphere was definitely hers.

No one had objected to this, and we’d also put the sweets we’d made into the industrial refrigerators there, so it was very convenient for us.

“Follow me, please!”

As we all trailed after Lady Erisu in a line, it felt like something out of a fairy tale. We headed to Erisu’s École Kitchen in an amicable mood despite being in the middle of a competition.

When we arrived, we were met by Yukina, Mizuki, and Hanaka, who had been getting everything ready. However, seeing larger numbers than planned sent them into a bit of a frenzy.

“A full house! I can’t believe it!”

“We never have this many guests!”

“Is there room for all of them?!”

It was up to us Seraphs to find out where everyone *should* be sitting and lead them there, so we skittered after the three Exousias in a slight panic of our own.

Getting everyone seated was a little touch and go, but it all worked out in the end. At a main table in the center sat Lady Sakura, Lady Kagura, Lady Asuka, and Lady Rosalie, with their Seraphs beside them. Almost all the other mistresses, including Himeko and Lady Angelica, were able to cram into the first floor as well, but there was no room for the Seraphs to sit there. Not only was this no big surprise, but we wouldn’t have a chance to sit down yet anyway; the Seraphs of the key salon leaders at the main table couldn’t get up and move around, so we had to handle the serving duties.

Still, this didn’t require all hands on deck, so anyone who wasn’t currently busy was asked to sit on the second floor. Lady Shion and Aoi had at some point

gone up there too, picking the table that gave the best view of the first floor.

Lady Angelica announced, “At last, it’s time for the battle of the sweets! There are no complex rules. All you need to do is have a pleasant chat together and enjoy sampling each salon’s dish. The Sky Salon will go first. Misaki, over to you.”

“Thank you!” I said, standing up.

Suddenly, Lady Asuka gave a meaningful chuckle and declared her own victory. “We’ve already won.”

She looked very self-satisfied indeed. I let out a strained groan of frustration.

“What an interesting thing to say,” Lady Sakura mused, a smile forming on her lips. She looked terribly intrigued. “How come you’re so certain?”

“Allow me to explain!” Apparently happy to be the center of attention, Lady Asuka milked it for all it was worth. “It’s been known since time immemorial that whoever goes first in a cooking contest always loses. It’s the only way the event can have the necessary drama and tension. Basically, the Sky Salon doesn’t have a whisper of a chance.”

I let out a huff. None of this made much sense to me, but if she was that confident, how could I not believe her?

“The Paradise Palace is going second, isn’t it?” Lady Kagura interjected coolly. “Doesn’t that mean the Gloriana Guesthouse should win?”

Lady Asuka was ready with an answer, however. “Heh. Don’t be naive. From second onward, it doesn’t matter where you are in the running order. Besides, we’ll be serving something made by Mei. We can’t possibly lose.”

“I’m impressed with how much confidence you have in your Seraph,” Lady Sakura remarked.

“Trust me,” Lady Asuka said, pointing sharply at Lady Sakura, “you’ll know why when you taste it!”

Lady Sakura nodded cheerfully. “I almost feel like you’re setting the bar too high for yourself, but if you’re that sure, I’m certainly looking forward to it.”

Mei, the one who’d been placed under these high expectations, did not flinch

even once. Clearly, she had just as much confidence. I could see why since I'd eaten one of her desserts as well.

All this made me a little nervous about serving my dish. I knew well and good that I wasn't going to win based on flavor alone.

Lady Kagura gave me some words of encouragement. "Ignore them, Misaki. Go ahead and serve everyone. Your idea won me over and I approved it, so everything is fine."

I steeled my nerves. "All right."

Given the number of people, it took more than just me and Kirara to give out the sweets we'd made. We recruited Matsuri and Mihaya to help. All the while, I was anxious to know what Lady Sakura would think.

When people saw it, they reacted with various little exclamations.

"Gosh!"

"Huh."

"Hmm."

"Really?"

I heard all those and more. To be honest, this was about what I'd expected. After all, you couldn't say our dish looked beautiful, or that it was anything especially rare, or that it was a traditional choice. That wasn't to say we had abandoned presentation, but it was much plainer looking than anything that would normally be served in a competition.

The first one to share a more detailed impression was Lady Sakura herself. "A very interesting choice!" she said. Then she giggled, smiling very happily.

In my mind, I threw a victory pose. We'd made this just for her. It didn't matter what anyone else thought; as long as *she* liked it, it was a success. Now we'd cleared the first hurdle.

The dessert we had served was a fruitcake. Relatively ordinary, but there was one thing that set it apart: the quantity and variety of fruit that we'd included.

There were pieces of apple, grape, orange, peach, strawberry, melon, kiwi,

pineapple, blueberry, banana, mango, and raspberry. Finally, as the pièce de résistance, we'd used cherries. After all, it was the closest thing we could manage to Lady Sakura's name.

It was a rich, luxurious cake filled with everything we could possibly put in it. We'd actually set aside the harmony of the different flavors and focused more on ensuring that anyone who ate it would instantly feel how exciting and varied it was.

The tea to accompany it was fruit tea as well. The blend used citrus fruits as the base, and for this we really *had* prioritized the taste.

"Please, dig in."

This was the best thing we could possibly have served her. It conveyed everything to Lady Sakura that we wanted it to.

"Yes, let's all have some!" Lady Angelica agreed.

Lady Sakura started eating. As I expected, all the Societal Arts students approached it in a refined manner, using a knife and fork flawlessly. Not to be outdone, Lady Sakura's manners were every bit as perfect.

After her second mouthful, then her third, Lady Sakura giggled. "This is amazing. Since it's all fruit, there aren't too many strong, clashing flavors, but it feels like a dance inside my mouth."

Her smile said it was almost too much for her, but she didn't stop. She continued until she had elegantly devoured the entire thing.

Other reactions were more mixed. Lady Kagura ate it without saying a word, a strange look on her face. Lady Asuka looked more assured of her own victory than ever. Lady Rosalie ate it in confusion, occasionally letting out a thoughtful hum.

Once she was finished, Lady Sakura said, "I see. Ha ha." She was laughing almost to herself, as if she'd remembered something.

"It sounds like everyone has their own thoughts on the Sky Salon's most unexpected dish," Lady Angelica said, addressing the crowd. "I have plenty of questions, but those can wait until later. Let's move on to the Paradise Palace.

Mei, it's your turn."

"Thank you."

Mei stood gracefully and served her creation with the help of Erisu's three Exousias. I was eager to see what she'd made.

The four girls pushed in a cart full of plates. Even before I could see it, the rich, sweet scent wafted across the entire room. It smelled so decadent that I could already tell it would be absolutely delicious.

"Here it is, everyone," Mei said as she started serving it.

"It looks beautiful!" Lady Sakura immediately exclaimed.

Lady Kagura's eyes gleamed, like she was gazing upon fine jewels. A feverish expression rose on Lady Rosalie's face as well; she looked absolutely enchanted.

Even Lady Saeko sounded delighted. "So this is what Mei's famous homemade sweets are like!"

I found myself letting out a joyous little yelp. Mei had made a fruit tart, but naturally, it was no ordinary tart. Peaches and apples had been cut into semicircular segments and layered on the top, arranged to look like the petals of a large rose. A plump strawberry was enshrined in the center, and the fruits had been coated with an apricot glaze to make them all shine like gemstones.

Cutting into it with a knife almost felt like a waste, but the sheer joy of eating it was enough to overcome that. The moment I bit into it, my whole mouth was filled with a luscious flavor that exceeded my wildest expectations.

Underneath the fruit wasn't just whipped cream. The mixture had an exquisite balance of cream cheese and strawberry sauce, making for a truly deep and complex flavor that set our hearts on fire.

No one said a word. Silence reigned until we finished eating, as if we were all afraid that if we spoke, this deliciousness would run away, never to be seen again.

Lady Angelica's comment afterward made it clear that she, too, was in the thrall of Mei's homemade fruit tart. "That was extremely good. Your skills are remarkable."

Everyone present was no doubt thinking the same. In light of this, Lady Asuka's pride and confidence made perfect sense.

Thanks to Mei, the Paradise Palace had just gone way up in everyone's estimation.

"I fear the Gloriana Guesthouse may have a tough act to follow," Lady Angelica continued, "but are you ready to serve your dish?"

"Absolutely," Marie replied jovially. "Mei's sweets are certainly nothing to sneeze at, but we won't be going down without a fight."

Her ability to stay positive really was a strength. I wondered what she, and her salon, would be dishing up.

Marie brought her dish to the main table, then to everyone else. "Here you are," she said at our table. "I hope you enjoy it."

When I saw what Marie presented, I let out a hysterical "Huh?!"

*But...this is...*

"Goodness," Lady Sakura said, surprised.

Even Lady Kagura wore an unusually stark look of shock. "Oh my."

Lady Rosalie remained composed, of course. She'd already known what was coming.

Meanwhile, Lady Asuka frowned deeply. "*What* is going on here?!"

I couldn't blame her. After all, what Marie had presented, what the Gloriana Guesthouse had prepared, was the very same thing we had—a fruitcake.

Not only that, but the quantity and variety of fruit was the same as well. The only difference was that the Gloriana Guesthouse hadn't just mixed fruit in with the batter and baked it. They'd also heaped all kinds of different fruits on top, making for a spectacular presentation.

"Oh, and allow me to add this decoration to Lady Sakura's table as well."

Marie produced a pink vase with cherry tree branches inside, each one adorned with cherry blossoms in full bloom.

Lady Sakura looked at the blossoms, spellbound. "My goodness. I thought the

cherry blossom season was already over. Was I wrong?”

“In this area, they all fall around the start of May, but deep in the mountains in cold regions, there are places where they’re still in bloom at this time of year. I was lucky enough to find some in Hokkaido, so I took a few branches back with me.”

I couldn’t believe it. Using cherries was easy enough, but finding actual cherry blossoms, Lady Sakura’s name incarnate, was on another level entirely. I could tell how serious Lady Rosalie was about winning her over.

“What elegance. Well, I’ll tuck in.” With a smile, she started eating the cake.

I whimpered. “Me too.”

My mind in disarray, I lifted it up to my mouth. It was really well made. The fruits mixed into the cake had been cut into different sizes to carefully control the strength of the flavors and achieve a perfect balance. It looked like they’d taken great care with the hues as well. When I cut into it, it looked like vividly colored jewels were scattered around inside the cake.

This was a model example of how careful planning and execution could turn an ordinary fruitcake into something truly special. The taste and presentation were both a clear step above mine.

Ours would undoubtedly pale in comparison. Was it like Lady Asuka had said at the beginning? Was it truly impossible for the team who went first to win?

*This isn’t a battle of flavor alone. I know that, but I’m still full of doubts.*

Which one was Lady Sakura going to choose?

Lady Angelica wiped her mouth, beaming with satisfaction.

“Now all three salons have presented their dishes, each more unexpected than the last. Of course, my opinion isn’t the important one. It’s all up to Sakura.” Turning to the lady of the hour, she asked, “What did you think? Have you decided which salon you’d like to join?”

“Hmm. Would you mind waiting a moment? This has been such an amazing experience that I’m struggling to choose.” She really did look lost; she put a hand on her cheek and sat there deliberating.



“That’s absolutely fine. In that case, let’s focus on clearing up for now and then hear your verdict after that.”

“If you don’t mind, that would be perfect.”

*So much for Lady Saeko’s seventy or eighty percent certainty of our team coming out on top.* Lady Sakura’s current indecision was totally at odds with that.

As I helped with the tidying, belated doubts began to creep in. I started wondering if we’d really made the right choice of dessert, or if there might have been a better way to win her over. *I still think it was the best option, though. Probably.*

Once the restaurant was looking spotless, Lady Sakura sat up straight with a look of resolve.

“Have you made your decision?” Lady Angelica asked. “If you’re still not sure, I’m sure we can postpone this for another day.”

“Thank you for being so considerate, but that won’t be necessary. I’ve made up my mind, and I’d like to inform everyone here and now. I wouldn’t leave you without an answer when you’ve all come here just for me.”

Lady Sakura stood up.

“First, I’d like to express my gratitude for this incredible opportunity. It’s truly an honor for such esteemed salons to have extended their hands to me. Even though I’ve had to choose one, I must say that you were all extremely close. I’ll thank each salon properly afterward, but first allow me to tell you my decision.”

She paused for a moment, then gazed out, her head held high.

“The salon I wish to join is...”

Tension filled the air as we waited.

“The Sky Salon!”

Gasps of surprise and disappointment filled the air across the restaurant.



With a grunt of frustration, Lady Asuka grimaced. She had been absolutely certain of her victory, which could only have magnified her annoyance.

Meanwhile, Lady Rosalie collapsed onto the table with a sigh. “No luck for us.”

Lady Kagura stayed silent, but I could see a measure of relief on her face.

Continuing, Lady Sakura explained, “Honestly, it’s painful to have to choose only one. The Paradise Palace is made up only of other girls my height, which is something I’m quite conscious of. I’m sure I’d have felt a sense of kinship and enjoyed many more carefree afternoons drinking tea there. The tart you served was also absolutely incredible. I don’t think I’ve ever tasted anything so delicious in all my life. If it were purely a matter of flavor, the Paradise Palace would win hands down; I can say that for sure.”

She closed her eyes a moment, savoring the memory.

“The Gloriana Guesthouse had a truly extraordinary atmosphere, and I had a sense that I would have been right at home there. Here in a foreign country, far from home, I got a taste of my own country. It’s also rare in this day and age to have many opportunities to wear such fine dresses, so wearing one every day is such a fabulous idea. The dish you presented was the same as the Sky Salon’s, and I’ll share my thoughts on the two cakes in a moment, but yours was truly scrumptious as well. Seeing cherry blossoms at this time of year was also a rare pleasure indeed. I could tell what great pains you’d gone to in order to show me a warm welcome. At the Gloriana Guesthouse, I’m confident that we’d have pushed each other further in an atmosphere of mutual respect.”

Her opinion of both salons so far was exceptionally high. It actually made me nervous to hear what she’d say about the Sky Salon.

“Last, but certainly not least, the Sky Salon has a breathtaking view, and I’m certain that I’d thoroughly enjoy spending time there. However, that’s not the key point. The Sky Salon isn’t seeking members just to enjoy one another’s company over a cup of tea. Everyone is there to share in and support Kagura’s dream. In a sense, our meeting was about whether we could be of use to each other. I found this greatly appealing. If I were here purely to enjoy my time as a student in Japan, the Paradise Palace and Gloriana Guesthouse could easily

have provided that. However, I came here with my future in mind. To that end, you could say it's vital that I...yes, that I *make use of* Kagura."

She spoke with passion. She had come to Japan for the sake of her own dream.

"However, that alone would have only barely scraped a win for the Sky Salon. In the end, I was able to judge based on another important factor, which is the prospect of forming a real connection with the members. As such, what really cinched it was the Sky Salon's fruitcake. Isn't that right, Sara?"

Smiling, she turned to her Seraph, who was standing a short distance away.

However, Sara just looked to the side and said, "I haven't the foggiest idea what you mean."

Her mistress chuckled. "Is that how you'd like to play it? In that case, allow me to explain. You see, that fruitcake is something Sara often made for me when we were younger. Naturally, she's capable of making far more elaborate sweets, but whenever I wanted to eat fruitcake, she'd make one just like that. It always had little emphasis on presentation but a huge variety of flavors. That's why I found it so interesting that you recreated exactly that dish. So perfectly, in fact, that I almost thought Sara might have made it herself. I don't know if the Gloriana Guesthouse made the same choice by coincidence or if they'd investigated my tastes and preferences. Either way, although it was the same *type* of cake, the flavor and appearance were quite different. Naturally, the one from the Gloriana Guesthouse was more delicious."

Lady Sakura looked in Sara's direction again.

"What surprises me is that Sara told other people about this. She tends to be shy around strangers, so I'd never have expected her to tell anyone about the distant past. It looks like she's been able to make good friends at this school. Sara is family to me. Our meeting changed both our lives. Now she has friends she can share her past with, and that's precious. That might even be more of an achievement than forming a connection with Kagura. That's why I've chosen the Sky Salon. It's the place where both the past and the future can be honored."

Now that Lady Sakura had poured her heart out, everyone looked pretty convinced by her explanation.

Lady Asuka went over and shook her hand. “At least you agreed that Mei’s dish was the most delicious. We’ll have to be satisfied with that.” From her point of view, it seemed she’d lost the war but won the battle.

“It really was incredible,” Lady Sakura replied. “I could eat it every single day.”

From above the petite pair, Mei grabbed on with both hands as if she still didn’t want to let Lady Sakura go. “You’re welcome anytime. Even once you’ve joined the Sky Salon, you could still visit every day.”

One thing was clear: Mei was far more frustrated at the loss than her mistress.

“If I’m eager to eat one of your confections, I’ll definitely call on you,” Lady Sakura replied politely.

She released Lady Asuka’s hand and turned to the Gloriana Guesthouse members next.

“Your salon was absolutely lovely as well. I know you’re pulling out all the stops to make it really special. It would have been an honor to have helped you with that.”

“Don’t worry,” said Lady Rosalie, “I appreciate the sentiment. Even though I couldn’t recruit you, I’ll keep improving my salon. One day, you’ll say it’s a shame you didn’t pick the Gloriana Guesthouse after all.”

“I can’t wait. If you reach that point, I’ll ask, no, *demand* that you let me visit.”

“The day will come! In the meantime, would you mind if I occasionally ask you for advice on British customs? There’s so much I don’t know.”

“Of course not. That would be absolutely fine.”

A relieved expression formed on Lady Rosalie’s face. She’d done absolutely everything she could and achieved plenty.

Finally, Lady Sakura shook Lady Kagura’s hand. “We’ll be seeing a lot of each other from now on, and not only in a social sense! I’m eager to get started.”

“Yes, I think it’s going to be a fruitful partnership. However, I don’t want you to think the Sky Salon is all business all the time. There’ll be plenty of time to sit and relax, and I hope you have a wonderful time there. To me, both the

members and the salon itself are absolutely irreplaceable.”

“I see your point. If you only cared about business, things might not have turned out this way.”

Both ladies looked at me and Kirara. It was almost like they were showing recognition for us.

Gently embracing me from behind, Himeko giggled and said, “I’m glad your efforts were appreciated.”

“I didn’t do it on my own. Lady Saeko gave me the idea in the first place, and we couldn’t have done it without Sara.”

“True, but I think your own popularity is what put you in that position to begin with.”

She squeezed tighter and nuzzled her cheek against mine, indifferent to all the gazes now firmly focused on us. Feeling a complicated mixture of happiness and embarrassment, I let Himeko keep cuddling me until she’d had her fill.



After that, Lady Sakura followed Lady Kagura back to the Sky Salon; apparently, they had a bit more to talk about today. Kirara and the Kokonoe sisters accompanied them, but Lady Saeko, Lady Sumire, and their respective Seraphs headed back to the dorms.

I wasn’t exactly sure why, but Himeko and I loitered outside Erisu’s École Kitchen for a while. As she held my hand, all she said was that she wanted to stay a little longer. My guess was that she was waiting for Lady Shion to come out.

Eventually, she and Aoi appeared in the doorway. Himeko practically ran over to them, just as I’d expected.

“Shion!”

“Congratulations on winning over Sakura, Himeko. It was quite a spectacle to behold. Everyone gave it their all.” The smile on Lady Shion’s face suggested she was in a very good mood.

“I see,” Himeko replied hesitantly. “I’m glad you had such a good time.”

However, you're ultimately the reason why this became such a large event, aren't you?"

Without letting her smile drop for a moment, Lady Shion cocked her head in puzzlement. "How so?"

"Please stop trying to feign ignorance. I know you were the one who leaked information about Sakura to Rosalie. She knew things that no one outside the school's administration should have had access to."

"Hmm, yes. I suppose I can't deny it."

*Finally, she's admitted that she's the culprit! She must've decided that there's no need to hide it anymore now that the battle for Lady Sakura is over.*

"I heard that Sakura was joining the school and wondered if there was some way I could use that to my own ends. Rosalie was right there just when I needed someone. Along the way, I got quite fixated on gathering intel. I even managed to pinpoint that fruitcake was her favorite, but I couldn't go as far as reading her memories, so I didn't know exactly how it should be made. You managed to beat me, Misaki."

Under her piercing gaze, I tensed up. "No, erm, I didn't do anything."

Himeko took a step forward as if to protect me. "Now that it's all over, can you please tell me why you did it?"

"Yes, I suppose I will." In an instant, the smile dropped and she wore a serious expression. "I was bored, so I wanted to have some fun."

"Really? That's all?"

"That's all. I was really, *really* bored, though. I've been waiting on you, Himeko."

"What?"

"I remember what you said to me a long time ago—that when you started at this school, you'd make it so much better. You'd make it into a more fun and exciting place. But it's been a year and a half since you joined and you've done nothing of the sort."

"But—"

“I know it’s easier said than done, and you’ve had a lot on your plate. Still, none of that is *my* concern. I decided that if you didn’t feel like changing the school, I’d have to do it myself.”

“I’m really sorry that I haven’t done more, but—”

“You don’t need to apologize,” Lady Shion replied, her voice kind as she turned to walk away. “I’ve already learned not to expect anything from you. I’ll take care of it instead.” She turned her head slightly and shot a challenging gaze at Himeko. “You can just watch in silence.”

Anguish haunted Himeko’s eyes. “Shion, I never intended to lie to you. I still want to make the school a better place!”

“Don’t strain yourself. Stick to your figurehead deputy chairman role.”

With those scathing words, she departed with Aoi. Unable to stop them or make a counterargument, Himeko stood and watched Lady Shion go with a look of frustration and regret.



Himeko walked back to her dorm with leaden footsteps. She didn’t say a word along the way. Not wanting to leave her alone, I tagged behind. Even though we’d won today, with Lady Sakura set to join the Sky Salon, any joy resulting from that had totally vanished.

Her mood didn’t lift at all when we got to her room. I suggested we have a bath, hoping that would cheer her up, but she remained totally silent even after we went into the bathroom. I ended up just watching her from inside the tub as she washed without my help for once. There was nothing I could do.

