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Strawberry & Panic

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lightnovel

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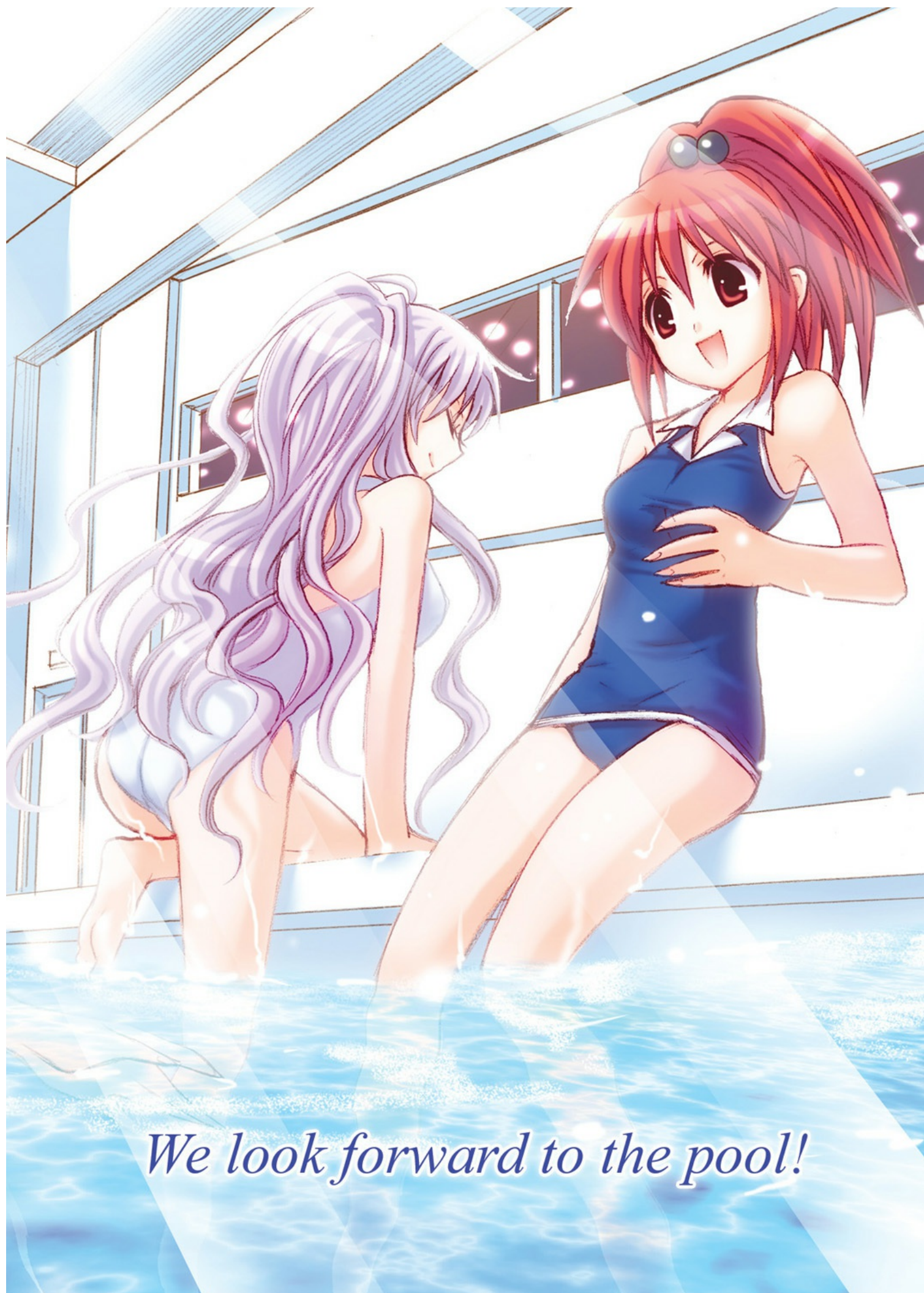


MORNING

10:00 AM



Summer has arrived, and the three Astraea schools have begun their swim classes in P.E. The students all wear their respective school swimsuits. Only Shizuma-sama is different—she wears her personal, virgin-white swimsuit rather elegantly.