Himeko had wanted to make this school better. However, as far as I knew, she had only done the bare minimum. There was nothing inherently wrong with that, of course, but it sounded like she hadn’t stuck to what she’d told Lady Shion.

*I know there must be some reason behind it, but I have no idea what it could be. If only I could do more to help Himeko. Maybe I should ask her. The problem is, if she tells me, it’ll inevitably make me want to be even closer to her. Then it’ll be tough to break off our relationship when the time comes.*



Leaving Himeko's side was already difficult, but I couldn't imagine what would happen if we forged an even deeper relationship.

I blew bubbles in the water.

When Himeko finally showed me a smile, it looked slightly forced, but I could tell she'd come back to herself a little. "I'm sorry you had to see me like this."

"Please don't worry about it. You can always be yourself in front of me."

"Thank you, Misaki." There it was—the usual Himeko smile. "By the way, it's almost summer vacation. Will you go home and see your family?"

"No, I was planning to stay here the whole time."

"Excellent! Then we can be together all summer."

"Oh! Yes!"

It sounded like Himeko planned to stay on campus over the vacation too.

"I wonder if anyone else from the Sky Salon will be sticking around?" she mused. "Kagura will probably be going back to see her family, and Inaho too. I don't know about the others, but Sakura only just got here, so I doubt she'll be going anywhere just yet. Either way, the Sky Salon will be pretty empty, so we can enjoy having it all to ourselves!"

"That sounds nice. I'll do my best to make delicious treats for you."

Himeko chuckled. "I can't wait."

She turned off the shower and got into the tub behind me. Wrapping her arms around me, she said, "During the summer, I'm going to set myself straight. It might end up giving you a lot of work, but I could really use your help."

"That's what I'm here for. I'm your Seraph."

The word "Seraph" was a weighty one, as was the position it represented. I was Himeko's Seraph. Every time I said it, it seemed to grow in significance. At the same time, something was starting to grow inside *me*. A feeling that was very comfortable and made me want to surrender myself to it.

## Chapter Four: The New Member

As I held my hands up to the sky, the rays of sunlight shone through the gaps between my fingers so brightly that they dazzled me. With the end-of-term exams over, life was calm again. Now it was just a case of waiting for summer vacation to begin.

Although I was on the verge of mentally checking out and going into full-on vacation mode already, one thing prevented that. We still had a very special event between now and then. Yesterday, Lady Sakura had suddenly joined the Sky Salon, so today we'd be throwing her a little welcome party. I was hurrying over to the Sky Salon with Kirara so we could make sure it was in tip-top shape.

Lady Sakura was a sweet and lovely young lady in all kinds of ways, and I was starting to look forward to serving her. Of course, she already had a Seraph, so her Seraph would be the one doing most of the serving in practice. Still, it was pretty common to make tea for other mistresses or for small errands to be given to whoever happened to be nearby, so I'd have plenty of chances to lend her a hand.

Even better was that her Seraph was my classmate and good friend Sara. I was thrilled that we'd get to work at the salon together.

Not everyone was as enthusiastic as me, however. After we were done cleaning up, Kirara slammed a hand down on the table and grimaced. "Hmph. Today's the day, huh?"

Kirara just didn't see eye to eye with Sara. She didn't pick fights, exactly, but the sense of rivalry was strong. Since Lady Sakura joining the salon inevitably meant Sara joining as well, I got the impression Kirara had been putting a lot of thought into how to keep her negative feelings in check.

Her voice shifted into a low, menacing laugh. From her expression, it looked like she wasn't upset about the arrival of her nemesis—she was eager for it.

"Bring it on. I'm her senior at the salon, so I'll take *great pains* to show her the ropes."

It sounded like she'd convinced herself that it would all be fine as long as she wielded her seniority as a weapon.

"You know it's not okay to bully her, right?"

"How rude! Imagine accusing me of such a thing." She looked up at me and raised her eyebrows as if the idea was totally unthinkable. "Sara and I will be getting along *very* well. I'll be sure to treat her with the utmost kindness." She chuckled again.

*I guess there are a lot of different ways for people to get along, and it doesn't sound like they'll be coming to blows, so maybe it's okay for now.*

While I was having that thought, the bell chimed to signal the elevator's arrival. The mistresses had finished class for today, so as each one came, Kirara and I went to greet them and guide them to the central table for today's party. Before too long, everyone was there except Lady Kagura. She had told us beforehand that she'd go to collect Lady Sakura personally, so I figured it would be a little longer before they got here. I went and waited by Himeko's side.

I started picturing what would happen if someone with Lady Kagura's level of fame at the academy turned up in a first-year classroom. Even the prim and proper Societal Arts students would go crazy for her.

Then the elevator sounded again and Lady Kagura, Lady Sakura, and Sara all stepped out. As Kirara and the Kokonoe sisters went over to greet them, it occurred to me that we now had every member of the Sky Salon in one place, including the new additions.

Lady Kagura looked around to confirm this for herself, then gave a small nod. "Sorry to keep you all waiting. As you know, Sakura chose the Sky Salon yesterday, which means that as of today, this is the new home away from home for both her and Sara, her Seraph. Sakura has only just arrived in Japan, so if she's struggling with anything, I want you all to help her out. Sakura, don't be afraid to ask if you have any problems either."

"I'm so grateful for your concern. I did a lot of independent study regarding Japan before coming here, but there's a difference between learning about a place and seeing it with your own eyes, so I'll appreciate all the advice you can give me."

Her Japanese really was impeccable. I actually started debating whether her language usage was better than mine.

“Typically,” Lady Kagura continued, “the members here don’t all sit together, but relax in their own personal spaces instead. We’ve arranged one for you as well, so you and Sara may feel free to use it as much as you like. It’s absolutely fine to chat with everyone else, of course. It’s up to everyone to decide how they want to spend their time. However, please let me know if you’d like to invite any non-members to visit. That’s because we sometimes have conversations here that we can’t allow outsiders to overhear.”

Lady Sakura’s smile said she knew what Lady Kagura was getting at. “Yes, that makes sense.”

In the end, the Sky Salon’s members weren’t here just to enjoy a pleasant chat over a cup of tea. Lady Kagura had assembled the ladies to support her goals, which in turn led to confidential business discussions.

“Other than that, there shouldn’t be any other issues. When it comes to all the facilities and how to use them, I assume it’s okay to share this information with Sara.”

“That sounds perfect, if you don’t mind.”

This topic had come up pretty quickly. I stole a glance at Kirara; it was subtle, but her imperious expression was almost a demand to give her the job of teaching Sara what was what. The Kokonoe sisters would undoubtedly have noticed it as well. I wondered what they and their mistress had in mind.

Lady Kagura herself probably was intending to assign the task to one or more of her Seraphs, but the twins spoke before she could.

“Kirara, you should teach Sara everything. You more or less understand it all by now, right?”

“And you’re both first years, so you’ll be more comfortable talking to each other. It’ll be much better than us lecturing her. If there’s anything Sara doesn’t know, she won’t feel too shy to ask.”

Something about Kirara’s attitude must have told them this would be an entertaining direction to take. That was their whole approach to life.

“Very well,” Kirara replied. “I’m happy to take on this responsibility.” She looked over at Sara, her face lighting up. “I’ll be an extremely thorough teacher, so you don’t have to worry about a thing.”

That gaze made Sara’s smile twitch ever so slightly. “Thank you, Kirara. I look forward to receiving your wisdom. I’m a fast learner and tend to remember all the fine details after only hearing them once, so please don’t hold back. Tell me absolutely everything.”

She replied with all the meek politeness expected of a new arrival, but she also made it clear that whatever Kirara had to say, she only wanted to hear it once. Sara’s strong spirit was still on display.

“Oh, there’s no need to rush ahead. If there’s anything you don’t know, I’m happy to tell you as many times as you like. After all, I am the experienced one here. Oh ho ho ho!”

Sara’s face twitched again. “That’s quite all right. Once will be plenty.”

Despite all the pleasantries on the surface, invisible yet furious sparks were flying between them.

Observing this, Lady Sakura laughed gently. “Please be gentle with her. And Sara, be sure to listen attentively.”

*Maybe she sees them as the kind of friends who are so close that they argue all the time.*

“Yes, milady. I’ll refrain from conducting myself in any manner that might sully your name.”

Given how perfectly she did every single thing in class, I had the sense this might be her first real challenge at Amanotsuka Academy.

Lady Kagura appeared to be fully on board with the twins’ suggestion. “Yes, I’ll gladly leave it in your hands. You and Sara look to have a relationship that lets you be open with each other. Why don’t we start by having you make tea together? After all, today is all about coming together and forming stronger connections.”

“You can leave it to me, milady. Come on, Sara!” she declared eagerly. “This

way!”

“Certainly.”

*It probably won't be too bad, right? Kirara doesn't deny that Sara's a skilled maid.*

This was no time for me to just stand and watch, though. “I'll help too!”

“That would be great,” Himeko replied. With her permission, I chased after my friends.

“Listen,” Kirara instructed in the kitchen. “The mistresses here all have their own favorite teacup and saucer that they picked out themselves. You must be careful never to serve them tea in someone else's cup by mistake. We sometimes have days like today where we have to serve everyone, so don't assume you can get away with just remembering your own mistress's.”

“Understood,” Sara replied.

“Don't think you can just use any tea leaves you want either. Every lady has her own individual taste, and there are also cases where they heard about an exciting new flavor and ordered some in, or brought something here that they got from a friend. Some of those are free to use and some of them aren't, so you have to really pay attention.”

“Do all of the Seraphs have to memorize each of those details? If I miss a day for some reason and the number of tea varieties increases in the meantime, will someone be kind enough to tell me?”

“Fear not!” Kirara replied, striking a pose. She'd clearly been waiting for this question. “We don't just commit them to memory, of course. There's a check sheet where all the supplies are listed, and if anything gets added, the Seraphs always write it down. One glance at that is enough to know what we have in stock, and if there's anything that isn't on the sheet, we know to look into it.”

“I see. It sounds very well thought out. It will give you experience of managing inventory that will prove very valuable in your future maid careers.”

The little nod she gave had an air of giving a good student a pat on the head. For her, it sounded like this whole concept was the most basic thing in the

world.

This instantly put a look of frustration on Kirara's face, but she carried on regardless. "As for the sweets to serve, I can't tell you what everyone will like. I mean, I do have a general idea of everyone's tastes, of course, but you always need to make adjustments on the fly when it comes down to it. There's no one-size-fits-all solution."

"I understand. The mistresses' mental and physical states can vary, which in turn will affect what they want to eat. Determining what they're looking for and what to serve them will always be a case-by-case decision."

"Exactly."

Sara was quick to catch on as always—or, more accurately, she already knew all this.

"I'll need to tell you all about cleaning up too, but maybe we can leave that for later. For now, the top priority is serving delicious tea and cakes to the ladies. The big question is what to offer."

This wasn't easy to answer. We could definitely serve everyone their favorite kind of tea, but the whole idea behind today's party was different than a usual afternoon at the Sky Salon. It was Lady Sakura's first day as an official member. It would be best to serve something fit for the occasion.

"Indeed. Would you mind if I take a glance at the list?"

"Go right ahead."

Sara took the inventory check sheet from Kirara and gave it a once-over before nodding. "I see. You're thinking of serving this to everyone, aren't you?"

She pointed to the variety of tea leaves Kirara had written at the very bottom of the inventory list. It was a second flush Darjeeling that had just recently arrived. Darjeeling was Lady Kagura's favorite kind of black tea.

Kirara raised an eyebrow. "What makes you think that?"

"First and foremost, you're the one who ordered it, and the delivery date was only a few days ago. Compared to previous purchases, the volume was rather large. I can deduce that you were preparing in advance for the possibility of my

mistress joining the salon—and a party like this being thrown.”

“Right. Uhm, I guess I’ll give you credit for your attention to detail. Still, we can’t decide based on that alone, right? Lady Sakura might want to drink something else.”

“No, I think it’s fine. As of today, she’s not a guest, but a member of the salon. Her first cup of tea here should be the same as everyone else’s so she can feel like part of a community. That particular variety is a favorite of Lady Kagura’s, I assume. If everyone partakes of it, it emphasizes who the leader is while fostering a sense of belonging. Also, serving everyone the same drink will drastically reduce the time it takes to prepare it. It’s important to serve the tea as efficiently as possible and to serve everyone at the same time. A table with nothing on it feels frightfully desolate, and any individuals who receive their drink late might feel uncomfortable, putting a damper on what’s supposed to be an enjoyable event.”

Sara continued, “If an individual does have a strong preference, it’s perfectly fine for them to receive that as their second drink. A similar approach can be applied to the sweets. For today, we should aim to serve large plates with enough for everyone to share. The ladies’ individual Seraphs can do the work of taking the portions and putting them onto smaller plates. This also aids in ensuring everyone has a sense of common ground and—”

Before Sara could even finish, Kirara growled in frustration and said, “Fine. Yes, you got basically everything right. I bet you think that’s cute.”

An innocent smile spread across Sara’s face. “I’m relieved. I actually wasn’t entirely confident. After all, harmony isn’t emphasized as strongly in Britain as it is in Japan. Everyone being served the same thing is more of a Japanese custom, I believe.”

“Pretty much. Don’t you dare think the plan was just to force everyone to follow Lady Kagura’s preferences, though. I took Lady Sakura’s taste into account as well.”

“I can see what you mean. My mistress is rather fond of Darjeeling, and she’s said that she finds all kinds of Japanese sweets delicious. I think what you’ve chosen should definitely satisfy her.”



“Of course it will. That’s the power of research!” She added a self-satisfied chuckle.

“Most impressive. I wouldn’t have expected you to get such a firm handle on Lady Sakura’s tastes in such a short period of time.”

Kirara fell silent for a moment; getting such frank praise from Sara left her with a slightly sour expression.

“I’m not stupid, you know. I listened to every word you told us about her and committed the details to memory. Obviously, that let me figure out some of her likes and dislikes.”

“Indeed!” Sara replied with a nod. “Though even if it was based on my remarks, remembering it all and putting it into action is still most impressive. I must say that on a personal level, I’m thoroughly overjoyed that you, Lady Kagura, and all the other members have been so welcoming toward my mistress. Thank you.”

Sara’s smile made her look so carefree. Talking about Lady Sakura seemed to give her a kind of childlike openness.

All of this seemed to have caught Kirara off guard. Her voice sounded a little shrill as she replied, “No need to say thank you. What else were you expecting? Now, we’d better not leave the ladies waiting.”

“How shall we organize ourselves?”

“Good question. How about this: I’ll arrange the tea set while you boil the water and warm the teapots. You can also bring the leaves over. Misaki, you focus on the sweets.”

“Jolly good.”

“Will do!”

After enthusiastically agreeing, the three of us set about getting everything ready.

It felt slightly odd for us all to be here. When I’d first met Kirara at the entrance ceremony, she’d been pretty antagonistic toward me. Then we’d become friends, but she’d developed a rivalry with Sara—who was now here

with us too. Who'd have expected it to end up like this?

Personally, I was overjoyed. I couldn't help chuckling quietly to myself as I watched Kirara and Sara working side by side.

"What are you laughing at, Misaki?" Kirara asked, bearing down on me. "Are you finished with your job?"

"Quite," Sara agreed, doing the same. "If you shirk your duties, it will only lower your own standing."

They came so close that they were pushing me back into the table, but this only made me happier still. Laughing, I replied, "But don't you think it's wonderful that all three of us are here together?"

"What are you talking about? Having Sara here doesn't make *me* happy at all!"

"As for me, I'm quite content as long as I can be with Lady Sakura."

"Huh, really? I could have sworn you were looking forward to this, Kirara. And Sara, you were excited about joining the Sky Salon, right? Am I imagining all this?"

"For sure."

"Indeed. I merely felt that this was the most appropriate salon for my mistress."

With them being this insistent, I couldn't push back any further. Still, if they felt this comfortable saying what was on their mind, our relationship seemed pretty good to me. *I guess they both have personalities that make it hard to say anything positive about each other.*

"Fine, if you say so."

"There is nothing 'fine' about any of this! Stop blathering when there's work to do!"

"All right! Your wish is my command. You *are* the head Seraph around here."

"What are you talking about?" she replied, suddenly nervous. "If anyone hears you call me that, there'll be hell to pay." Kirara moved away, trembling

with fear.

Obviously, the salon had a lot of older Seraphs to look up to. Every one of them was far more skilled and impressive than us, with the Kokonoe sisters at the top of the list. I didn't think anyone would have been genuinely annoyed by my little joke, but we'd be teased and mocked more than enough to make up for it. That would probably have been *worse* than getting shouted at.

Turning to Sara, I said, "By the way, don't let yourself become the older Seraphs' plaything."

"I'm not entirely sure what you mean, but I shall have to be careful." There was trepidation in her voice; a faint bead of sweat formed on her temple as she moved away.

Once the tea was ready, we carried it back to the central table, where everyone was already chatting pleasantly.

"Sorry for the wait!"

"Ah, thank you," Lady Kagura said. Gesturing with her hand, she added, "Please serve those to everyone."

"Yes, milady."

On her signal, we handed out the sweets to all the ladies. Even though Lady Sakura was new, this was otherwise a totally normal event. However, I sensed that Kirara was extremely nervous. Her restless gaze kept shifting between her hands and elsewhere.

The "elsewhere" was Sara. It looked like Kirara was very conscious of everything our newly arrived Seraph was doing.

That was when it hit me. Sara's whole bearing was markedly different from ours. Her back was straight as an arrow as she gracefully held the tea set. Every one of her movements was captivating, but that wasn't what really stood out. It was that as she moved the tray and set each cup down on the table, it didn't make even the slightest noise.

Kirara was doing a far better job than I was, but I didn't measure up to either of them whatsoever. Every step I took made the vessels on the tray clatter

loudly against one another, which made me stand out as an inexperienced novice. When I put the cups down, I tried my hardest not to spill any of the contents, but my posture inevitably slipped. The tea turned into a stormy ocean, with the waves rolling over and splashing into the saucer.

Watching how carefully Kirara was working to avoid all this, the Kokonoe sisters giggled and stroked her bottom.

“Looks like Sara’s got you beat, Kirara!”

“You need to concentrate harder!”

Unable to say anything to counter that, or to raise any objections to their grabby hands, Kirara gritted her teeth in frustration. They were making her feel the clear difference in rank. Even so, Kirara didn’t lose heart. She tried to copy Sara’s movements exactly, closing the gap between them as best she could.

I already knew I was hopeless. I did my best to follow in their footsteps, but I had no idea how to make it *that* perfect.

Lady Kagura was watching Kirara as well. A soft chuckle came from her lips. “It seems as though Sakura and Sara’s arrival will be quite the motivating factor around here.”

“I can see what you mean,” Lady Sakura replied. “Sara’s also putting in extra effort today. I’m sure she’s quite self-conscious about Kirara and Misaki being here.”

Sara politely denied this. “No, milady. This is my standard level of performance.”

“Is that so? I don’t remember you being so exacting before.”

“If it appears that way, then I’d ask you to consider it proof that I’ve learned and improved in my time at this school.”

“Hmm, yes. If you put it that way, I’ve no choice but to celebrate my Seraph’s improvements.”

“Indeed, milady.”

Bowing her head respectfully, Sara quietly laid a plate of sweets in front of her mistress.

*They're the picture-perfect pair. I hope Himeko and I can look like that one day.*

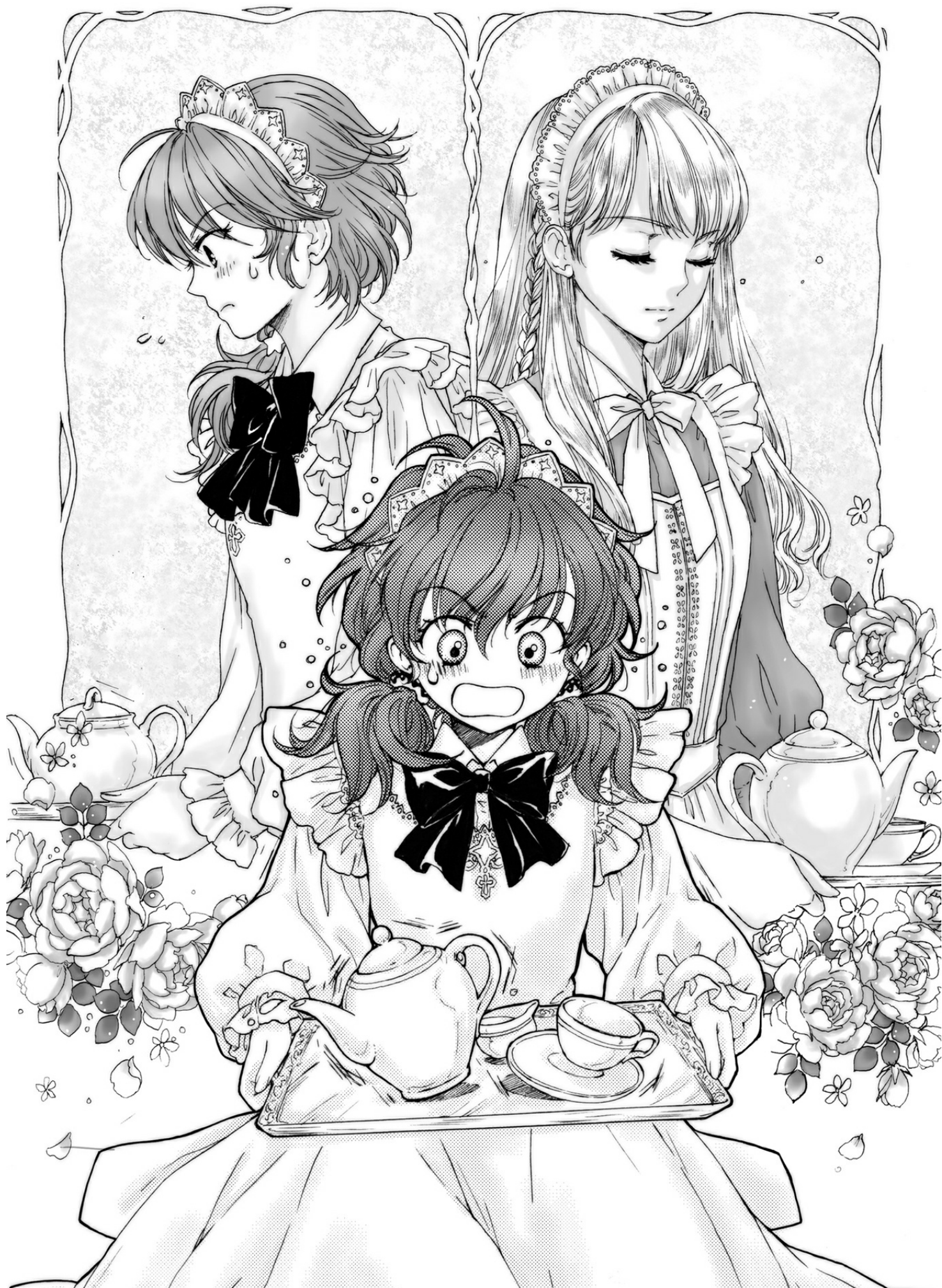
Meanwhile, despite my attempt to really focus, the cups on my tray were bouncing around and colliding with a noise that sounded like laughter. "Here you go, milady," I said, my voice a bundle of nerves.

Himeko stifled a laugh, then apologized. "Sorry. Maybe you can learn a little from Sara too, though. I'd be happy to see you get better at this, Misaki."

I lifted my head. "Yes, milady! I will!"

Hearing that was a pleasant surprise. So far, Himeko had given me very little to go on when it came to my maid duties. She'd never told me what she wanted from me on that front. I knew that was because we had a special kind of arrangement, but Himeko had finally pushed past that barrier.

There was a momentary look of realization on her face too, but she quickly smiled again without saying a word. Maybe she didn't think I'd noticed anything.



The rest of the party was an amiable affair, with Lady Sakura fitting in perfectly at the Sky Salon right from the word go.

Once the sweets had all been eaten, Lady Kagura looked around at everyone and said, “By the way, summer vacation will be starting very soon. Could I ask what everyone’s plans are? I assume some of you will be visiting your families and others will be staying on campus.”

Lady Saeko spoke up first. “I’m staying here. I have all sorts of minor business to attend to.” She bared her fangs in a bold, suggestive grin. Whatever business she was talking about, my instincts told me not to ask.

“I’ll be going home,” answered Lady Inaho. “I have to help out there.”

Similarly, Lady Sumire said, “I’m afraid I’ll be going to a summer resort for some rest and recuperation.”

Lady Sakura’s plans were no surprise. “I’m staying. I only just got here, after all.”

Soft laughter bubbled across the room.

*I guess it would be pretty exhausting to go back so quickly anyway. She hasn’t even been here one month yet.*

“Since I’m here during the summer holidays,” she continued, “I might as well take this opportunity to look around every nook and cranny of the school.”

“Good idea,” Lady Kagura agreed. “The campus is so large that there are plenty of places even I’ve never been to.”

The school grounds really were enormous. The high school alone had two buildings that looked like castles with vast gardens surrounding them. Also, while I hadn’t seen it, there was not only a junior high on the other side of the hill, but apparently a university as well. Adding all that together, the scale had to be immense. If she wanted to explore every corner, it really would take the entire vacation.

“I’m staying on campus as always,” said Himeko. Turning to me, she added, “What about you, Misaki?”

“I’m thinking of staying here too.”

More to the point, I didn't exactly know where I'd go "home" to if I *did* decide to go home.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I want to help you, and someone has to take care of the Sky Salon during the vacation."

"Excellent," Himeko replied, grinning and gently stroking one of my pigtails.

"In general, it sounds like everyone's sticking to their usual plans," Lady Kagura concluded. "I'll be going home for the first half, so I'll leave the salon in the hands of those of you who are left." Turning to Kirara, she added teasingly, "I'd like you to come with me this time, Kirara."

"Oh! Yes, milady!"

During Golden Week, Kirara had stayed on campus to try and win over Lady Minako, so this would be her first visit to Lady Kagura's family home. It was a big step. This was set to be Kirara's place of employment after graduation. I could only imagine how she felt about the prospect of setting foot in that house as a first-year student.

Thanking her mistress with a nervous expression, she shot up from her chair and bowed. In my mind, I gave her a silent cheer of encouragement.



## Chapter Five: Summer Vacation Begins

*Beep! Beep! Beep!* went the alarm clock next to my head. Half-awake, I reached out and groped for the button.

The end-of-term ceremony was over, and today was the first day of vacation at last. With no class to go to, I could have slept in, but I didn't want to rest on my laurels. Himeko had a meeting in the morning, so I was thinking of seeing her off, then heading to the Sky Salon to do a deeper clean than was usually possible.

All in all, I *had* to get up. I couldn't let myself fall back to sleep.

Next to me, Himeko was still sleeping soundly. Careful not to wake her, I slipped out of bed. We'd slept in the same bed plenty of times by now on weekends and so on, but from today, it wouldn't be the kind of isolated event it had been so far. During the vacation, not only would Kirara be gone, but so would my other two roommates, who were both going home to see their families. Until they got back, I'd be sleeping over in Himeko's dorm every night.

I'd be here from "good morning" all the way to "good night." Was that the full-fledged maid lifestyle? Or maybe that was more like a cohabiting couple? It wasn't much different from my current situation, yet it made me feel closer to Himeko and her life somehow.

Her sleeping face had a hint of a smile on her lips, as if she was having a good dream. *I know she's got a lot on her mind lately because of Lady Shion, but at least her dreams are Shion-free.*

I quickly changed into my maid uniform and got myself cleaned up. Since we were on vacation, it would have been fine to wear my own clothes, but having a preset outfit to wear saved me the time it would take to choose. Plus, at this school, walking around in a maid uniform was the normal option.

Even with no classes, some of the restaurants on campus would stay open throughout, so eating breakfast at one of those was an option. However, Himeko tended not to like going out if she didn't have to, so often I would make her sandwiches and things with ingredients I'd bought beforehand.

*Speaking of which, I should make Himeko some sandwiches before she wakes up.*

I fried some eggs, opened a can of tuna, and prepared a potato salad with ham. *It's mostly premade, but isn't that the whole point of sandwiches? And hey, even if it's not obvious from this particular meal, I am learning to cook, slowly but surely.*

I neatly laid out the sandwiches on a plate and brewed some tea, then I was done. After washing my hands, I cheerfully went back into the bedroom to wake up my mistress.

Gently whispering in her ear, I said, "Himeko, I've made you breakfast. Time to get up."

No response. This was typical, though. On school days she got up relatively easily, but as soon as it was a day off, it got much harder. It was like a switch turning on and off.

"Himeko, you have a meeting today, remember? You don't want to be late."

Still nothing. Looking at the sleeping princess's lovely profile, I thought about poking her cheek to see if that helped, but it felt a little too disrespectful.

*She really does look beautiful when she's asleep, though.* Naturally, she looked beautiful when she was awake too, but then I couldn't spend too long staring at her face, since the awkwardness always got to me first. That made this a special treat.

Still, I couldn't stare at her all day. We had things to do. Just as I was considering how much force might be okay, her arm suddenly stirred, reaching out from under the covers. With a yelp, I was dragged into bed with her.

"Can't we lie here a little longer?" she murmured sleepily, embracing me from behind. "It's our vacation, and the meeting's not until nine so we have an hour more than we normally would. Take it easy, Misaki."

It didn't feel like she would be letting me go anytime soon. She pressed her cheek against mine and hugged me like I was a body pillow.

"Fine. Only fifteen minutes, though. I already made breakfast."

“All right, I understand.”

I wasn't sure if she really had understood, but her measured breathing told me she'd fallen asleep again, so for now all I could do was wait.



When she finally woke up with a big yawn, it was half an hour later. After the first fifteen minutes, she'd demanded "just another five" three times, and I eventually gave in.

As I poured her tea, I kept glancing at the clock. "You'll be okay for time, right?"

*To be fair, if what she said earlier is true, she should easily make it.*

"It's completely fine," she replied, confirming this. "Besides, it doesn't matter if I'm at the meeting or not. All I'm ever there for is to sit and listen and maybe sign something at the end to show I approve. Today there might not even be that much. They'll be discussing business for next term, so there'll probably be nothing for me to deal with."

"Oh, really?" I replied hesitantly. I had absolutely no clue what Himeko's work as the deputy chairman of the board involved, so there wasn't much else I could say.

"I think it'll end early in the afternoon. What are you planning for today?"

"I'm thinking of going to the Sky Salon. I'll have time to do the usual upkeep plus some extra-deep cleaning."

"Then it sounds like we can have lunch together. What should we have? Something cold would be a treat. Sushi or soba maybe."

"That sounds great. If we can have dessert too, I'll have no complaints at all!"

She giggled. "Then let's meet at the Sky Salon."

"Great!"

We left François House together and were soon struck by the relentless summer sun. I hurried toward the former school building, which housed the Sky Salon, conscious of the dark shadows the intense rays were casting on the ground.

I'd walked this route countless times by now, but it had a different air about it on the first day of summer vacation. On a typical day off, it was usually pretty deserted, but now I could see smatterings of people about. There were a lot of Societal Arts students walking around accompanied by Domestic Arts students,

all of whom were carrying large bags. *I guess they're on their way home today.*

I wondered if Kirara had set out already. I had no real way of contacting her, so I wouldn't find out about her time at Lady Kagura's home and how it all went until she got back. It was possible she'd call if she had time, but I figured if she didn't, I'd treat it as "no news is good news." It was all in Kirara's hands, at the end of the day. I didn't think she'd have any trouble though. The Kokonoe twins' special training was clearly paying off, since her skills were getting more and more impressive.

Her rivalry with Sara looked like it had lit a fire under her too. Sara was in a class of her own, but Kirara was among the top students in our grade as well.

I looked around to see if anyone I knew was nearby, but I didn't spot anyone, so I just made a beeline for the salon.

When I arrived using the old-fashioned elevator, I noticed something strange. The air conditioner was already running. Someone had arrived before me.

In my mind, I ran through the Sky Salon members who were staying over the break. It wasn't Himeko of course, and it was unlikely to be Lady Saeko or Lady Sakura.

*What about Matsuri, Lady Saeko's Seraph? She's a bit of a workaholic, so maybe she had the same idea as me and got started on it before I did. I could see it happening.*

Standing in the entrance, I looked around for her, but she was nowhere in sight. Figuring she might be cleaning her mistress's personal space, I headed over there, only to see someone I definitely hadn't been mentally prepared for. Not that her being there was a problem, of course. If anything, I should have expected her there.

Still, I couldn't keep myself from yelping in shock.

Lady Saeko licked her lips when she saw me. "What a crude noise you just made. Did you see something unpleasant, perhaps?"

I whimpered in panic. "No! Erm, not at all! I was just surprised, that's all! I was expecting to see Matsuri, and then you were here!"

She leaned back in her chair and stared up at the ceiling. “Matsuri’s not here,” she murmured, a distant look in her eyes. “She’s gone somewhere else.”

Now that I looked, her table didn’t have a drink on it, just a paperback book that she’d probably brought with her.

“Erm, she didn’t tell you she was through, did she? Or go back to her family saying that she couldn’t take your harsh daily discipline anymore?”

Beckoning me over with a smile straight out of hell, Lady Saeko slowly said, “Misaki, why don’t you come over here? Just for a moment.”

I took a few steps back, wishing I could run away. “I’m joking! The heat is getting to me! It’s making me talk nonsense!”

It was pretty clear that Lady Saeko was the only one here. No one would be coming to help me, so maybe cutting and running *was* the best plan.

Before I could, she replied, “Don’t worry about it. Look, what I said about her being somewhere else was true, but it’s not because we’ve had a big, dramatic breakup or because she was running away from me.” She rolled her eyes and let out a weary sigh.

“Oh, really?” I ventured.

“Matsuri is—”

Before she could finish, the bell signaled the elevator’s arrival. Someone else had arrived. Was it Matsuri, I wondered?

It was not.

“Oh, the air conditioner’s been switched on,” Lady Sakura remarked, making the same observation I had. “Someone’s here already.”

“So it seems,” Sara agreed.

“It sounds like Lady Sakura and Sara,” I said to Lady Saeko.

“Indeed it does. You should go and say hello to your friend.”

She started waving goodbye, so I decided to take her up on that. “Yes, erm, that’s a good idea. Bye for now.”

Grateful for their timing, I went over ready to thank them profusely. “Lady

Sakura! Sara! Hello!”

“Oh, Misaki, good day,” said the mistress, going into a curtsy so elegant that it made me stop and marvel.

“Good day, Lady Sakura.” I returned the greeting, trying to imitate her mannerisms.

When I did, Sara, who had been watching our exchange, smiled and grasped her skirt in the same manner. “Good day!”

It looked like Sara had relaxed a little now that we were on vacation—unless it was because Kirara wasn’t here to put her on edge.

“How are you two spending your day?” I asked.

“Well, we’re planning to make a start on our campus exploration adventure,” Lady Sakura explained, “but I’m rather parched, so it made sense to come here first.”

“Yes, I see.”

*I guess Sara will take care of serving Lady Sakura, so maybe it’s okay for me to start cleaning.*

Before I could move a muscle, though, Lady Saeko came out, smiling at us all. “If you’d like a really refreshing drink, I can take you somewhere great. You might get to see something quite interesting as a bonus!”

Lady Sakura smiled back. “That is a very intriguing offer!

“Of course, it would mean setting out again when you just got here.”

“I don’t mind. To be honest, I’m too curious not to take you up on it. You phrased it so tantalizingly. What are we going to see?”

“It’s not as exciting as I’ve made it sound. It’s actually the same place you went to the other day, Erisu’s École Kitchen.”

Now this was a surprise. Last I remembered, Lady Saeko had hardly ever been there; she’d said it didn’t suit her palate. *To be fair, the food there has changed a lot, so maybe she’s started going there more often. I’ve never seen her there, though.* Himeko and I went there pretty often, so it felt pretty unlikely that



we'd never bumped into her.

The shock must have been visible on my face. "Goodness, Misaki," Lady Saeko remarked. "Is it so unexpected for me to mention Erisu's?"

What could I do but be honest? "Kind of."

"It's true that I hardly ever go there, but today is, well, a special occasion, you might say."

There was something unusually deliberate about her words. What was happening at Erisu's today?

"Now, let's all go there."

Despite my doubts, Lady Saeko escorted Lady Sakura back into the elevator.

*It can't be anything that far out of the ordinary, right? It's just Erisu's École Kitchen.*

With absolutely no idea what to expect, I followed behind them.



Erisu's École Kitchen was still open during summer vacation and had students going in and out already. By now, there was no sign it had ever been unpopular. It seemed to have gained a reputation of being a hidden gem.

Squinting in the light of the sun, which had risen fairly high in the sky, Lady Saeko stood in front of the door. Sara burst into action, nonchalantly stepping in front of the ladies and opening the door with a carefree motion.

I gasped. Had I made a huge mistake not thinking about this? What did I normally do when Himeko and I came here? I had a feeling that sometimes she opened the door and sometimes I did. At any rate, I definitely hadn't taken the initiative to go in front and show her in.

"There, there, Misaki," Lady Saeko said, stroking my head like she was consoling a child. "You have a good example to follow for next time."

*Ouch. This is even more painful than being lectured. Hanging around with other people makes it really clear just how lenient Himeko is with me.*

Groaning, I replied, "I'll take it to heart."

Just when I thought I was improving, I'd been shot down again. Lady Saeko was right, though; Sara was a great example to follow. Now that she'd joined the Sky Salon as well, I'd have to absorb everything I could from her.

*And wouldn't it be fun to try and level up while Kirara's not here and surprise her when she gets back?*

"Thanks, Sara," Lady Saeko said as she stepped into the restaurant.

After that followed the usual cry of "Welcome!" from Hanaka, the waitress.

Except that it didn't. The voice I heard from inside belonged to someone else. *Huh? Who was that?*

It didn't sound like any of Erisu's three Exousias. It was definitely familiar, but as far as I knew, no one else worked here apart from Hanaka, Mizuki, and Yukina. It also wasn't the owner herself.

Just as I peered in from behind Lady Saeko, the waitress suddenly froze.

"Lady Saeko!" she said, audibly shocked. "I didn't expect you to—"

"Goodness, is it so horrible to see your own mistress?"

"Matsuri, is that you?" I asked.

It was true. Lady Saeko's Seraph, Matsuri, was serving as a waitress at Erisu's École Kitchen.

What was she doing here? All kinds of scenarios ran through my head. Had she left the Sky Salon? Had Lady Saeko's bullying finally become too much for her? Or had she been a spy from the Paradise Palace all along?

"Hurry up and show us to our seats. Misaki's so confused she's about to explode."

"I'm not going to explode!"

I couldn't object to the rest, though. The "confused" part was entirely true.

"Would you like a private booth, or—"

"Out in the open is perfect. I want to be able to watch you work." Lady Saeko grinned.

“Certainly. This way, please.”

Matsuri led us to our seats with experienced poise. I could have believed she had always worked here.

Once we were seated and she’d gone into the back, I whispered a baffled question to Lady Saeko. “What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why is Matsuri working here? She’s your Seraph, so she doesn’t need another job, right? You haven’t canceled her contract, have you?”

“Of course not. I finally got my very own sla— uh, Seraph, so why would I get rid of her? Matsuri always gets part-time jobs during long vacations, that’s all. This time she’s working here because Erisu asked if she could help out every once in a while.”

“But—”

“But what about her Seraph work? Why do I allow it?”

She’d predicted all my questions, so I just nodded in silence.

“It’s all to reduce the amount of time it takes for her to pay off the debt. There isn’t much work for her to do during vacation, so why would I say no? The money’s important to her.”

“That’s true,” I replied hesitantly. In theory, there was nothing suspicious about any of that, but something was still gnawing at me.

Thinking back to how Lady Saeko had looked at the Sky Salon, she hadn’t looked fine with Matsuri not being there. She’d spoken about it in kind of a joking way, but she had undeniably looked quite lonely.

Matsuri came back with water and a menu. “Here you are.”

“Thank you,” her mistress replied. “You’re getting very good at this. Maybe I should ask Erisu if you can work here all the time.”

“Please don’t,” she squeaked. “I’m your Seraph, milady. I couldn’t.”

Smirking, Lady Saeko took the menu. “Don’t worry about that. It’s important to think about your future, isn’t it?”

This wasn't too different from their usual banter, but there was definitely something a little weird about Lady Saeko's tone. Her cruel teasing was normally accompanied by genuine concern about Matsuri's well-being. Now it was almost like she'd thrown that off altogether.

She opened the menu, then quickly closed it again and passed it to me. Apparently not in the mood to decide for herself, she said, "I'd like a drink and some kind of snack. What would you recommend?"

"For today, we have a mango parfait available. We also have mango pudding, or cheesecake with mango sauce. To match that summery atmosphere, I'd suggest having the tropical juice."

"In that case, I'll have the cheesecake and a tropical juice. What about you, Sakura?"

"Hmm, the pudding sounds good to me. Do you want the same as I'm having, Sara?"

"Yes, milady. That sounds jolly good."

"And you, Misaki?"

I thought for just a moment, then said, "I'll have the same as you, Lady Saeko."

When I handed back the menu, Matsuri smiled and said, "Two cheesecakes with mango sauce, two mango puddings, and four tropical juices. Coming right up."

She gracefully bowed her head and started walking back to the kitchen. Every movement looked so comfortable that I'd never have guessed this was her first day on the job.

I could see that Lady Saeko was surreptitiously watching her as well. There was a strange look in her eye, a mixture of affection and loneliness.

While waiting, Lady Saeko engaged Lady Sakura in some casual chatter.

"Where in Britain are you from?"

"Just outside of Mayfair."

“Oh, that’s not far from Buckingham Palace, is it?”

“Correct. You’re awfully well versed.”

“I visited as a child. The Changing of the Guard was so impressive that I had to watch it several times.”

“Oh, really? I always used to go and watch it as well, so maybe we were even there at the same time once.”

Lady Saeko laughed. “What a romantic idea.”

Soon I saw Matsuri returning with a tray in her hands. Her mistress noticed as well and glanced her way.

“Misaki, I have an idea,” she said with a grin. “Why don’t we have some fun?”

That kind of smile always meant she was up to no good, which put me on high alert. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“When she gets here, stick your foot out to trip her up.”

“What? I can’t do that!” This was a crazy idea to suggest out of nowhere.

“I’m not saying you should make her fall flat on her face and hurt herself. It can be more subtle, just to make her stumble a little.”

“No, I really can’t!”

“Are you sure? That’s a shame.” She sighed in disappointment.

Her finding ways to bully Matsuri was nothing new, but I wouldn’t have expected *this*. It could have resulted in injury or damage to the restaurant. There’d probably have been a mess to clean up.

With no idea of what Lady Saeko had been planning, Matsuri returned. “Thank you for waiting!” Placing our orders on the table, she added, “Is this everything?”

“Yes, thank you,” the mistress replied. “Matsuri, be sure to work hard. Don’t do anything to cause trouble for the restaurant.”

The Seraph nodded cheerfully at this encouragement. “I’ll do my very best, milady.”

Lady Saeko's whole tone was changing back and forth so rapidly that I had no idea what was going on in her head. How did she *really* feel about all this?

"Anyway, let's dig in," she said.

*There's definitely something going on here, but I don't know what it is.*

It had been worth getting Matsuri's recommendation. The dessert and drink were both absolutely delicious. As we ate, the restaurant steadily got busier and busier. I could tell that by now, Erisu's was a pretty popular place. Both Matsuri and Hanaka were rushing from table to table to serve everyone. Thinking about it, I hadn't seen Yukina or Mizuki at all so far, but I figured they both had to be in the kitchen.

Just as we were finishing up, the owner herself, Erisu Kumashiro, came over and offered a delicate curtsy. As always, she looked as pretty as a doll. "Oh, I didn't expect to see all of you here! Misaki comes here all the time, but it's lovely to see a few more unusual faces. Good day, and welcome to Erisu's École Kitchen."

"Good day, Lady Erisu," Lady Saeko replied. "Since my Seraph is working for you starting today, I thought I'd come and see how she was getting along."

"Ah, I see. To be honest, she's already doing a better job than my own Exousias. I think she can probably teach them a thing or two."

"Don't be silly. If she makes any blunders, you shouldn't hesitate to give her the discipline she deserves!"

Lady Erisu heaved a sigh of mild discomfort before saying, "I'll leave that up to you."

Although she could be strict with her Exousias, she definitely didn't practice the kind of physical punishment Lady Saeko was a fan of.

"And you're Sakura, aren't you? It's lovely to have a chance to speak to you at last. I'm a member of the Paradise Palace, but my restaurant isn't part of the salon, and Misaki and Himeko are actually regular customers. So, if you like it, you can come whenever you want without worrying that you're breaking some unwritten rule. I'd be thrilled to see you here! The staff are still learning, of course, so sometimes the flavors don't match up to other restaurants—

although that might be a matter of personal taste.”

“Good day, Lady Erisu. Thank you for letting us use your restaurant for my sake the other day. I’m sad that I can’t join you at your salon, but I felt a great kinship with the Paradise Palace members, and the dish I ordered today was absolutely delicious as well. I’ve hardly been anywhere else on campus yet, but your restaurant has a wonderfully relaxing atmosphere. I’m certain I’ll be coming here again.”

I was pretty sure Lady Sakura was sharing her true feelings here. She’d eaten the mango pudding and drunk the tropical juice with great gusto.

“I’m so happy to hear you say that! And this must be your Seraph, Sara.” Lady Erisu turned to her and smiled. “Feel free to come here on your own too, of course!”

“Thank you most kindly. I’ll be sure to do so.”

Next, Lady Erisu looked toward me. “I see you’re here without Himeko today.”

“Yes, my mistress is in a meeting right now.”

“I see. She has it rough even when we’re all on vacation.” She let out an absentminded sigh.

“By the way,” I said, “I don’t think I’ve seen Yukina or Mizuki today. Are they busy in the kitchen?”

“Mizuki’s toiling away in there, but Yukina’s not here at the moment.”

“She isn’t?”

“She’s gone to train at a restaurant run by my family. I’m planning to send all three of them, one after another, and promote them all to Seraphs if they make it through unscathed.”

I let out a small yelp. “After all this time!”

“Yep, I’m finally doing it. You helped them out a lot, you know. If they do become Seraphs, I’ll be sure to send them your way to say thank you.”

“What? But I hardly did anything! It’s all because of their hard work.”

“They were working hard, I’ll grant, but they were going in the wrong direction.”

I replied with an awkward laugh.

“It’s all fine now, though. Anyway, that’s why I needed Matsuri to step in.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

So Yukina, Mizuki, and Hanaka were finally going to be Seraphs. “Finally” was the word; they were clearly good enough for it. I’d thought that all along.

“I’ll leave you alone now. Enjoy the rest of your time here!”

“Thank you very much.”

Was I imagining the spring in Lady Erisu’s step as she walked away? She’d no doubt been eagerly awaiting this day as well. As someone who knew all the intimate details of the situation, I found myself breathing a big sigh of relief.

As she lifted the last of her cheesecake to her mouth, Lady Saeko murmured, “Yukina’s a third-year student, isn’t she? I wonder what will happen to this place after she graduates.”

After eating it, she continued, “Maybe Erisu will take on some other hired help. The real question is what happens after *she* graduates and only the building is left. Maybe someone will buy it up? It would be a waste otherwise. Hmm, maybe I can cajole Matsuri into buying it. What do you think, Misaki? Should I make Matsuri buy this nice place?”

“Huh? There’s no way she can do that, surely? Besides, Matsuri’s a third year. She’ll graduate before Lady Erisu does.”

“Good point. Hmph, what am I going to do then?”

Those last muttered words didn’t sound like they were directed at me.

I’d never seen Lady Saeko behave like this before. She was saying some really weird things. Was something going on?



## Chapter Six: Melancholy Summer

When I told Himeko about this, she cocked her head. “Saeko’s acting weird, you say?”

“She really is.”

After we left Erisu’s École Kitchen, Lady Saeko had headed off on her own, saying she wanted to go back to her dorm room. Sara and Lady Sakura had exchanged glances and agreed to go back to the Sky Salon for now, where we’d chatted for a little while. It wasn’t long before Himeko arrived after her meeting.

The salon’s newest member and her Seraph changed their plans—their campus exploration adventure could wait until the afternoon. First, it looked like they wanted to join us in trying to figure out the mystery of Lady Saeko’s strange behavior.

The four of us sat down in Himeko’s personal space. After I’d explained everything we’d seen at Erisu’s, Himeko seemed to have no more idea than I did.

“Hmm,” she mused. “If she was trying to make you interfere with Matsuri’s work, could it be that she doesn’t like the fact that her Seraph is working there?”

“That’s not the impression I got. When she saw Matsuri at Erisu’s, it was more like she was worried about her, or proud of her. To be honest, I didn’t get the sense that she didn’t like it.”

“Huh.”

Silence fell for a moment. It was broken by Lady Sakura, who offered, “I couldn’t tell you the reason, but my guess is that she’s trying to do something to Matsuri—and I think I know what.”

“Really? What is it?”

“Most likely, she wants to make her Seraph assume some additional liability.”

After mentally piecing together what this meant, I rephrased it for my own benefit. “Erm, make her take on debt, you mean? I know that Matsuri is in debt to Lady Saeko, but she’s been working so hard to pay it back. Why would her mistress want her to take on even more? Would it just be to earn more interest from her?”

That would definitely work as a benefit for Lady Saeko, but I’d never seen her as someone fixated on money above all else. Rather than someone who’d fuss over getting the most interest she possibly could, she was the kind of person who would support Lady Kagura’s business. In other words, she was the kind of person who was more likely to invest her money; the risks were great, but so were the rewards.

“Wait, I think I know what’s going on.” Himeko appeared to have realized something. “What if she’s trying to prevent Matsuri from fully paying off her debt?”

“Huh? But she’s put in so much work!”

“Yes, but Saeko might not want her to finish returning the money.”

“Why not?”

“Saeko took on all the debt owed by Matsuri’s family and made Matsuri into her Seraph as a kind of security on the loan. That means that if the debt is repaid, Matsuri won’t be able to continue working as her Seraph. It could be that Saeko is talking like this because she doesn’t want to let Matsuri go.”

“Oh, right!”

That did fit with how she’d been acting.

“But surely she could just tell Matsuri, ‘Thanks for all your help so far. From now on, you can stay or go; it’s up to you’? Lady Saeko clearly likes Matsuri a lot, and Matsuri... Well, actually she’s always quaking in fear. She seems to get some pretty harsh punishments too. The reason she’s doing extra work on the side is probably so she can pay off the debt quicker and get away.”

The more I said, the less and less likely it felt that their master-servant relationship could carry on just like it was after the debt was repaid.

Suddenly, the situation made me feel uneasy. Could we really just let their Seraph contract evaporate? If something like that happened while Lady Kagura was away, couldn't it screw up her future plans somehow?

"What are we going to do?" I asked nervously.

"I don't think it's up to us to do anything," Himeko replied. "It's between the two of them, and it's a question of money, which is a sensitive topic at the best of times. We probably shouldn't butt in, right? Not to mention that if I say anything, Matsuri will practically take it as a command. If things go sour after that, I can't be the one responsible."

She closed her eyes and quietly took a sip of tea.

The Domestic Arts students did tend to treat anything the Societal Arts students said as words handed down from on high. For that reason, the Societal Arts students had to be extra careful with whatever they said to anyone in the other program. Also, in cases where students who were already Seraphs or Exousias started getting more acquainted with other Societal Arts students, there was a chance of their own mistress warning the other lady not to step on her turf by ordering her servant around.

What I'd recently learned was that the Societal Arts students *acted* as though they were overwhelmingly powerful, but this wasn't really the case. What they generally valued above all else was keeping up appearances.

Lady Sakura interjected with a very practical suggestion. "Either way, if we're worried, perhaps we should ask Matsuri how she really feels at this stage? If she doesn't want to leave Saeko anyway, there's no need to take any action. Saeko's worries will be completely unfounded."

"True," I replied. "That'll probably give us a clearer picture than asking Lady Saeko. What do we do if she says she *does* want to stop being a Seraph, though?"

"Hmm," Himeko said, just as pensively as before. "It would be far from ideal, but there would still be nothing for us to do."

It sounded like if it came to that, it would be a matter for them to resolve on their own. It wouldn't be up to third parties like us to interfere.

*But it won't come to that, right? Surely Matsuri will want to keep serving Lady Saeko.*

As it turned out, the answer that awaited us proved me both right and wrong.



After Matsuri finished her shift at the restaurant the next day, we cornered her and asked her directly.

With a smile, she replied, "It's true that I'm working an extra job so I can pay off the debt more quickly, but I'm definitely not thinking of quitting as Lady Saeko's Seraph."

"Oh, really? That's a relief. We were worrying about what we should do if you said you *were* ready to quit."

"Oh dear. It looks like I've caused a big fuss all because this job is somewhere you can see me doing it. Admittedly, my mistress can be harsh at times, and serving her has its difficulties, but I also owe her a lot, and I wouldn't want to find a new mistress this late in the game. Also, not to toot my own horn, but I've served her for more than two years now. I'm confident that no one else would meet her exact needs."

As bashful as she sounded while saying that, it was clear that she had faith in herself and that her connection with her mistress was based on mutual trust. No matter how it looked from the outside, their arrangement was successful. It would be one thing to hear Lady Saeko say it, but hearing it from Matsuri left no doubt whatsoever.

"Besides," she added, "the way I see it, once I pay off the debt, we can finally have a *real* master-servant relationship. If I'm working for her just to pay off my debts, that's not exactly decent in the eyes of society. I'd prefer to have an arrangement where she wants me there and I respond in kind."

"I can see what you mean," I admitted. "There is something really nice about the idea that you both need each other."

"Exactly. That's why your relationship with Lady Himeko looks like the ideal situation to me."

“Ideal? Really?!”

“You don’t think so?”

“Well, I do when you put it that way. I couldn’t manage without Lady Himeko there, and I’m sure she feels the same way about me.”

Giggling, Matsuri replied, “You see?”

I wasn’t lying. Himeko and I truly needed each other.

Putting that aside, Matsuri got back to the matter at hand. “The truth is, I’ll finish paying off the debt in a few days.”

“Wow, really?”

“Yes. Lady Erisu has been kind enough to pay me very handsomely.” She gave a cute little wink and then giggled again. “I bet my mistress will be really surprised!”

“She sure will.”

“I hope so. For the first time, I’ll be able to face her with my head held high. I can’t wait.”



That night, when Himeko and I were lazing about in bed together, we talked over what Matsuri had said.

Himeko sounded pretty relieved. “I guess there’s nothing to worry about. I suppose serving someone with Saeko’s fierce temperament requires either a submissive maid like Matsuri or the veteran-style confidence of Shion’s Seraph, Aoi. No one else could do it.”

“True. I doubt I could cope, for example.”

*With Lady Saeko, it might just about work. Even when she starts getting angry, it doesn’t always feel like she’s totally serious. But Lady Shion? No way!*

“Indeed. I think it’s best that you’re with me, Misaki.”

“I agree!”

She giggled, while I laughed nervously in return. We smiled at each other and

joined hands. I didn't know if the sweltering midsummer heat was to blame, but I was in high spirits. I was happy for Himeko to fawn over me even more than usual, and to talk about all kinds of things I didn't normally feel comfortable discussing. As the night wore on, we spoke about all the places we wanted to go and things we wanted to do during the vacation.



Just two days later, we got word that Matsuri had squared away her entire debt. Actually, she came to us herself and told us about her plan, which was to formally return the last of the money to Lady Saeko and ask for a new contract so she could keep working for her. Beaming, she asked if Lady Sakura, Sara, Himeko, and I could join her to witness it. Hence we all gathered at the Sky Salon.

Even with the AC running, all the windows made the salon kind of like a greenhouse. The air was stiflingly hot. Maybe that was the reason Lady Saeko didn't look like she was doing so well.

She and Matsuri stood facing each other near the central table while the rest of us watched from some distance away. The contrast between them was striking. Matsuri was positively beaming, while Lady Saeko was gazing down at the table with her arms crossed. *I can't be the only one who thinks she looks uncomfortable, right? What's the problem, though? Her Seraph is going to repay her debts and then renew their relationship with no ill will at all. That's a cause for celebration, isn't it?*

The others wore heavy expressions too. It looked like they'd also picked up on this.

Matsuri was the only one smiling as she imagined what was about to happen. It reminded me of gears trying to turn while not being locked together properly. *But that's just my imagination, right?*

When Lady Saeko spoke, she sounded more frail than usual. "What's this about, Matsuri? Don't you have work to do at the restaurant?"

"My shift doesn't start until the afternoon today."

"Oh."

Apparently not noticing her mistress's dour mood, Matsuri took a step closer, her cheeks flushed. "I have something quite important to tell you today."

In perfect sync with her Seraph, Lady Saeko stepped back. "Oh? What is it?"

"First of all, I want to express how grateful I am for everything you've done for me and my family. If not for you, we might have been out on the street by now."

Lady Saeko stared back with a heavy expression.

Continuing, Matsuri said, "I know I've been a burden to you all this time, but today I'm finally showing my appreciation. No, that's not right. Today I'm finally able to repay what I owe you."

She retrieved an envelope from her pocket.

"This is all the remaining money I owe you. I believe this exactly covers the last of the debt. Please check it and make sure."

"All right."

Quietly, Lady Saeko took the envelope and checked its contents. Then she got out a ledger and wrote something down.

"That does indeed clear the entirety of the remaining debt. Congratulations. All your hard work has paid off."

This was the kindest tone I'd ever heard her use while talking to Matsuri.

Nodding happily, Matsuri replied, "Yes, milady! Thank you!"

Lady Saeko appeared to mentally prepare herself for a moment. Then she drew nearer to Matsuri. A gentle smile on her face, she put a hand on her Seraph's sleeve. "That means that as of today, you're free."

"What? But..."

All of a sudden, Matsuri sounded disoriented, as if sensing that something was off. It took a moment for the rest of us to realize what Lady Saeko was doing as well—but when it became clear, I cried out in shock at the same time as Matsuri.

Lady Saeko reached for the golden badge shining proudly on Matsuri's chest

and pulled it off.

“Huh? Milady, what are you...?”

Her voice was trembling and had grown faint. With a look of fear, she stared at the object in her mistress’s hand. It was the special proof that she was a Seraph—and now she was no longer wearing it.

“You started working for me because I took on your family’s debts. Now that those are cleared, I can’t continue to restrain you. You held up your end of the bargain and paid back the money, which means I have to keep my promise as well.” She turned to Himeko and Lady Sakura. “Isn’t that right?”

Himeko had a pained expression on her face as she nodded. “Yes, I suppose.”

Strictly speaking, there wasn’t anything wrong with what Lady Saeko was saying, but did she have to stick to it so rigidly? After all, she obviously liked Matsuri, and Matsuri actually wanted to keep working for her.

But Lady Sakura agreed, murmuring distractedly, “A contract must be upheld. Otherwise, you might no longer be trusted in these matters.”

“Exactly. Even if other people might see it as an agreement freely made between two students, to me and those close to me, I cannot under any circumstances be seen as someone who plays fast and loose with contractual terms. This is especially true given my promise to help Kagura with her business. You understand, don’t you?”

That last question was directed firmly at Matsuri herself.

Her voice wavering, Matsuri replied, “I don’t recall any terms that required me to stop being your Seraph as soon as I paid off the debt.”

“That would be trying to get by on a technicality. Anyway, aren’t you happy to be free at last?”

Lady Saeko put a hand on her (former) Seraph’s shoulder and slowly turned her around—to face the elevator.

“Thank you for your excellent service. I know you’ll find a new mistress, and she’ll be perfect for you. I hope everything goes well in the future.”

She pushed her all the way to the elevator.



“But milady!”

Ignoring Matsuri’s cries of protest, she put her inside and pressed the button.

Then Matsuri disappeared from the Sky Salon.



When she was gone, Lady Saeko went back to her own personal space. All the rest of us could do was exchange worried glances and sighs.

“*What* are we going to do?!” I asked, barely holding it together.

Tilting her head, Himeko put a hand on her cheek. “As I said before, I don’t think there’s anything we *can* do. Nothing that springs to mind right now, anyway.”

“But we can’t just do nothing!” I was shaking so hard that my voice had started to sound like a toy on the verge of breaking.

“I agree, but I think we need to give it some time. Whatever we say to Saeko now, it won’t get through to her. Thankfully, since it’s summer vacation, there are only a handful of people who know about any of this. We have a while before word starts spreading. If we can change her mind before that happens, it’ll be fine.”

This calmed me down a tiny bit, but I still couldn’t stop the shaking in my voice. “Do you think we can?”

Himeko sighed. “I think so, but it’s easier said than done.”

“I have a few ideas,” Lady Sakura interjected in an unassuming manner.

“Really?” I asked.

“Yes. They may not be entirely above board, of course. Given how much importance Saeko places on contracts and trust, I don’t think just asking her will be enough to make her agree. It does suggest another solution, however, and that’s forming a *new* contract.”

“But why would Lady Saeko enter into another contract with Matsuri now that Matsuri is fully paid? Wouldn’t she still see it as trying to keep Matsuri entrapped past the terms of her initial contract?”

“You have a point, yes. From the outside looking in, it seems slightly ridiculous, but her conscientiousness is rather admirable.”

“But you have some way to convince her?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Huh? Wasn’t this plan your idea?”

A mischievous smile formed on Lady Sakura’s face. “It was indeed. I didn’t say it requires convincing Saeko, however.”

“It doesn’t?”

She was presenting it like a riddle, but no matter how hard I thought, I couldn’t figure out the solution.

“You’ve heard some hints already, Misaki.”

“I have? When?”

“The other day at Erisu’s and after that at the Sky Salon.”

“Huh?”

This left me baffled. What had I heard back then? It had to be something Lady Saeko had said herself, right? She’d tried to interfere with Matsuri’s work at the restaurant. Why? So it would take Matsuri longer to repay the debt?

“At the restaurant, she tried to get me to trip Matsuri. If I’d done that, it would have looked like Matsuri had made a mistake—and if anything had gotten broken, I guess that would have added to her debt. Is that what you mean?”

“Precisely.” She lifted a finger. “In other words, all we need to do is get Matsuri in debt again and have Saeko take on the debt.”

“Right, I see! Then they’d be back where they started.”

“Indeed. There’s only one problem.” She whipped around to face the others. “Who’s going to suggest it to Matsuri herself?”

“Does that matter? Won’t Matsuri go along with it no matter whose idea it is?”

“If you’re sure of that, why don’t we leave it in your hands, Misaki?”

“Wait, what?”

In a panic, I looked at Himeko and Sara, but both of them were pretending not to notice me. Nothing came from them but silence.

“This is crazy! I can’t go to someone and say they should take on debt, let alone someone older and more experienced!”

Himeko looked up at the ceiling. “That’s true. It would be especially scandalous for a Societal Arts student, but even a Domestic Arts student would probably end up getting expelled if word got around that they’d made someone do that. It’s not a terrible idea, but we don’t have anyone to carry it out.”

Lady Sakura turned to face us again. “Indeed. I really think putting everything back the way it was is the easiest solution, but if the two of them won’t do it on their own, it falls to onlookers like us to step in—and that brings all kinds of problems with it.”

“Hmm, yeah,” I replied. “With all the hard work Matsuri has put into paying it back, I don’t know if it would really be okay to ask her to take on even more debt.”

“Probably not.”

“Do you have any other ideas?”

“One more. It’ll take some time, but if we can convince the two of them, it should work.”

“Really? Tell me, please!”

“Well, the stumbling block for Saeko is that she wants it to be clear to everyone around her that she honors her contracts. That’s why, from the start of the next term, it will be clearly established that Matsuri has fully repaid the debt, honoring the contract. Saeko will have proven that she’s done the same and made her a free agent for now. Then, once that becomes common knowledge, Matsuri can ask to be Saeko’s Seraph again. That would work, wouldn’t it?”

“Right, I see. I think that’s a great idea!”

All of a sudden, I felt a forceful hand gripping my shoulder. “No, it is *far* from a great idea.”

It was Lady Saeko, and she did not sound happy at all.

“Huh?” I exclaimed.

“If you’re going to talk about me behind my back, you could at least have the decency not to do it so loudly where I can hear you.”

Furrowing her brow, she bared her teeth threateningly at Lady Sakura and the others.

“Sorry to tell you this, but even if Matsuri said she wanted to be my Seraph, I’d tell her no and that would be the end of it. Also, since you’re still new, Sakura, it makes sense that you’re not familiar with all the rules yet. Normally, if a Domestic Arts student actively asks a lady to let her be her Seraph, that’s a rule violation. I’m not such a good-natured softie that I’d make a girl my Seraph if she was so lacking in decorum. What’s the problem, anyway? Matsuri worked hard to pay off her debts, and she finally did it. Now she’s free.”

“But she told us she wants to keep serving you.”

“Who knows whether she was telling the truth?”

*Oof, Lady Saeko is surprisingly obstinate.*

“If we confirm that she *was* telling the truth and does really want that, then will you let her be your Seraph again?”

“No.”

“Why do you have to be so stubborn about this?!” I cried, only realizing a moment later just how rude this was.

Lady Saeko took on a low voice and directed her next words not to me, but to my mistress. “Himeko. I’ve said this all along, but don’t you think you’re a little too lenient with Misaki? As a student who frequents the Sky Salon, she should be expected to have more class. If you don’t make her more careful about her phrasing and her attitude, the Sky Salon will go down in others’ estimation.”

“Perhaps, but I think Misaki has been very careful about that sort of thing lately. For example, she’s been consistently calling me ‘*Lady* Himeko’ whenever we’re in public, and she’s been showing me plenty of respect in other ways.”

“It’s not nearly enough. If you ask me, you two look like you’re only pretending to be master and servant. You uphold the facade, but you’re really acting more like a lovey-dovey couple.”

“No, that’s not fair!” Then Himeko suddenly put both hands on her face and looked at Lady Saeko, doe-eyed. “Wait, is that how we look?”

“Absolutely.”

After a moment’s pause, Himeko’s face went bright red. Covering it with her hands, she said, “I see. I’ll watch out for that.”

Stepping in front to shield Himeko, I faced Lady Saeko head-on. “Hold on just one minute! If you’re going to tell my mistress that, say it to me directly. It’s not fair to blame her.”

“Not fair? Don’t be ridiculous. If a Seraph messes up, it’s only natural for the mistress to take responsibility. In fact, if I were to address you directly, that would be against the rules. Whatever cautions are needed, you have a mistress, and that makes it her responsibility to deliver them. If you want to avoid getting Himeko into any more embarrassing situations like this, then you might want to be more careful.”

Whimpering, I replied, “I suppose that makes sense, but—”

“Speaking of which, your punishment is that you’re forbidden from entering the Sky Salon for the rest of the day. Now leave and think about what you’ve done.”

“What?! But—”

Just as she had with Matsuri, she started forcibly shoving me toward the elevator.

“Himeko!” I cried out.

“Misaki!”

Like Romeo and Juliet, we reached out our hands to each other, but the distance was too great. Even Himeko couldn’t stand up to Lady Saeko’s will at this moment.

“You two just don’t know when to give up. Do as I say for today, Himeko. You too, Misaki.”

Suddenly, Lady Saeko leaned in and whispered something into my ear. When I heard it, I lost all my power to resist.



After being forced out of the Sky Salon, I went looking for someone.

Naturally, this someone was Matsuri. While pushing me into the elevator, Lady Saeko had told me, “Go and check on Matsuri for me.” I would have gone to find her anyway, but it made me happy to know that Lady Saeko really did care about her (former) Seraph’s feelings.

*Whatever she claims, I can tell that she needs Matsuri.*

“Now, where would she be?” I wondered aloud. “Wait! She’s right there!”

I’d barely even started looking when I spotted her. She was sitting in a corner of a flower bed near the entrance to the former school building that housed the Sky Salon. She was clutching her legs and staring down at the ground, hidden among the abundant plant life. It almost looked like there was a dark cloud hanging over her.

I rushed over, shocked by just how downcast she was. “Matsuri!”

Weakly, she raised her head and turned toward me. “Oh, Misaki. It’s you.”

The beaming face she’d worn mere minutes ago was nowhere to be seen. She had dark circles under her eyes, and her cheeks looked more hollow and sunken than usual.

“It’s all right,” I said, albeit hesitantly. “Lady Saeko needs you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Uhm, I’m pretty sure.”

I didn’t know what Lady Saeko had in mind, so I didn’t want to say anything too committal. Giving her false hope could definitely be a problem. I sat down beside her, figuring that the most important thing for now was to give her some peace of mind.

“So try to calm down, okay?”

She tightly grasped my hands and looked at me imploringly with tears in her eyes. “What did Lady Saeko say after I left?”

I could feel her trembling. Telling the truth when she was in that state felt like



a risky idea. *How can I tell her that her mistress has no intention of taking her on as a Seraph again?*

“Oh, erm, well...”

While I was panicking over what I could even say, Matsuri put me out of my misery.

“She didn’t say anything at all, did she? She doesn’t need me anymore.”

The floodgates finally opened. She collapsed into my lap, wailing.

“Lady Saeko is worried about you. She asked me specifically to go and check on you. I’m sure that you’re totally important to her. No doubt about it.” She didn’t respond, so I underlined it again. “It’s true! I promise!”

I stroked her head. *That much is certain, so why can’t she just be honest about it? I don’t understand the need for all this awkwardness.*

*If it were me, I’d... Suddenly, I paused. What would I do if it were me? One thing’s for sure: someday, Himeko will tell me she wants to say goodbye. What’ll I do then? Will I be able to keep it together? I mean, it’s what we’ve been planning from the start, so there’s no reason to get upset...right? Why do I feel a painful stirring in my heart all of a sudden?*

Matsuri looked up at me from my lap. “Misaki, are *you* all right?”

“Yes, everything’s fine. There’s nothing for you to worry about. We’ll convince Lady Saeko to take you back for sure. She definitely still needs you. It doesn’t take a genius to figure that out.”

“Don’t trouble yourself, please. I don’t want to cause you and the others all that extra work.”

Wiping away her tears, Matsuri sat up. Her face looked swollen; she was clearly suffering a great deal.

“You’re part of the Sky Salon, just like us. We wouldn’t abandon you. There’s still so much I want to learn from you, Matsuri. It would be more troubling if you suddenly weren’t there anymore.”

“Thank you. That’s nice to hear.”

She forced a smile. *I doubt she's even taking in half of what I'm saying.*

"Just to make sure, you *do* want to keep serving Lady Saeko, right?"

"Of course. Being anyone else's Seraph is unthinkable."

"I'm glad to hear it."

That meant Matsuri needed Lady Saeko too. We *had* to figure this out somehow.

"Matsuri, how would you feel about staying over in my dorm room tonight? Kirara and my other roommates are all gone for the summer, so there'll be no one else there. It's a rare opportunity, and then we can chat a bit more. How about it?"

"I wouldn't mind, but aren't you staying with Lady Himeko at the moment?"

"Don't worry, I'll get her permission. The bigger worry would be leaving you on your own right now."

She made a whimpering sound. "I'm supposed to be the experienced one with everything under control. What kind of example am I setting if you're the one fussing over me?"

"It's all good. I'm sure I'll be running to you for help again before long."

To be honest, it felt like I was doing nothing *but* depending on the other Sky Salon maids. I wasn't going to pass up this chance to return the favor a little.

"In that case, I'll take you up on your offer. If I did stay on my own, it's not like I'd be doing anything important. I can't go back to Lady Saeko's room either."

"It doesn't have to just be today. You can stay all summer if you need to. Anyway, erm, let's head there for now."

I was sensing that negative aura from Matsuri again, so I hurriedly stood up and took her hand.

"Wait, you have a shift at Erisu's this afternoon, right? Maybe you should take the day off. I can go and tell them if you want."

Given her current state, I really didn't think she should be working.

"No, I'll go to work. I've made a commitment, so I need to stick to it. I'd be

breaking a promise otherwise. Besides, they don't know that Lady Saeko has canceled my Seraph contract yet. If I skip my shift, it'll damage her reputation."

"Oh. I see."

*Breaking a promise, huh? I can see how it would be important to avoid that.*

I just never expected that keeping a promise could cause someone so much pain.



We went back to my room for a little while first. We talked over a cup of tea, and she seemed to relax a bit. She was able to smile, if weakly. The idea of her going to her shift no longer seemed *too* worrying.

At noon, I said goodbye to Matsuri. Then I decided I'd go and check in with Himeko, and afterward go and buy the things I'd need when Matsuri was staying over.

Since it was better for me not to go up to the Sky Salon right now, I did the same as Matsuri had and waited outside the building. Himeko came down almost instantly; I was amazed, thinking for a moment that we were deeply in sync in some kind of telepathic way.

She soon shattered that illusion. "I saw you coming through the window so I headed down to meet you. Saeko's still upstairs, so it seemed best not to make you come up."

"Fair enough," I replied with a touch of disappointment. "Still, it was nice of you to do that. I was planning to wait here until you happened to be leaving."

"Either way, let's not linger here. It's too hot out."

She squinted up at the sky and blocked out the sunlight with her hand. There wasn't a single cloud up there, and the sun's rays were oppressive. *Is it possible for the weather to be so good that it actually makes you feel worse?*

Himeko took my hand and started walking. "We probably shouldn't go to Erisu's, I suppose. Why don't we go to one of the other restaurants on campus?"

"Sounds good."

Grasping her hand in return, I realized just how comforting I found it to have a mistress who held my hand.



Around half of the restaurants were closed over vacation, but there were more than enough open to serve the students still at the academy. For those to be operating as usual when there was so little demand suggested they were probably being subsidized by the academy. There were other students like Matsuri who worked part time at these places over the summer, so that was probably another reason for them to stay open.

Himeko opted for a café that also served lunch.

“Let’s eat while we’re here,” she said.

Originally, we’d been planning to eat lunch at Erisu’s, but that was off the table. It seemed like Himeko wasn’t sure how to approach Matsuri for now.

When we went inside, a waitress spotted Himeko and rushed over. The girl appeared to be a Domestic Arts student working here part time, and she led us to a table with some very nervous glances at Himeko.

Around half of the tables were occupied with other people who had come here for lunch. This included mistresses who had brought their Seraphs. It occurred to me that these had to be the relatively rare cases of Societal Arts students who had Seraphs but had still decided to stay on campus. *Maybe they’re trying to squeeze in as much school life as they can, since they’ll be together at home for a long time after graduation.*

We sat down and ordered a light lunch of sandwiches accompanied by orange juice. Frowning slightly, Himeko brought up the matter at hand. “How was Matsuri when you spoke to her?”

“It’s tough to say. She seemed pretty upset, but after we chatted in my room for a while, she calmed down a lot. She’s gone to Erisu’s for her afternoon shift, so maybe that’ll take her mind off all this for now.”

Himeko heaved a sigh of relief. “That’s good. I was worried she’d be in complete despair.”

“Ah, that reminds me. I want Matsuri to stay over at my place tonight. Maybe for a few days until she gets back on her feet.”

“Oh. Yes, that does make sense.”

Even if Matsuri was looking slightly better, I still didn't feel comfortable leaving her on her own. As Himeko had said, she wasn't in complete despair, but that could only be temporary. What if she started thinking about Lady Saeko in the middle of the night and got really upset?

Himeko reached out and put her right hand over mine. “I thought we'd be able to spend all summer together, but I suppose that was too good to be true.”

Her impish smile made my face start to flush.

“Yeah,” I replied nervously. “That was my plan too.”

She stroked my hand just gingerly enough to make it ticklish. Soon it was too much, so I slipped my hand out, put it on hers instead, and began to return the “favor.” She chuckled and fought back, starting a game of cat and mouse between her right hand and my left.

From a distance, it would have looked like we were still having a friendly chat, but our fingers were entwining and tormenting each other, trying to drive the other to give up. I didn't get what kind of battle this was supposed to be, but Himeko looked like she was really enjoying it, so I ended up giving it my all.

Just then, the waitress approached our table with a cart. “Erm, please excuse me,” she said, her voice wavering. “I have your order.”

With a nonchalant grin, Himeko pulled her hand away. “Thank you very much.”

The waitress's face was bright red as she placed our sandwiches and juice onto the table. “Here you go.”

*This is too embarrassing for words!*

Unlike Himeko's, my face had grown burning hot. It was one thing for us to act like this in private, but being touched so playfully by Himeko in public—and being caught in the act—was something else entirely. Recently, I'd been putting extra effort into presenting myself as the perfect Seraph, but I felt like summer

vacation had made me lax.

“What’s wrong, Misaki?”

“Nothing!” I lightly slapped my cheeks to pull myself together. “Let’s eat our lunch, milady!”

She started to giggle. Either I was just that entertaining or she kept remembering something really funny, because she occasionally broke out into laughter again as we were eating.

After we left the café, we confirmed our plans one last time.

“Well,” Himeko said, “I’ll leave Matsuri in your hands. In the meantime, I’ll try to work on Saeko some more.”

“All right. Hopefully I can cheer Matsuri up a little.”

“Yes. And if I have any progress, I’ll let you know right away.”

She stroked my pigtails as if reluctant to part with them, twirling the tips around her fingers. Part of me felt self-conscious and awkward, but I was just as unwilling to say goodbye to her. Still, we had important things to do. If we didn’t do something to help Matsuri and Lady Saeko, we’d never be able to relax and fully enjoy our vacation.

Then we went our separate ways. Himeko headed back to the Sky Salon, where she’d discuss it with Lady Sakura again and try to talk some sense into Lady Saeko. Meanwhile, I had to get my room ready for Matsuri’s stay before she finished her shift at the restaurant.

*I guess the main thing is to make sure she has everything there that she needs. I’ll buy a new towel and toothbrush for her. She’ll need fresh underwear, but maybe she’ll bring that herself. Oh, but what if she normally stays over in Lady Saeko’s room? It’s possible that she keeps all her daily essentials there and can’t go back to get them. I’d better ask Matsuri first and then decide whether to buy some.*

I also figured she might not want to eat out, so I decided I should buy ingredients to cook at home. Then, once I was done with all my shopping, I’d clean my room and burn some aromatherapy oils to create a really calming

atmosphere.

*All right! Now that's a plan!*

First I'd help Matsuri feel better, then we could put our heads together to figure out a plan to get her back into Lady Saeko's service. With a clear vision in my head, I made my way to the shops.

My only real option for daily goods were the stores in the Domestic Arts dorm. The ones inside the school buildings were mostly geared toward the Societal Arts students, and to put it bluntly, those were *really* expensive. My paycheck was plenty for me, but it wasn't enough to maintain a lifestyle of that level.

So, after saying goodbye to Himeko, I set off back to my own dorm. However, on the way back, I suddenly spotted someone moving in the distance.

Whoever it was was running along at high speed among the thick rows of trees. At this school, none of the ladies would ever be seen running outside unless they were part of a sports team, so at first I thought my eyes were deceiving me.

It definitely was a lady and not a maid—I could tell that from her clothes. Even at a distance, I'd never mix up the Societal Arts and Domestic Arts uniforms.

A name popped into my head. "Was that Lady Angelica?"

I didn't have much to go on, but I was pretty sure already. Lady Angelica had a certain aura about her. Having encountered her quite a few times now, I was confident I wouldn't mistake her for someone else.

Lady Angelica hadn't gone home for summer vacation. Where *was* her home, anyway? *She's a vampire, right? Does that mean she's from Britain or Romania—somewhere like that?*

Either way, if she was running like that, there had to be a reason. Whatever it was, though, I didn't want to know.

*Yup. Nothing happened. I didn't see a thing.*

Lady Angelica seemed to really like this school, and when things went wrong,

she found a way to solve them without anyone knowing. At least, that was my impression. It could very well be that this was another one of those cases. If she'd been a normal human, I'd have gone over to ask, but I couldn't bring myself to move my feet.

*If this problem hasn't found its way to Himeko, it's probably something too big for ordinary people to handle. It's probably better to leave it to Lady Angelica. Plus, she's probably too far away for me to catch up by now anyway.*

Telling myself that, I carried on with my plan of going shopping and getting my room ready for Matsuri.



After her shift, Matsuri came straight back to my dorm room. A thought flashed through my mind: *She's basically run away from home without telling anyone, right?* But I kept that to myself.

"I don't know how long I'll be staying here, but I want you to know once again that I sincerely appreciate your hospitality."

She was bowing deeply in the doorway, her knees on the floor. Flustered, I urged her to stand back up.

"No need for all that formality! It's honestly fine."

"But you're doing so much for me. You're letting me stay in your room."

"That's really not such a big deal. All this business with Lady Saeko is a surprise, but it's also a nice chance to talk to you alone, which we haven't done much before. I'm kind of looking forward to it, actually."

I took her hands and pulled her up.

"But—"

"No buts. If you keep trying to thank me over and over, it'll get old pretty fast."

"Oh. Yes, I suppose. Then I'll come in, if that's okay."

"It's more than okay!"

Her smile looked forced, but she finally agreed and came into my room.



“Whew. It’s been a while since I’ve stayed in the Domestic Arts dorm.”

“So you do normally stay with Lady Saeko?”

“Yes, for more than a year now. I only go back to my room every once in a while to drop things off.”

“I figured. Lately, I’ve been staying with Lady Himeko a lot too. That must be pretty common for Seraphs.”

“It is. Becoming a Seraph means taking care of your mistress in every facet of her life, so it only makes sense that you’d want to be as physically close to her as possible, doesn’t it?”

“That’s what I thought too.”

I turned to take off my maid uniform. *She can talk normally again. It sounds like she’s recovered a lot from earlier.*

But when I turned back, she was sitting on the bed, hugging her knees. She let out a heavy sigh, as if she’d shut down completely. I could practically see that dark cloud swirling around her head again.

“Matsuri,” I began hesitantly, “why don’t we have some tea? I’ll make it, so could you clear the table?”

The table still held our empty teacups from earlier, when we’d come here before her shift at the restaurant.

“Oh. Certainly.”

She immediately got up and started working. It occurred to me that she was probably the type of person who felt most at ease when she had some kind of job to do. *The best idea is probably to keep her occupied long enough that she can’t start feeling down, but I don’t have that many things I can ask her to do. It would be better if I could lift her spirits by chatting with her.*

We both stood in the kitchen. While she tidied and I made the tea, I tried to gauge her mood.

“Did you and Lady Saeko never talk about what would happen when you paid off the debt?”

Part of me was reluctant to bring the topic back to Matsuri's mistress, but if we were going to fix this, I needed a little more information.

"No, we've never discussed it before. The first time I ever met her, she was with someone from the bank. I remember finding it strange to begin with. What was a child doing there? While our parents were talking, I just chatted with Lady Saeko and showed her around the neighborhood, but later I got word that a deal had been made to extend the time we had to pay back our debts. The condition was that I would come to this school and serve as Lady Saeko's Seraph. Students at Amanotsuka Academy receive wages, after all. To me, it sounded like a very reasonable condition for a payback plan, so I agreed. That's how it began."

Once our respective tasks were finished, we moved over to the table and continued our discussion.

Matsuri went on, "At first, she tried to determine whether to make me her Seraph. I never had any objection to doing it, and once she formally made me her Seraph, she was strict, but not unreasonable, and she did everything she could to help me repay my family's debts. I knew I wanted to serve her for my entire life. That's why I never thought about what would happen after I paid everything back. I was focused on doing it as quickly as possible, and with Lady Saeko's help, I finally managed it. All I wanted was to pay her back and say I was looking forward to carrying on working together. But instead, *this* happened."

Holding her cup in her hand, Matsuri let out a heavy sigh.

"As far as I can tell, she doesn't really want to let you go either. She never said that, at least. It's all about her reputation. If we can find a way to make her comfortable with it, you can go back to normal, I'm sure."

After a pause, she said, "That would be nice."

She cast her eyes downward and took a slow sip of her tea. Her expression was unbelievably sad. I could see her lips quivering. There had to be a maelstrom of emotions inside her, with one question at the center of it all: *Why?*

"I genuinely thought she'd be happy," she said at last, the words mixed with a deep sigh as tears welled in her eyes again. She'd done her best to keep it

together, but thinking too long about Lady Saeko must have made it impossible to hold back.

“I thought she’d praise me. That she’d say ‘Well done’ and ‘You’re my Seraph, so keep working hard.’”

She lowered her head to hide the tears that were falling.

“How can I become her Seraph again? I have no idea. She’s not the kind of person who easily changes her mind, so I don’t think she’ll listen to anything I have to say. So please, if there’s anything you can do, I need your help.”

Still looking down, she turned her body to face me and kneeled down so far that her head touched the floor.

“I’m begging you! Help me be Lady Saeko’s Seraph again. I’ll do anything. Anything!”

“Matsuri, please drop that. You don’t have to beg me—I’m already helping, and so are Himeko and Lady Sakura. You’re the one and only Seraph for Lady Saeko. You know what I’ve realized lately? People who are chosen to be Seraphs are connected by fate to their mistresses somehow. The person the mistress chooses is her perfect match, like puzzle pieces fitting together.”

“Thanks, Misaki. I believe that too. Without being conceited, I don’t think there’s anyone else who could be Lady Saeko’s Seraph.”

Wiping her tears, she raised her head and showed a smile again, even if it was an uneasy one.

*Thank goodness. At least she’s calmed down enough to smile again.*

After that, we made a modest dinner together, then sat on my bed until late in the night, bragging about our mistresses.

## Chapter Seven: The Vampire and the Midsummer Sun

The next day, I headed to the Sky Salon to meet Himeko, while Matsuri went to her part-time job again. Before we left, she told me in an upbeat tone that she was going to do everything she could for now, and that involved working hard at her part-time job so she didn't besmirch Lady Saeko's name. There were still glimmers of sadness in her eyes, but she wasn't in a state of despair, which was a huge relief.

I picked up the pace, trying to reach the Sky Salon as quickly as I could. I rode the antique elevator all the way up, but sadly, it looked like Himeko wasn't there yet. I ran through her plans in my mind. She didn't have any meetings today, so I figured she'd be there soon.

*Unless she just stays in bed forever because there's no one to wake her up. Hmm, it would have been kind of a lengthy round trip, but maybe I should have gone to Himeko's room first.*

There was nothing I could do about it now, anyway. If she wasn't here, I'd just have to take care of some cleaning and other odd jobs in the meantime. Someone had to do it, given that there were no other Sky Salon Seraphs still on campus other than me, Matsuri, and Sara. Matsuri probably wouldn't be able to come back here until this problem was solved, and Sara had only just joined, so she'd probably be more focused on serving Lady Sakura specifically for now—not to mention that they hadn't been able to do their tour around the campus yesterday. They'd probably do that first before coming to the salon.

That left only me to take care of everything. I worked as efficiently as I could to get everything ready before Himeko arrived. All I really had to do was clean up a bit and water the plants. The inventory had all been taken care of before the start of vacation, so that wouldn't be a problem.

*Oh yeah, I'd better take out the trash too.* That was a surprisingly hefty task because the collection point was some distance away. Apparently, there had been one right behind this building before the new one had been constructed, but then they'd moved it closer to that. For burnable waste, it wasn't too big a deal, but if we had a lot of cans and bottles to dispose of, carrying them all that way was kind of a pain.

The garbage collector was due to come the following morning, so if I didn't take it out now, there was a risk of having to keep it here all the way until the end of vacation. We didn't have too much right now, but there were some fallen leaves and all the trash from Lady Sakura's welcome party, so it was better to take it out sooner rather than later. For now, it was still an amount I could handle on my own.

I decided that if I took the trash out first, then did the cleaning and plant-watering after I got back, I'd reduce the chance of missing Himeko's arrival. Still, time was of the essence. I hoisted up two bags of trash and got back into the elevator.

Outside, it felt like the sun's rays had gotten even more intense. It had only been a few minutes, but the air temperature was rising rapidly. I was pretty happy with my decision to take out the trash first; if I'd left it another thirty minutes, I'd have been sweating buckets.

On my way to the rear of the new school building, I walked past a number of students getting things ready for their club activities. Lady Kagura's business plan seemed to fit with this school; Amanotsuka Academy was more of a sports powerhouse than I'd have expected going in. Lady Minako's volleyball team was top of the list, but the school put up plenty of competition when it came to tennis, badminton, fencing, equestrian sports, and more.

This was Lady Minako's last summer here, so she was probably training hard. *I don't know anything about the tournament schedule, but when this business*

*with Matsuri is over, I'll have to take some refreshments to the team and watch them practice. Maybe Himeko would want to come with me.*

Musing over all that, I carried my bags over to the collection point. There was a ton of trash piled up there; apparently, a lot of other salons had taken their trash out just before the start of vacation. I added mine, then wiped the sweat from my brow. I was about to start heading back to the Sky Salon when I caught something out of the corner of my eye. Something leaping around.

It wasn't small enough to be a bird. If I wasn't mistaken, it was human—at least, it *seemed* that way.

Very odd. I thought back to what I'd seen the day before. I was pretty sure I'd seen Lady Angelica then, but I didn't have any definitive proof. I still had none, but that shadowy figure definitely looked like her. Lady Angelica was a vampire, so she would be able to leap between the trees like that. After all, I'd seen her float down from the sky right in front of me. How could I think it was anyone else?

*What's she doing, though?* She was beyond the gardens, among the dense wooded area. If she was doing some kind of patrol of the campus, she was surely moving way too fast. How would she explain it if anyone saw her?

Just as I was getting really intrigued, another figure appeared. This one was following after Lady Angelica—only it wasn't leaping, but running along the ground. However, even from this distance I could tell it was still moving faster than should have been possible.

Ridiculous an idea as this was, it almost looked like they were playing tag. *But Lady Angelica would never play a kids' game like that, right? Maybe it's some kind of training.* Even that felt a bit like something she'd be past the point of needing anymore.

*Man, I really want to know what's going on.* I'd been able to turn a blind eye yesterday, but this was getting too much.

Whatever was going on, if Lady Angelica had sprung into action using her vampire abilities, it had to be something she couldn't discuss with normal students. Since I knew her secret, though, there was some chance I'd be able to lend a hand. I figured I could try to see what was going on, and if it turned out

to be something way beyond me, I could just apologize and be on my way. I doubted Lady Angelica would blame me for it.

*Well, it's now or never. I have time, so I'll get a little closer.*

I crossed through the well-tended garden and ventured into the trees. The canopy blocked enough sunlight that I felt the air around me get noticeably cooler. There wasn't a real path to follow, but the ground wasn't too rough to walk on.

*I'm pretty sure she went that way.* I walked in the direction I'd last seen her going. The grounds behind the school had a lot of ups and downs, and when I turned back at some point, I realized I couldn't see the buildings anymore. I tried to remember if there was anything nearby. As far as I knew, there would just be trees and more trees—there were no buildings in this direction.

It was starting to feel like a hiking expedition. Evidently, no one ever came here; the weeds had grown wild.

Just as I was doubting whether Lady Angelica had gone this way after all, I suddenly heard a soft squeaking sound above me. When I looked up, there was something clinging to a moss-covered tree. A black butterfly—no, a bat.

When my eyes met the bat's, it made the same squeaking noise again. It was definitely directed at me. One thing was clear: this bat was very used to being around people.

My mouth opened wide as I started to cotton on. "Are you a friend of Lady Angelica's?" I asked gingerly.

The bat squeaked again. Yes, it was saying.

"I knew it! Which means Lady Angelica must be around here after all, right?"

*Squeak! Squeak squeak squeak!* it answered, flapping its wings. It looked like this bat really did understand human language.

"I don't really need to see her. I'm just curious about what's going on, that's all."

I started walking toward it, intending to go past and be on my way. I even waved goodbye to the bat. However, continuing to squeak, it flew down and

perched on my shoulder.

“You want to show me the way? Thanks, I appreciate the help!”

There couldn't be any harm in letting Lady Angelica's friend sit there. With this cute little companion on my shoulder, I kept walking through the trees. All the while, the bat kept squeaking, as if holding a conversation with me.

As I kept going deeper into the thicket, the temperature dropped even more. A thick fog hung in the air, and my skin grew cold. Suddenly, I realized I could hardly see anything in front of me at all. For a moment, I considered turning back, but after a few more steps I had a clearer view again, so I decided to keep going.

*I think I'm way outside of the high school grounds by now.* If I recalled correctly, going farther in this direction would lead to the university campus. I'd never gone over there, so I was kind of curious, but apparently it was even more expansive than the high school grounds, so taking a proper look around would take up a whole day. I didn't even know if students from the high school were allowed over there.

I started to wonder if Lady Angelica had some business at the university—but as soon as I had that thought, I heard a strange noise from another direction. At first I thought it might be construction work, or a tree being felled, but it didn't sound like that. It was more like a battle.

*Maybe I really should turn back already.*

Then I heard Lady Angelica's voice. She hadn't gone to the university campus after all. She was still off the beaten path, somewhere deep in the thicket.

*What could she possibly be doing?*

Whatever it was, I couldn't just ignore it and turn back. With some trepidation, I moved closer to where the sounds were coming from.

I soon reached a small clearing. It didn't look like it had been made neatly, though. It was like the trees had been forcibly mowed down. Now that I was here, I could hear voices more clearly. One was Lady Angelica's, and the other I didn't recognize at all.



“You’re wasting your time. Your techniques are centuries out of date.”

“Shut up. I don’t have to listen to you, vampire. Now be quiet and let me exterminate you.”

*Huh? That’s a really weird conversation. Not the kind of thing I’d expect to hear at a school for young ladies, that’s for sure. What is Lady Angelica doing?*

Peering from behind a tree, I could see that she was in full-on vampire mode, with bats swarming around the wings on her back. Facing her was a student I didn’t know in a Domestic Arts uniform.

Her short, chestnut-colored hair flicked up in a casual and straightforward manner, giving her a lively feel. Her distinctive features didn’t look Japanese. She had the active air of a sports player about her, and her ribbon color indicated she was a first year, like me. I couldn’t be sure since she was just wearing an ordinary uniform, but I didn’t get the impression she was Lady Angelica’s Seraph.

*Maybe it’s some kind of challenge where if she beats Lady Angelica, she can become her Seraph? But then why would she have said she wanted to “exterminate” Lady Angelica? In fact, if I take what she said at face value, it sounds like she knows who Lady Angelica really is and is trying to take her down.*

*Wait! That would be pretty awful, wouldn’t it? She may not be human, exactly, but I don’t think she’s a bad person. Actually, I’d say she’s a good person. She’s working hard to make this school the best place it can be.*

*What do I do? I know I’m not strong enough to jump in and stop this, but that doesn’t mean I can just stand here and watch someone attack Lady Angelica.*

As I stood there trying to decide, the girl pulled a string of garlic from somewhere and drew closer to Lady Angelica.



“Take this, demon cur!” she cried, throwing the garlic.

For an instant, I thought, *So I guess you really do use garlic against vampires.* But a second later, Lady Angelica casually tossed the garlic aside.

It flew toward me. With a yelp, I drew my head back.

The girl jumped down, covering a height of two or three yards in an instant. “Who’s there?!”

When I nervously peered out again, my eyes met Lady Angelica’s. *Ack! What now?* I tried to come up with an excuse, but nothing sprang to mind.

Clicking her tongue, the girl ran off. In the end, it looked like I’d managed to stop the fight after all. *I get the feeling the danger isn’t over for good, though.*

“Misaki?” Lady Angelica said, a hint of exasperation in her voice.

She knew it was me. I decided there was nothing I could do but step out and show myself. “Erm, good day, Lady Angelica.”

Feeling very, very nervous, I walked over to her.

“Good day.” She folded her arms and sighed. “I’m impressed you actually made it all the way here.”

“You are?”

“One of my bats warned you, right? And I put up the fog as a barrier. You should have felt an urge to go back when you were passing through it.”

“Oh, uh, so you’re saying that that little critter wasn’t having a friendly chat with me? It was telling me to turn back?”

She paused a moment. “I would hope so, yes.”

“The fog was really heavy. I couldn’t see a thing for a minute. But then it cleared up again, and here I am.”

“Intriguing. I wouldn’t have thought you’d be capable of getting through it so easily. Maybe you’ve built up some immunity to my abilities after repeatedly being in close contact with me. Still, if anyone was to find me, best for it to be you. What were you doing around here anyway?”

“I was taking out the garbage when I saw you leaping through the trees. When I noticed the girl who was here just now chasing after you, I got curious.”

“It’s my fault for being careless. There aren’t usually too many people around here, and the visibility is poor, so I let my guard down. It didn’t help that I was being chased.” She sighed again.

“About that—why was she going after you? She said some pretty worrying things.”

“Hmm. Well, after what you’ve seen already, I might as well tell you. It’s better that way. She might have seen your face, after all.”

I suddenly had a very bad feeling about all this. “I’ll just pretend I didn’t see anything. None of this even happened.”

“If she remembers your face, she might approach you. Safer for you to be armed with at least some knowledge, surely.”

“Yeah, I suppose. Is she really dangerous then?”

“It depends.” Lady Angelica paused and thought a moment. “She doesn’t especially pose a danger to me, but she could be quite dangerous to a normal person like you.”

“Oh.”

“Let’s go somewhere else for now. She probably won’t come back here, but you never know.”

“All right.”

I walked through the thicket with Lady Angelica. After we passed through the wall of fog, a lone bat flew down from the sky. I was pretty sure it was the one who’d been sitting on my shoulder shortly beforehand.

This time it sat on Lady Angelica’s shoulder as it began to talk again. *Squeak! Squeak!*

“Yes, yes, I know,” Lady Angelica replied. “It’s not very effective on Misaki, unfortunately. It’s not your fault. You can go back on guard duty now.”

With a cheerful goodbye squeak, it left Lady Angelica’s shoulder.

“Erm, I’m sorry for being so dense,” I said.

I didn’t know if the bat would understand, but I said it anyway. It flew in a circle twice above my head, squeaking all the while, then flew off. *I guess I should take that to mean my words got through.*

“You’re not scared of bats?” Lady Angelica asked.

“Not really. I mean, normally I wouldn’t get so close, but it seemed okay since I was pretty sure it was a friend of yours. I guess if they’re tame, they’re actually pretty cute.”

She chuckled, looking slightly pleased. “I see. Well, all the bats at this school are associates of mine, so if you’re ever in trouble, you can tell the bats and they’ll pass it on to me.”

“Really? That could definitely come in handy, I guess.”

Who’d have ever expected bats to be a means of communication? They were kind of like carrier pigeons that could only be used by people who knew the secret.



We sat at a table in the open-air café Lady Angelica frequented. There, she started to share all the details.

“That girl’s name is Lutia. She’s a first-year Domestic Arts student like you. As I’m sure you’ve gathered, she didn’t come here with the aim of becoming a maid. I suppose you’d call her a vampire hunter.”

“Sheesh.” It wasn’t the smartest response, but it was all I could manage when hearing a term like “vampire hunter” for the first time.

“She looked suspicious right from the start, so I’ve had my eye on her since she arrived, but she’s controlled her behavior so well that I started to think I was imagining things. She must have been gathering information, ready to finally strike during summer vacation.”

With an unruffled expression, she raised her coconut water with a slice of lemon up to her lips. She didn’t *look* like someone who’d just been under attack.

“So you’re saying vampire hunters are a thing? She’s not just role-playing and getting ideas in her head—that’s what she actually is?”

As I sipped my lemon squash, I couldn’t help feeling like I’d stepped outside of reality. None of this seemed possible.

“It’s true. As much of a headache as it is, vampire hunters really do exist. I’m almost impressed with her boldness, to be honest. I can’t believe she chased me all the way to Japan from my homeland.”

“Your homeland? Where’s that?”

“Ireland.”

“Really? You’re from Ireland?”

“I am indeed.”

*Huh. Well, I wasn’t too far off, since Ireland is right next to Britain. I’d never have guessed she was from there, though.*

“However, to my knowledge, there haven’t been any vampire hunters in many, *many* years. I wonder if something’s changed.”

“Are other vampires being hunted apart from you?”

“I don’t know yet. It’s tough to imagine that Lutia is acting entirely independently, but I’m lacking in intel. If she and her fellow hunters all went into action at the same time, the information wouldn’t reach me from Ireland right away. The others might not even think I’d be attacked when I’m all the way over here in Japan. This is a peaceful country, and I’ve been here for a long time. All other things being equal, I’m planning to stay here indefinitely.”

I decided it was better not to ask just how long “a long time” was.

“Anyway, that’s the long and short of it. I’d advise you to be cautious of Lutia. Even if you see her, don’t get too close—and if she comes for you, then call for help.”

I let out a nervous breath.

“How about this: for now, I’ll assign a bat to stay somewhere close to you at all times. If anything happens, just tell the bat and I’ll come running.”

“It’s like having my own cute little bodyguard.”

She giggled. “You could say that! I’m sure the bats can also keep her at bay for a while and give you time to run away.”

“Okay. I understand.”

To be honest, I didn’t really understand that well at all, but the key point was not going near Lutia. That I could manage.

With the discussion about Lutia over for now, Lady Angelica changed the subject. “So you’re not going home over the summer, Misaki?”

“No. Lady Himeko said that she was staying here as well, so I wanted to be by her side as much as possible, basically.”

“That’s fair. You know, I’m glad she met you. It’s made her much more interested in the goings-on at this school. I hope you can keep things going in that direction.”

“I’m not sure I—”

“Oh, speak of the devil!”

Before I could finish my comment, Lady Angelica was looking past me and waving. When I turned my head, I saw Himeko change direction to walk over to us.

“Oh, Lady Angelica. Good day.” She smiled gently, wiping the sweat from her forehead with a handkerchief.

“Good day, Himeko. I happened to bump into Misaki, so I borrowed her for a bit.”

“The timing worked out well. I was just wondering what I’d do if I went up to the Sky Salon and Misaki wasn’t there.”

“Interesting. Is something the matter?”

Apparently, Lady Angelica had picked up on a change in Himeko’s attitude.

“Yes. Well, it’s not us who are affected, but we do have a problem on our hands.”

Himeko kept her words pretty vague. It wasn’t public knowledge yet that Lady

Saeko had canceled Matsuri's Seraph contract. *She's probably trying to decide if telling an outside party is appropriate, even if it is the president of the student council.*

"Is it better not to pry?" Lady Angelica asked.

"I wouldn't say that. Hmm, actually I think it's probably fine to share it with you."

"Either way, it sounds serious."

"It is, to be honest." Himeko put a hand on her cheek and sighed.

"All right. If you want to, I'll gladly listen and try to help. I don't know if I'll be able to, of course."

"We're at a point where even the slightest idea will help us form a plan, so any advice you can provide will be a huge help. It would be better to talk at the Sky Salon, so do you mind if we head there?"



The three of us went to the Sky Salon. By now, Lady Sakura and Sara had shown up as well, having presumably arrived while I was following Lady Angelica. As far as I could tell, Lady Saeko still wasn't there.

Spotting Lady Sakura, Lady Angelica went over to her. All at once, the room had an international flair.

"Good day, Sakura. Are you settling in well?"

"Yes. I'm grateful for all your help. I've only just arrived in Japan, but every day's been full of excitement so far."

"Glad to hear it. I'm sure that being here will help you achieve the future you're dreaming of."

"Undoubtedly. Meeting everyone here has been a true stroke of good fortune."

Listening as they spoke to one another, I joined Sara in making some tea.

"Morning, Sara."

"Good morning, Misaki. Did you take the rubbish out?"



“Yeah. My plan was to do it before Himeko arrived.”

“Ah, I see. Terribly sorry that I wasn’t here to help you.”

“No worries! I’d have managed it even if a little more had piled up, but I wanted to deal with it in time for tomorrow’s collection. It’s quite a trek to the collection point, so I figured it was better to do it now while there wasn’t too much to carry. It wasn’t all that difficult for me to take it there on my own.”

“I see. Well, I’ll be sure to take on that duty next time.”

“Maybe it would be better if we set up a formal rotation for it. Let’s all discuss it when Kirara gets back.”

“Good idea. Then it will always be clear whose responsibility it is.”

“Exactly!”

“By the way, what shall we serve Lady Angelica?”

“I’m not sure. I was just at the café on the terrace with her and she had a cold glass of coconut water. We have AC in here, so how about some iced Darjeeling tea without any ice? We could bring ice in a separate bowl and add some if she wants it, maybe.”

“That could definitely work. I suspect my mistress will want milk, so we could bring milk and sugar, too, and adjust it at the table to suit everyone’s tastes.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

We nodded to each other and set about getting it ready to serve. When we returned to the central table with the tea, the ladies hadn’t broached the main topic yet. Himeko and Lady Angelica were still telling Lady Sakura all kinds of things about the school.

After making sure everyone had tea and sweets, I sat down next to Himeko. My mistress took a sip of the Darjeeling to quench her thirst, then, still hesitating a little, started explaining the situation.

“So, the problem we’re having is about Saeko and Matsuri,” she began.

Taking a glance around, Lady Angelica replied, “Now that you mention it, I don’t see them here.”

I didn't know where Lady Saeko was, but I had the feeling she might not come here for a little while. Matsuri, of course, was busy working at Erisu's École Kitchen.

"You're unlikely to see them here until the situation is resolved, I'd say."

"It really must be something serious, in that case."

"Yes. We don't know what to do. It would be easier if Kagura were here, but in a way, it might be better that she's *not* here."

Fiddling with her cup in her hands, Himeko let out a small sigh.

"What on earth has happened?" Lady Angelica asked. "Before the start of vacation, they looked like a perfectly normal mistress and Seraph to me."

"They were. It happened very recently. Let me ask you something: do you know the circumstances that led to Matsuri becoming Saeko's Seraph?"

"I have a rough idea."

"Good, then it'll be fine to talk about it." Himeko paused a moment. "As you might know, Saeko took on the debts of Matsuri's family, and Matsuri's work as a Seraph was to pay off those debts. However, not long after the vacation started, she fully paid off everything that was owed."

"But that's wonderful news. Matsuri must have worked incredibly hard."

"She certainly did. However, this was also the cause of the problem. Because Matsuri paid it all back, Saeko decided that Matsuri couldn't be her Seraph anymore and dissolved her contract."

Even Lady Angelica was audibly shocked by this. "My word! Why would she do that? It definitely came from Saeko? Matsuri wasn't the one who wanted to quit?"

"It was entirely up to Saeko."

"But why? Surely she has no reason to do that."

"That's what we thought, but in Saeko's mind, Matsuri became her Seraph purely in exchange for taking on the debt, so now that it's repaid, there's no reason for the arrangement to continue any further. Matsuri fulfilled her end of

the bargain, so if Saeko didn't free her from the contract, she'd look like someone who doesn't fulfill her obligations."

"Hmm." Lady Angelica pressed her fingers to her forehead in thought. "She's taking it far too seriously. Who would really be bothered by that except for her?"

Himeko took on the same pensive pose. "I thought the same thing, but I didn't think there would be much use in saying it. She's made up her mind pretty firmly."

"Now that you've explained it, this is quite a pickle—in more ways than one."

Falling silent, Himeko frowned, looking slightly troubled by Lady Angelica's words.

Since I didn't know what she meant, I decided to interject. "Erm, is this somehow a problem for more than just Matsuri and Lady Saeko?"

The student council president lifted her head and looked toward me. "Yes, it has far bigger implications."

"It does?"

"As you know, Misaki, the 'Seraph' concept is unique to this school and involves entering into a special agreement called the Golden Contract. It's a guaranteed offer from the mistress to come and work for her in the future. A student chosen for this is kept away from all other possible offers. You could say it's a system to allow the lady to monopolize a particular maid. From the Domestic Arts students' point of view, it's a promise of future employment, so if they're chosen, they'll inevitably devote themselves to that mistress even more than before. However, if even one Seraph's contract is dissolved, it will have a serious impact. In Matsuri's case, there's a more detailed explanation, but it'll likely be seen as Matsuri working incredibly hard to meet her obligations, then being thanked with the loss of her contract. If other Seraphs come to know of this, how do you think they'll react?"

"I see what you mean. If being a Seraph is meant to be a guarantee for the future, it would make them very uneasy to hear that it's possible for the contract to be dissolved. Especially if they don't know what led to it."

“Indeed. It’s a problem that could shake the very foundations of the system. Don’t you agree, Himeko?”

“Yes,” Himeko replied uncertainly, her eyes wavering.

Only then did I realize that what Lady Angelica was saying also applied to me. I’d only become Himeko’s Seraph for one year, so in one year—no, it was closer to half a year by now—the very same thing would happen. Lady Angelica was unaware of this, but Himeko no doubt felt the weight of her accusation already.

“It would be one thing for it to happen to an Exousia, but for a student to lose their contract after being made a Seraph, there would have to be an *exceptionally* good reason. Otherwise it would lead to big trouble.”

For now, Himeko put our own case to the side and carried on discussing the matter at hand. “I suppose that doesn’t apply here. It’s happening because both of them are upholding the terms of their contract, which doesn’t give us much room to intervene.”

“Quite a conundrum indeed. They both believe they’re doing exactly what they should be.”

“Do you have any suggestions?”

“Not as such. One thought has occurred to me though. I’m wondering if Saeko might be feeling some regret.”

“Regret, you say?”

“Yes. Saeko’s an intelligent person. She might have started to see a problem with what she was doing. After all, she seems to like Matsuri, so she can’t be happy about breaking the contract. Deciding to let Matsuri go anyway might be a sign that she doesn’t think their existing relationship can or should continue.”

“What do you mean?”

“At first she made Matsuri her Seraph purely as a show of mercy. It was a way to save her family from financial ruin. However, after a year of having Matsuri in her service, she’s genuinely come to like her. Only she can’t forget about the particulars of how and why Matsuri became her Seraph to begin with. She might be doubting whether Matsuri genuinely wants to serve her. If there’s

even the slightest resentment there, she'd rather cancel the arrangement altogether for both of their sakes. Maybe she decided that settling the balance was a good opportunity to draw a line under their relationship too."

"When you put it that way, Saeko has looked distressed about the whole thing."

"I am only speculating, of course."

Speculation or otherwise, it sounded plausible to me. It fit with a lot of what we'd seen.

"Even if it's true," Himeko replied, "changing her mind will be no mean feat."

Himeko had seen Lady Saeko's stubborn attitude as well as I had. Whatever regrets she might have, it was clear that she intended to stick to her guns.

"I'm sure it won't." Lady Angelica paused and thought for another few moments. "Unless we can persuade her that there's something more important than honoring—"

She was interrupted by the sound of the elevator arriving.

Every member of the salon was here other than Lady Saeko and Matsuri, so it had to be one of them. We were probably all thinking the same thing as we simultaneously turned to look.

Moments later, the doors opened and Lady Saeko stepped out. As soon as she realized we were all gathered here and staring right at her, she frowned and shrugged her shoulders.

"Good day, everyone. I see you've even invited Angelica here for tea."

Her tone suggested that she knew *exactly* what we'd been talking about.

"Good day, Saeko," Lady Angelica responded. "We were just discussing your abandonment of Matsuri."

That reply was so direct that I screamed internally. *So impressive! She doesn't hold back even a little.*

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't use such an odd turn of phrase. I certainly didn't 'abandon' her. She fulfilled her side of the contract, so I released her from it

accordingly.”

“So you say. I have the feeling those around you see it rather differently.”

“I don’t believe so. I’m a woman who upholds her contracts. There’s no reason to see it any other way.”

After her forceful reply, she didn’t wait for Lady Angelica’s response before heading over to her own personal space.

When she was gone, Lady Angelica smiled in amusement. “I can see this is going to take some elbow grease.”

Himeko sighed, then looked at me. “Misaki, why don’t you bring Saeko a drink?”

She was telling me to go and check on her. Honestly, I was worried about how she was doing too, and it would be a good chance to give her an update on Matsuri.

“Yes, milady.”

I went and made her a drink. She was fond of Earl Grey with a little milk and a little sugar, so I decided to purposely put in lots of sugar and no milk. I put some matcha cookies on a plate to accompany her tea, then took both over to her personal space.

“Lady Saeko, I’ve brought you some tea,” I called from the entrance.

She left a pause before replying. “All right.”

I came straight in and saw Lady Saeko reading a paperback book with a languid expression. After a bow, I silently placed her refreshments on the table.

Lady Saeko looked down at the cup I’d placed in front of her and froze for a moment. “This was a premeditated crime,” she murmured.

“What do you mean? I remembered you like Earl Grey, so I brought you some.”

She scowled at me, then took a sip. Then, putting on a false show of courage, she said, “Well, sometimes it’s nice to have it extra sweet with no milk.”

*Stubborn to a fault.*

“Matsuri’s staying in my room, by the way.”

“Oh.”

“Yesterday she was really down, but today she seems to have recovered a tiny bit. She went to the restaurant as usual.”

“I see. I don’t recall asking you, however.”

“If there’s any kind of message you’d like me to pass on to Matsuri, just let me know.”

“Nothing springs to mind,” she said after a moment. “If she’d like to have her personal belongings delivered to her dorm, I’ll arrange it.”

“I don’t think Matsuri will ask for that, so can you please keep them in your room for now?”

“You’re pretty mean, you know that?”

“Am I?” I replied with a look of feigned ignorance.

“Anyway, never mind that. Thank you for the tea and cookies.”

She waved me away. It was pretty clear that she wouldn’t be happy with me saying anything else, so I decided to obediently withdraw.

I went back to Himeko to report what I’d learned, even though the answer was “not that much.”

“How was she?” my mistress asked.

“It’s hard to say. I think she’s worried about Matsuri, but she didn’t show it very openly.”

Staring toward Lady Saeko’s personal space, Lady Sakura said, “I think coming to the Sky Salon is probably a sign, though. I think she wants us to do something. She had to have known we’d be talking about her, so if she decided to come here anyway, it’s like her subconscious is sending out an SOS.”

“Yes, I have that feeling as well,” Lady Angelica agreed.

Lady Sakura sighed softly. “Which makes your suggestion seem the most likely to get results.”

*Huh? What suggestion?*

Himeko sighed in a similar manner. “The timing will be awkward, but hopefully we can find a good opportunity.”

It sounded like the conversation had moved on quite a bit while I was talking to Lady Saeko.

“Erm, I don’t suppose you could tell me what you’ve decided?”

Potentially, it was something I could recruit Matsuri to help out with.

“I don’t think it’ll be *that* difficult,” Lady Angelica insisted.

“That *what* will be that difficult?”

Once she’d finally explained her idea, it actually made sense. *This could work!*

She concluded, “That’s it in a nutshell.”

One point about this was that it was better not to tell Matsuri. Matsuri had to be involved, but if she play-acted her part, Lady Saeko would never accept it.

My eyes met Himeko’s. Himeko had an important role in Lady Angelica’s plan—but at the same time, it felt like she was judging *our* relationship as mistress and maid. We both smiled very awkwardly indeed.



## Chapter Eight: A New Bond

Several more days passed without incident. Lady Saeko came to the Sky Salon every other day or so, but she hardly spoke to the rest of us. She just stayed in her own private corner and spent her time reading.

When the time was right, we'd hopefully be able to persuade her, but the moment just wasn't coming quickly enough, and it was starting to stress me out. *Maybe it won't even come until after school starts up again. If so, they're considering going for Lady Sakura's plan, but with Lady Angelica's layered over the top. Then we'd have to ask for Matsuri's help after all.*

As the days dragged on, Matsuri kept going to work as scheduled. For me, having her there was pretty handy. Outside of her shifts, I got plenty of one-on-one lessons in cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry. I felt like my maid skills leveled up a little.

Today I was thinking about asking her to teach me more secret cleaning techniques, but when I waited in my room after her shift, she didn't show up. It wasn't like she'd promised to come straight home after work or anything, and I sometimes went out to see Himeko around this time. She'd probably just gone for a walk. On the surface, at least, she was back to her usual self, so there probably wasn't that much cause for concern. Still, given the situation, I couldn't help worrying.

My mind started running away with me. *She wouldn't try to break into Lady Saeko's room, would she?*

"I'm back!" Matsuri announced, putting that idea to rest.

Her voice sounded as cheerful as ever; my fears had apparently been groundless.

"Hi," I said, going to meet her at the door.

Sweat was dripping down her face. Even in this sweltering heat, she had to have been doing more than just walking back to the dorm.

"Should I get a towel?"

“No, don’t worry. I’ll get one myself.”

She showed me a smile I hadn’t seen on her face in quite a while.

“Did something happen?”

“Yes. After work, I went and cleaned inside the school building. No one’s been in there to clean since the start of vacation, right? I realized it must have gotten slightly dusty. When I started, I got more engrossed than I’d expected. When I’m exerting myself like that, I can forget about everything.”

“Sure. Yep.”

*Cleaning the school without anybody asking her to? That’s Matsuri all right, but it feels like she’s putting on a brave face to the extreme. It’s almost like she’s swung from a depressive state to a manic one. I hope she won’t have a sudden swing back.*

Of course, the fact that she was feeling good right now was a plus. *But if she’s doing something like this, she can’t be back to her normal self.*

“You’re right that there’s no one to take care of it during vacation. Should I come and help out as well?”

“No, you mustn’t. You have to focus on serving Himeko.” She poked me in the cheek for emphasis.

“I guess you’re right. I’d better make her my priority.”

She giggled. “Definitely. If you have a mistress to take care of, she has to come first.”

“Right,” I said weakly.

*Ugh, we really have to fix this quickly, but it’s not going to be easy.*



A few more days passed with frustratingly little progress. All the while, I was so focused on Matsuri that I totally forgot about my other problem.

One day, I went to the Sky Salon in the morning as usual, cleaned and took care of odd jobs, and enjoyed a nice cup of tea or two with Himeko. After that, I set out back to my dorm room—and came across a certain girl.

More accurately, she was waiting to ambush me. She stood imposingly on the path with her arms folded. With a scornful huff, she said, “Misaki Hotaru, right?”

*Oh no. It's Lutia.*

Her chestnut-colored short hair and bright blue eyes were a rare sight at Amanotsuka Academy. It made sense that she stood out, though, since she hadn't come with any intention of becoming a maid. That gave her something in common with me, but her reason for being here was *very* different from mine. She was a vampire hunter targeting Lady Angelica.

“No, that's not my name,” I lied. “You have me mixed up with somebody else.”

Playing dumb, I started to walk past her, only for her to suddenly grab my arm.

“You can't fool me. I've been researching you over the past few days. You're actually sort of famous around here, so it wasn't hard to get information. I've also discovered who you *really* are. You're a minion of evil trying to help take over the school by cozying up to the highly influential Himeko Amanotsuka. You're some variety of fiend operating under Angelica's orders! And just like her, you'll face my wrath!”

*What?! What is she talking about?!*

“None of that's true! You've got it all wrong!”

I didn't know what to do. Lutia was laboring under a major misapprehension. Evidently, she was the type of person to interpret information *very* freely and convince herself of things she'd made up.

“Will you please let go of me?”

“No. First I'm going to use you as bait to draw out Angelica, then I'm going to dispose of both of you at once.”

*What now? Shall I cry out for help?*

The second I looked around, I saw a small black form flying toward me.

*Lady Angelica said she'd make sure a bat was always nearby. Now it's come to*

*rescue me.*

Moments later, it was no longer alone; a whole swarm of squeaking bats bore down on Lutia.

“Dammit! You’re a vampire too! I knew it!”

Surrounded by the bats, Lutia was forced to let go of my hand and focus on defending herself.

A bat turned to face me and squeaked loudly as if to say, “Run!”

“Thanks,” I replied. “Don’t put yourselves in danger either!”

I ran to my dorm as fast as I possibly could. When I got to my room and looked out through the window, the bats were just flying up into the sky. Having successfully bought me enough time for an escape, they were swirling away in a flurry.

*I’m glad they’re safe, but I still can’t believe how badly Lutia has misunderstood. She definitely thinks I was the one controlling the bats.*

Groaning, I decided I had to talk to Lady Angelica as soon as possible. The only problem was, I had no way to get in touch with her.

That was when I remembered. *I can ask the bats to give her a message, right? If they come back, I’ll give it a try.*

Since they were still nowhere in sight by the evening, I cautiously opened the window to make sure Lutia wasn’t there. All was quiet; it looked like she wasn’t staking me out or anything. *Maybe she’s retreated to form a new strategy.*

“Erm, are there any bats around?” I called through the window. “If so, I have a favor to ask.”

Squeaking, a single bat flew over from behind a tree.

*Ooh, how cute! I love how it comes when I call it! I wonder if you can keep a bat as a pet?*

“Erm, I’m a little scared Lutia might be listening, so could you come into the room? I’ll give you a snack.”

Squeaking in reply, the bat flew through the open window. *What a clever little*

*thing! It understands everything I say!*

“Do bats like fruit? I’ve got some apple pieces and milk ready for you.”

On the table, next to my own portion, I’d placed an apple cut into tiny chunks and a saucer of milk. I didn’t know exactly what bats ate, but this one gleefully flew over to the apple.

*It’s eating the apple!* I thought with excitement as I sat down on a chair.

“Are you all right? You and your friends didn’t get hurt earlier, did you?”

The bat squeaked and lifted up one wing as if to say it was totally fine.

“Thank goodness. Thank you so much for your help, by the way. You might have literally saved my life.”

I gingerly stroked the bat’s little head. It closed its eyes, reacting like a cat would. *This critter’s so cute and charming. I’m starting to wish we could spend more time together.*

“Anyway, I’m wondering if you can help me out. Could you take a message to Lady Angelica? I want to let her know that Lutia attacked me and ask if we can meet somewhere tomorrow. The more public, the better, since that’ll make it harder for Lutia to strike as well. Maybe we could go for the open-air café Lady Angelica likes? Maybe she’ll have anticipated this and will be there anyway. Still, I guess it would be best to set a time. Let’s say ten in the morning.”

After I’d finished, the bat flapped its wings. It seemed to be saying, “Leave it to me!”

The bat and I were still enjoying our little snack when Matsuri arrived. “Misaki, I’m back!”

*I wonder if she went to clean the inside of the school building after work again. Wait, I hope she’s okay around bats. It would be awful if she’s scared of them.*

I only had seconds to worry about this before she came into the living room and shrieked.

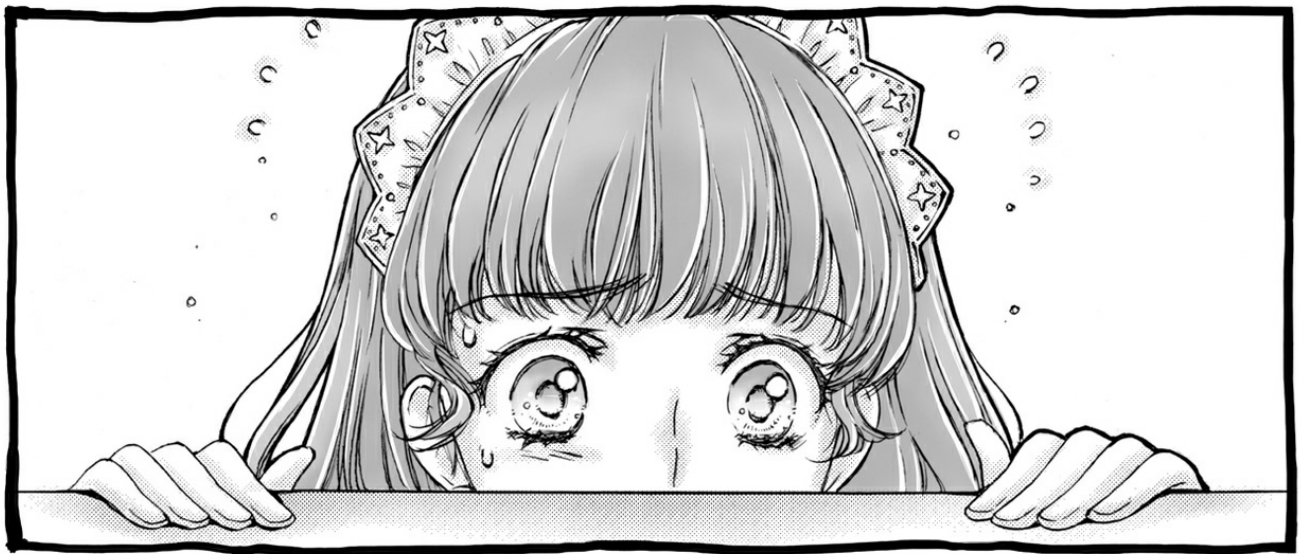
*Gah! I knew it!*

She collapsed to the ground and pointed at the bat. “Misaki! I’m not imagining things, am I? That’s a bat, isn’t it?!”

“I’m sorry! It seems to have gotten lost. I tried feeding it an apple, and it started eating it, so I’m playing host for now. It’s really, really tame. Look at how it’s eating the apple pieces. Don’t you think it’s adorable?”

“Erm, maybe.”

Looking exceptionally nervous, Matsuri sat up and crawled over to the table. Trembling, she poked half of her face up from behind the table to peer at the bat.



“That’s a fruit bat, I think.” Her voice was wavering as well. “They look kind of like foxes. It’s actually a little cuter than I thought. Maybe.”

*Phew. For a second I was worried she’d suddenly lash out and hit the poor bat.*

“Would you like an apple too, Matsuri?”

“Yes,” she croaked. “Yes, I think I would.”

Even after admitting the bat was cute, she must have still been afraid, since she sat down on the farthest chair.

“Can it fly? Is it going to bite me?”

“It’s a bat, so it can fly, but it wouldn’t bite anyone. It’s too smart for that.”

After serving Matsuri an apple and some juice, I stroked the bat’s head, prompting Matsuri to gasp.

“It’s awfully friendly around humans!”

“I told you.”

“Are you going to keep it as a pet?”

“I’d kind of like to, but I guess it’s not practical when I don’t live on my own. I wouldn’t be able to let it fly freely around the room, for example.”

“Yes, I can see what you mean. Still, if its roost is nearby, maybe it’ll come back again. Have you thought about giving it a name?”

“Good idea. It’d be easier to call it over that way.”

*Which is more important than you realize,* I added in my mind.

“Hmm, what would be a good name,” I mused.

*A name for a bat. Well, I could go for the obvious.*

“Something like ‘Batty’?”

“Or ‘Squeaky’ because of the sounds bats make?” Matsuri suggested.

Neither of these were the most inventive of names, but if we were focusing on how cute the little critter was, this was what we ended up with. *I could go for a more chic and stylish name like “Black Rose,” but I’d only end up using a*



*nickname like “Rosey” anyway. It doesn’t help that I don’t know if it’s a boy or a girl yet.*

“It’s a fruit bat, right? What about something like ‘Fruitington’?”

As soon as I said that, the bat turned to me and squeaked.

“That’s it! That’s your name!”

“It sounds like it’s fond of the name,” Matsuri agreed.

I couldn’t know how the bat was *really* feeling, but it seemed to be happy with “Fruitington.”

“Maybe we could make it even more fancy. Something like ‘Fruitington III.’”

“A classy name for a very polite little bat.”

“In that case, from now on I’ll call you Fruitington III!”

When I called Fruitington III by its new name, it raised its wings as if to give assent. Then, with a flutter, Fruitington III went over to the window, apparently having had enough of the apple.

“I guess it’s time for Fruitington III to go home.” I moved closer to the window, ostensibly to say goodbye, then whispered into its ear, “Tell Lady Angelica what I said, okay?”

I got a soft squeak in return before Fruitington III flew out of the open window.

Watching Fruitington III’s departure, Matsuri said, “Pets are nice. Maybe if I had one, it would distract me from my loneliness.”

This was a very sad remark.



I went to the open-air café slightly early the next morning, but Lady Angelica had arrived even earlier and was already sitting at a table.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Misaki, good morning. I’m glad to see you’re okay.”

She didn’t have her usual easygoing air. Instead, she seemed kind of antsy. As

soon as she saw me, she stood up and ran over.

“Yes, I managed to get away safely thanks to Fruitington III’s help.”

“Oh, that’s right, you gave her a name. She was really happy about it!”

“She was?”

“Absolutely! If anything else comes up in the future, you can give her a message anytime.”

“Thanks. Will do.”

We moved over to the table and Lady Angelica continued the conversation while cautiously watching our surroundings. “It sounds like Lutia remembered your face after all.”

“She also seems to think I’m a vampire for some reason.”

“Is that so? That’s definitely not ideal. I’ve finally received information from Ireland, and apparently they’re having similar problems there. Vampire hunting is a growing trend lately, especially among young people. They’re not strong enough to take us down, but it does cause problems for us if we’re trying to live a quiet life. What’s more, they might also cause harm to ordinary humans like you. At this point, I can’t leave it alone. I’d hoped to avoid escalating the situation, but it looks like I’ll have to deal with it properly.”

“Do you mean by fighting her, like you did the other day?”

“More or less, although I don’t think it’ll even qualify as a fight in the end. There’s no way she could beat me in a face-off. What we’re afraid of is that society at large will become aware of our existence again and persecute us. We have to nip this in the bud while it’s seen as nothing more than some youths acting foolishly.”

“Right.”

“Lutia won’t attack after sundown. Apparently, people like her believe that vampires are more ferocious at night. It’ll also be safe during the day if there are other people around, so my advice is to avoid being alone as much as possible. That said, if you are under threat, your new bat friend—Fruitington—should come and help you.”

“Got it. Just one thing, though.”

“Is there some other problem?”

“No, not really. Just that her name isn’t Fruitington, it’s Fruitington III. The last part is important.”

When I said this in an entirely serious tone, Lady Angelica had to stifle some hearty laughter.

“Ha ha, that’s so funny. If everyone was like you, my kind would be able to live in peace and happiness.”

Still smiling, she stood and cradled my head in her arms, patting it gently.

After that, she said, “I plan to take some kind of action in the next few days, so be extra careful until then, okay?”

Then she left.



Beyond what she’d said, I had no idea of the details. What kind of action did she plan on taking in the next few days? It didn’t sound like she planned to do a citizen’s arrest and hand her over to the police.

In the meantime, I waited. When Matsuri and I were alone at night, the conversation often turned to Lady Saeko.

“Was she at the salon today, Misaki? Did she have any problems?”

Matsuri often brought up her (former) mistress. By now, she was able to talk about Lady Saeko normally, but I kind of had the feeling that this was because *not* thinking about her made Matsuri anxious.

“Yeah, she was there in the morning. As far as I could tell, she just sat there reading, same as always. I spoke to her a little, but I don’t know of any problems. Wait, now that I think about it, her uniform did look slightly more creased than usual.”

I had to really dig deep for this. It was an effort to find *some* kind of issue to mention.

“Ah, I’m not surprised. I wonder what she’s doing about laundry? Is she

sending her clothes out to be laundered herself, perhaps? That means she's not getting them ironed every day."

Laundry was handled collectively, with the Domestic Arts students having a rotation for who was taking care of it. Everything was ironed before returning it, of course, but no one would give their clothes to the laundry service every day just to have them ironed. The only ones who would iron so frequently were Seraphs, but Lady Saeko no longer had Matsuri there to do it for her. *She could have her there, though. I wish she'd change her mind already.*

"I've been thinking as well, by the way," Matsuri said. "About whether I can convince Lady Saeko to make me her Seraph again."

"Did you come up with an idea?"

"Not really." She shook her head sadly. "I think the easiest way would be to get myself into debt and ask Lady Saeko to bail me out. That's all."

This was the same brute-force method that Lady Sakura had mentioned initially.

"Won't the same thing eventually happen again, though?"

"Hmm, I suppose you're right."

*I still don't think they'd have a "normal" relationship. That's why everyone's been struggling so hard to come up with a better idea.*

Lady Angelica's plan sounded the best, but it relied on an opportunity arising by happenstance. Unless that happened, the situation would stay exactly the same as at the start of vacation. Eventually, the only option left would be one like Kirara had taken. She could explain all the details in front of the whole school and then beg Lady Saeko to take her on as a Seraph again. It might not help, but at that point, it couldn't hurt either.

Lady Saeko had told us she'd still say no in that situation, but maybe she'd feel differently in the moment. We'd have to stake it all on that.

*Every approach we have is full of uncertainty. I just hope we can manage this soon! This must be what it's like to be trapped in a maze with no way out.*

However, it turned out that someone unexpected was going to break down

the walls and give the maze an unplanned exit.



I panted heavily, short of breath. *How did I end up in this situation?*

When I turned my head, I could see her. There was no mistaking it. Lutia was coming after me.

She was baring her teeth and holding up what looked like a cross and a string of garlic. I wanted to shout “I’m not a vampire!” but I knew she wouldn’t listen.

It had happened when I was on my way home from the Sky Salon. There had been no one around. Sure, I should have been more careful, but I’d never *really* believed she’d make me her target. I definitely made an easier mark than Lady Angelica, being an ordinary human, but surely researching me properly would have revealed that I wasn’t a vampire at all?

*How much research could she really have done about me anyway? She’s not in a position to have access to my student records or anything. It’s more likely she just asked a few other students what they knew and counted that as “research.”*

None of that helped right now, of course.

Learning from our last encounter, when the bats had gotten in her way, she hadn’t attacked right away when she saw me. Instead, she’d kept herself concealed and led me right where she wanted me.

That place was the new school building—specifically, the Societal Arts wing that was essentially its own building. Before I knew it, I was running into the building, having been ushered into her trap.

Now that I was inside, Fruitington III and the other bats wouldn’t be able to come to my aid so easily. It would be harder for me to contact them too. She’d clearly thought about this.

Well aware that it was completely improper and violated the school rules, I ran like hell through the building. Thankfully, there was no one else in sight to judge me.

“You can run, but you can’t hide, Misaki Hotaru. I’m going to use you as bait to draw out Angelica, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

While reeling off lines straight out of a villain's playbook, she ran behind me at a distance of about twenty yards.

"I'm telling you, this has nothing to do with me!"

I didn't know if she could even hear me, but I had to try.

*Maybe Fruitington III is still somewhere nearby. She must have been watching me, right?*

I charged up the staircase to the second floor and then kept running. Through the window, I saw a black shape.

"Fruitington III!"

*Squeak!* she replied.

"Please, you have to go get Lady Angelica!"

Having maybe decided she couldn't come inside the building, she immediately turned and flew off instead. *But will I be able to stay away from my pursuer longer enough for help to arrive?*

The new school building had four floors—no, five if I could get up onto the roof. Sadly, I didn't think my legs would get me that far. I wasn't athletic in the slightest, and Lutia was rapidly closing the distance. At this rate, she would reach me on the third floor—and I'd be toast.

"Ha ha ha! You're pretty slow for a vampire! Are you some kind of vampire dropout?"

I was too out of breath to say a word, but she made up for it by being free and easy with the disparaging remarks. I made it past the second floor and onto the next set of stairs, but by now Lutia was right on my tail. She caught up the moment I reached the top of the staircase. I turned my head and there she was, closing in on me with a jubilant expression.

Suddenly, I heard another voice. "Misaki?"

"Huh?"

I looked in front of me, and there she was. Matsuri.

My panicked reaction came far too late. I collided with Matsuri at high speed

and knocked her sideways. I would have fallen backward down the stairs if I hadn't just barely managed to grab onto the railing.

I only had a brief moment to feel relieved before Lutia grabbed my shoulder. That same instant, there was a loud *smash* as an expensive-looking vase fell to the floor.

"Oh no," said Matsuri, deflated. Her hand was reaching out to the spot where the vase had just stood.

Because I'd bumped into her, she'd knocked the vase.

"Hah, now you've done it. I bet that's worth a small—"

Before Lutia could finish commenting, a gust of wind blew past. It felt like something, or someone, had rushed past me with tremendous force, and suddenly Lutia was gone.

"Huh?" I exclaimed slowly.

*I don't know what just happened, but at least Lutia's not here anymore.*

"Matsuri, are you all right? I'm so sorry. It's all my fault! It only got broken because I crashed into you!"

Although I hadn't expected anyone to be there, Matsuri was cleaning the school building again, as she had been every day, all to distract herself from the loneliness of not being by Lady Saeko's side.

"What? No. It wasn't your fault at all, Misaki." She looked empty inside as she stared down at the shattered vase.

"How can you say that? Clearly it only happened because of me."

"That's not true. Admittedly, the shock of you colliding with me *did* lead to me knocking the vase over. I could have caught it, though. I'm sure I could have stopped it from falling. But my hands wouldn't move. There was a thought that flashed into my mind just for a moment: if this vase breaks, maybe Lady Saeko will help me again. That made me hesitate."

She collapsed to the ground.

Lady Angelica approached from the end of the hall. "Neither of you are to

blame for this. You can blame *her*.”

*What? When?! How?!*

In her right hand, Lady Angelica was holding Lutia by the scruff of the neck. Did that mean the gust of wind just now had been Lady Angelica?!

Lutia wasn't moving a muscle. *She's only unconscious, right?*

“Lutia's got guts, I'll give her that. She was determined to keep going after you. I'll have to give her the punishment she deserves. But first...”

Lady Angelica crouched, then grasped Matsuri's shoulder and pulled her to her feet.

“Matsuri, none of this is your fault. However, I'd like it if you kept this incident a little vague in your mind.”

Her eyes glimmered bewitchingly as she stared straight into Matsuri's. Matsuri let out a gasp.

“Erm, is everything going to be okay?”

“Yes, there's nothing to worry about. I'm just fogging up her consciousness a little to make sure she doesn't find out about me. She'll remember everything except for my involvement.”

“Right, okay.”

“Now then,” she said, standing up. It looked like she'd finished putting Matsuri under her spell, or however it worked. “Matsuri, you broke a vase.”

“Yes,” Matsuri replied feebly.

“Even if it was an accident, it won't change the truth. We'll decide among ourselves how to deal with it, so until then, stay in your room—or rather, Misaki's room. Unless there's a very good reason, just wait there, okay?”

“I will.”

With slumped shoulders, Matsuri started walking. Once she was gone, Lady Angelica gave me my orders.

“Lutia's actions are unforgivable, but I have to give credit where credit's due—she really helped us out here. Go and tell Himeko right away.”



“Huh? What do you mean?”

“We finally have a chance to bring Saeko and Matsuri back together.”

Lady Angelica showed me a smile and a wink.



In a meeting room, Himeko exchanged glances with me and Lady Angelica. Frowning, she asked, “Matsuri broke a vase? How did that happen?”

It was a totally reasonable question. Someone as conscientious as Matsuri doing something like that on purpose seemed unimaginable, but the small possibility was there.

“It was my fault,” I replied. “I was coming up the stairs and I didn’t see Matsuri there, so I bumped into her and it made her knock the vase over.”

“Oh, really?” She didn’t quite sound convinced. “Are you both all right?”

“Yes, neither of us were hurt.”

“That’s good to hear. For the vase, we can just buy a replacement. In fact, the insurance should—”

Interrupting with a wicked smile, Lady Angelica said, “Himeko, you’re missing the point. This is a golden opportunity.”

“Oh! Yes, I see what you mean now.”

“It might not be the nicest thing for Matsuri, but we can use this to turn the screws a little.”

“Agreed.” Himeko nodded. “We can’t leave it too long either. Let’s set things in motion right away.”

“Good idea. I’ll use a school broadcast to call both of them to the Sky Salon. I think that’s the best place to draw a line under all this. You two should go there and wait.”

“All right. Let’s go, Misaki.”

“Yes, milady.”

Himeko and Lady Angelica were planning to use the broken vase to pressure

Lady Saeko and Matsuri. If it all went according to plan, they'd go back to how they were before.

On the way to the salon, Himeko asked me, "By the way, why were you in the school building to begin with?"

My "Huh?" was more like a scared yelp. *That's a great question. Why in the world would I have been in the school building—especially the part with the Societal Arts classrooms?*

"Well, Matsuri told me she's been cleaning in there lately, so I went to help."

*I'm sorry for lying, milady! I don't have a choice. Otherwise, I'd have to give away Lady Angelica's secret.*

"Fair enough. I can see Matsuri doing that."

She seemed to believe me. I mentally apologized again, wishing there was anything else I could do.



Using the school broadcasting system had the hidden goal of making anyone who heard wonder if something was going on with Lady Saeko and Matsuri. That was all part of Lady Angelica's scheme.

Assembled in the Sky Salon now were me, Himeko, Lady Angelica, Lady Sakura, Sara, and the two girls in question.

"What's the point of this?" Lady Saeko asked, indignation clear in her voice. Since she and Matsuri had both been called here, she no doubt had a general idea of what this related to.

Ignoring her sullen glare, Lady Angelica stepped forward, ushering Matsuri with her. "Allow me to explain. You see, not long ago, Matsuri broke a vase on the third floor of the Societal Arts wing."

Lady Saeko shifted her glare to Matsuri. "What did you do?"

"I'm so sorry." Matsuri bowed down in an apology so deep that her head practically reached her knees.

"Don't blame her. She was just making sure the interior stayed spotless while

no one else was cleaning it over vacation. Breaking the vase was nothing but an unfortunate accident, of course.”

“If so, then everything’s fine, but I don’t see what it has to do with me.”

“Think about it. Even if Matsuri can’t really be blamed for it, the fact remains that she broke the vase.”

“Are you suggesting I should take on the costs that fall to Matsuri? The insurance would cover all that—wouldn’t it, Himeko? And if you’re asking Matsuri to pay the deductible, I’m sure she can cover that on her own now that she’s no longer in debt.”

Himeko stepped forward to take over from Lady Angelica. “You’re right about that. We could use the insurance to pay for the broken vase. However, that’s not the issue at hand. This incident could be very bad for you, Saeko, which is why we wanted to bring both of the relevant parties together as quickly as possible.”

“I have no idea what you mean,” Lady Saeko replied, folding her arms bad-temperedly. One thing was clear: she was *not* happy.

“There are witnesses to Matsuri breaking the vase, so it won’t be long before word spreads.”

This was a lie. No one had been there apart from us. However, Lady Angelica and Himeko had agreed to these embellishments beforehand.

“That alone wouldn’t cause a big fuss, of course,” Lady Himeko continued. “There have been plenty of things broken by accident before.”

“I would assume so, yes.”

“However,” she continued, saying it loudly for emphasis, “the timing is quite bad. As of now, nobody else knows that you’ve dissolved Matsuri’s Seraph contract. However, news of this accident will start spreading fast from today. By contrast, the news about you canceling the contract won’t spread until after school starts up again, I imagine.”

Deep ridges appeared on Lady Saeko’s forehead. She didn’t say a word, but it was clear that she’d understood what Himeko was getting at.

“What do you think the other students will think after vacation when they hear that Matsuri is no longer your Seraph?”

Lady Saeko remained silent.

“I’ll tell you what I think. They’ll think you dumped Matsuri over a careless mistake.”

“I can just explain what really happened. Dropping Matsuri’s contract had nothing to do with her breaking the vase. I honored my contract, as I should have done after she worked hard to pay off the debt.”

“Wishful thinking. Everyone here knows all the background, but the rest of the student body doesn’t. They’ll see you as someone who dissolved Matsuri’s contract—something that was supposed to be guaranteed job security for her future—because of a trivial mistake. They’ll see you as some kind of ogre.”

“Himeko, don’t you think you’re exaggerating slightly?”

“Perhaps a tiny bit. I think a healthy majority of the student population will see it in that light, though. Imagine if you were told a story like that. A Domestic Arts student broke something, and then she lost her Seraph contract. You wouldn’t believe any of the fancy justifications you heard afterward, right? They’d just sound like excuses.”

No words came from Lady Saeko’s lips. She knew that Himeko was right. When there was good news, plenty of people doubted it, but people tended to believe bad news when they heard it.

“As a result, you wouldn’t be seen as a trustworthy person who honors your contracts. Quite the opposite; your name would probably be raked through the mud. True or otherwise, you’d be the person who breaks contracts on the slightest of pretexts.”

Lady Saeko gritted her teeth in frustration. That kind of stigma could cause her serious damage. It would be the exact opposite of what she’d been trying to achieve.

*Is this actually going to work?*

Himeko took another large step forward. She looked pretty fired up at this

point. “In any case, breaking a Seraph contract is fundamentally prohibited at this school. If there’s a chance the contract might be broken, the student shouldn’t be made into a Seraph in the first place. That’s what Exousia contracts are for. What you’ve done has the power to shake Amanotsuka Academy down to its very foundations. As deputy chairman of the board, I cannot allow it.”

Himeko stopped for a moment. For some reason, her gaze lingered on me for a second.

“If you’ve made a student into your Seraph, you need to take full responsibility for that person. If you can’t, you shouldn’t make her a Seraph to begin with.”

*It sounds almost like she’s telling herself that rather than Lady Saeko.*

With sweat dotting her forehead, Himeko lacked her usual elegant poise.

Falling silent, Lady Saeko cast her eyes down at the floor. For a short while, no one spoke.

At last, Lady Saeko looked up with a soft chuckle. “I never expected to hear that from you, Himeko. Not after how little effort you’ve been putting in. What’s brought on this change?”

Himeko’s face flushed. “This isn’t about me.”

“If you say so. Anyway, you’ve got me. This has the potential to cause me serious problems.”

On the verge of tears, Matsuri clutched her hands together in front of her chest. “I’m so sorry, Lady Saeko. It’s all my fault.”

“Yes, that’s true. I’m in quite a bind, and it’s all down to you.” She came closer and wrapped her hands tightly around Matsuri’s. “I think I was just insecure. I couldn’t let go of the idea that you were only serving me because you were trapped by the contract. It never occurred to me that you might keep working for me even after you paid off the debt. Matsuri, will you stay by my side?”

“That’s what I’ve wanted all along—now and always. From the day I met you, I’ve wanted to be by your side forever.”

“You’re such a fool. I’m not the kind of mistress you think I am. When you

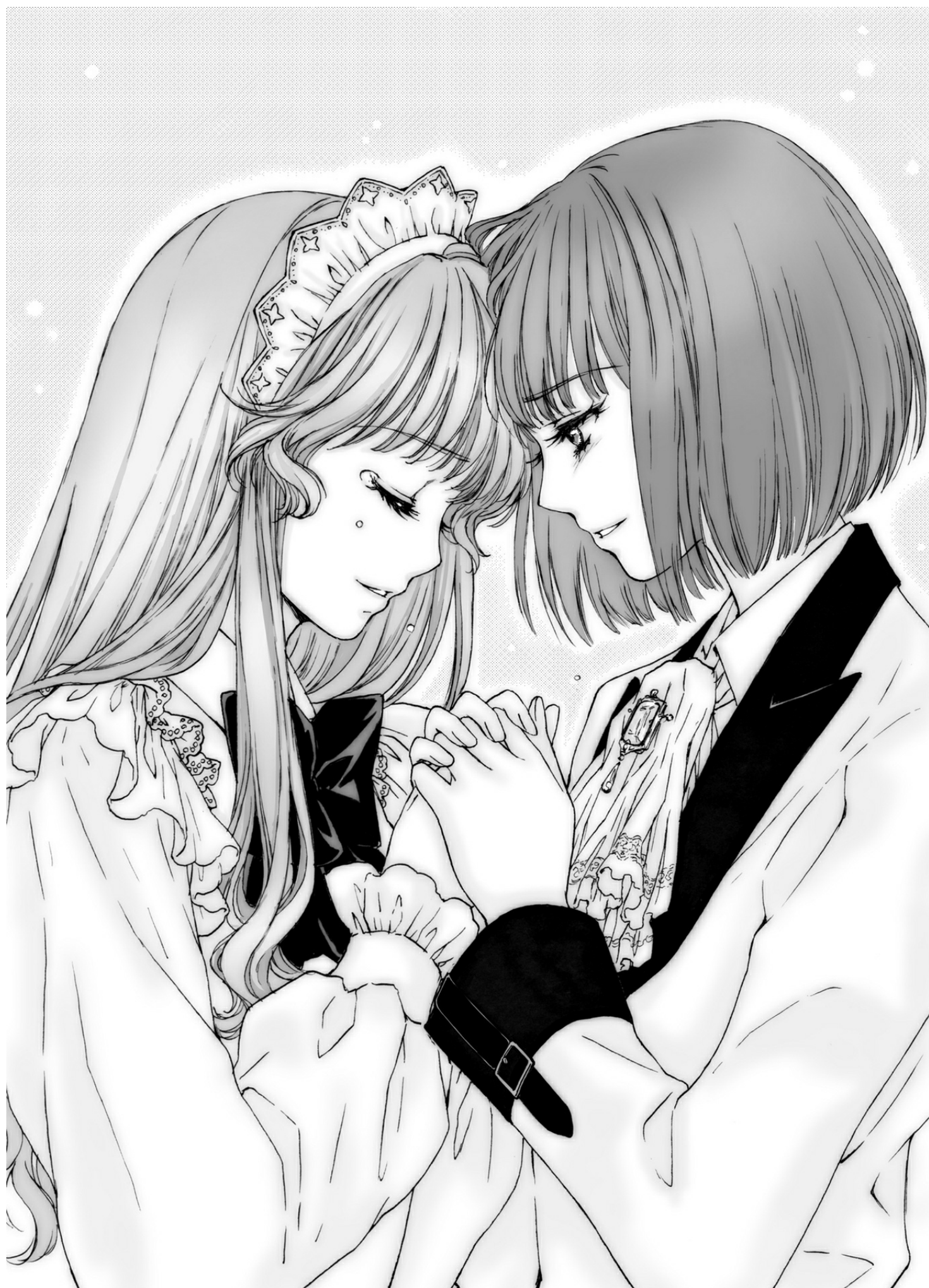
make mistakes, I punish you—physically, even.”

“That’s only natural if I do something worthy of punishment. I’ll accept any treatment if it’s at your hands, Lady Saeko.”

“I don’t understand why you’d put up with that. Someone as skilled as you could find a mistress who treats you with gentle affection. Still, if you say it’s what you want, I’ll believe you. Stay with me, Matsuri. I’ll train you even more strictly than before.”

“Yes, milady!”

Pressing their foreheads together, they made a fresh vow to each other. The mistress and Seraph who nobody knew had parted ways exchanged a new Golden Contract before anyone had a chance to learn what had happened.





Now that she was finally back to her usual self, Lady Saeko was sitting at the table with Matsuri standing behind her. It was a sight for sore eyes.

“Himeko, charge me for the cost of the vase,” she said.

“I’m sure we can handle it under the insurance.”

“Forget about that. I made your lives difficult, so let me do this to make up for it. It’ll also be beneficial to my reputation.”

“If you insist.”

The mistress was taking responsibility for an expensive mistake her Seraph had made. This was sure to win over the hearts and minds of the Domestic Arts students. It would also provide a good justification for Matsuri continuing to serve her even after the debt was repaid. Anyone would be able to see that the reason they were together wasn’t because of some debt, but because of the unbreakable bond between them.

“Very well,” Himeko said. “Then I’ll have the invoice sent to you.”

She didn’t add anything else.

The cost of one vase was probably nothing to Lady Saeko, and in fact, when I asked about it later, Himeko told me she’d send her the invoice but actually use the insurance to pay for the vase. She wanted to set the money aside and give it back to Lady Saeko and Matsuri after graduation.

Matsuri decided to move back in with Lady Saeko that same day, but before she did, she went back to my room and cleaned it to perfection. Alone in my room, I felt a little lonely, but I knew that feeling would go away soon. I was moving back in with my own mistress, after all, so Himeko and I would be spending most of our time together.



## Epilogue

“I’m so glad those two are back to normal already,” I said to Himeko.

“I quite agree.”

How long had it been since I’d last been in Himeko’s room? I was pretty sure it had only been a few days, but I was feeling quite self-conscious about it. I didn’t think this was just because I’d been gone. It was also because her words at the Sky Salon had left an impression on me. The speech she’d delivered to Lady Saeko had been directed just as much at herself.

*Which means that with me, she— My thoughts were interrupted by the telephone ringing with a call on the internal line. It was rare to hear the in-room phone ringing.*

I picked it up. “Yes, this is Himeko Amanotsuka’s room.”

“Oh, Misaki, it’s you.” Lady Angelica was on the line. “Is Himeko there?”

“Yes, just a moment.”

Getting a call from her on the internal line was very unusual. It had to be a pretty urgent message.

“Lady Angelica for you, milady.”

“How odd. I wonder what she wants.” Himeko clearly had no more idea than I did. “Hi, it’s me.”

She paused while Lady Angelica spoke.

“What? Really?”

Whatever it was, it clearly *was* urgent.

“Yes, I’ll be fine.” Another pause. “All right. Then I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Then Himeko put down the receiver. Before I could even ask, she told me what she’d just heard.

“Angelica’s going back to her home country tomorrow.”

“That’s sudden,” I replied, immediately thinking about Lutia.

“What is her home country, anyway? It’s not springing to mind.”

“She’s from Ireland, isn’t she?”

“Yes, that was it,” Himeko replied, acting as though she’d known this and had just momentarily forgotten. “That sounds right.”

*Did Lady Angelica use her powers to make her forget so she could hide her true identity more easily?*

“She said that before she leaves, she wants to have a meeting to confirm our plans for the immediate future and make sure everything’s in place to continue without her.”

“That sounds like a lot of work.”

“She wants you to come with me, apparently. It’ll be one last chance to see you before she goes home, and a chance for you to put in any requests for souvenirs.”

“It would be nice to get something from her homeland. What’s Ireland famous for?”

“I believe they drink a lot of tea there, don’t they?”

“Sounds great. I can never have too many kinds of tea!”

I knew she was going mainly to try and deal with the vampire hunters, but I wondered if she’d feel like doing any sightseeing alongside that. *Given how little threat Lutia was, I doubt she’ll be all that busy.*

In my mind, I was so casual about the whole thing. I could never have imagined what was *really* going to happen.



# Amanotsuka Academy for Girls Uniform Collection





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Uniform

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Uniform







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by Nayo

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4

# Girls Kingdom

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