We look forward to the pool!



AFTERNOON
2:00 PM





*After a little break, we'll
practice our shots.*

Girls from all three schools play basketball in the gym. They're taking a break, relaxing. The Lulim pair in the back, Kizuna and Remon, must have too much energy... They're enjoying themselves as they wrestle for the ball.



AFTER SCHOOL

3:30 PM



Heh heh ♡
Everyone looks
so nice!



The Room Assistant tradition of the three Astraea schools, in which first-year students provide service and assistance to upperclassmen, is re-enacted here. Chikaru, the St. Lulim Girls' School Student Council President and Costume Club President, gathers first-year students from each school and makes them wear her homemade maid outfits. Chikaru looks pleased and satisfied.

Lovers Drawn to Each Other

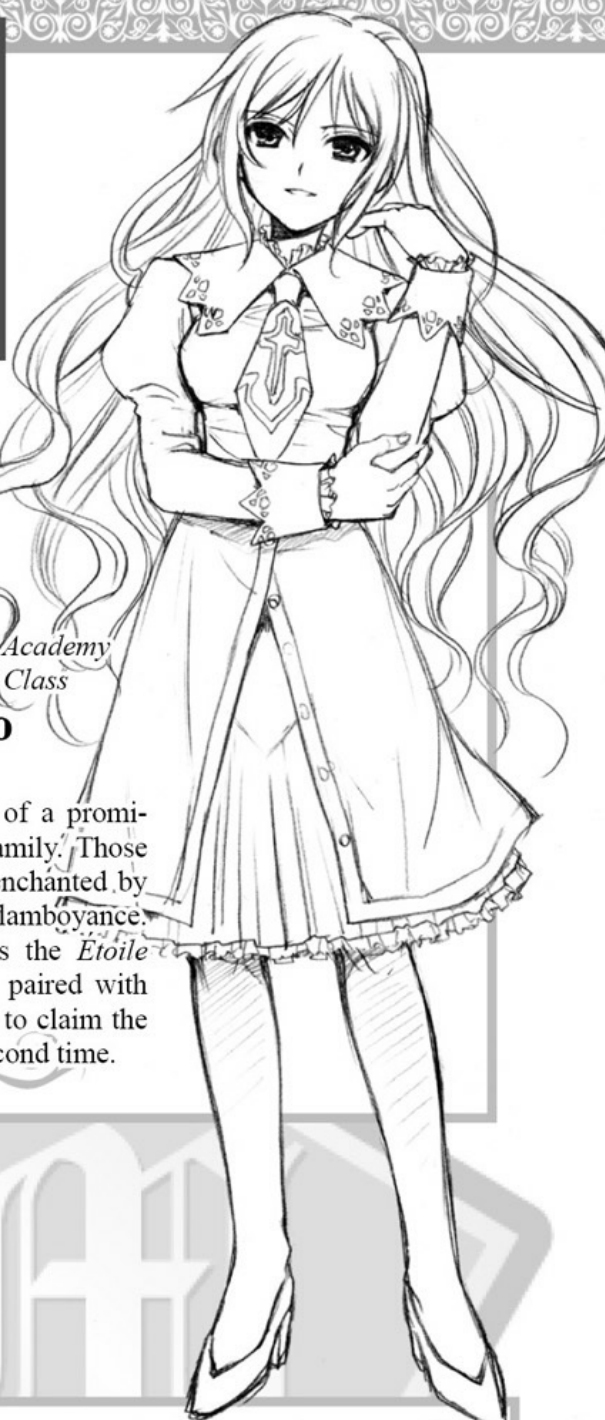
The *Étoile* competition is held to find the best couple out of the three Astraea schools. We will introduce the favored lovely couples of this contest: Nagisa and Shizuma, and Hikari and Amane.

Hanazono Shizuma

*St. Miator Girls' Academy
Sixth Year; Snow Class*

Hanazono Shizuma

Eldest daughter of a prominent Japanese family. Those around her are enchanted by her beauty and flamboyance. Though she was the *Étoile* last year, she is paired with Nagisa this year to claim the crown for the second time.



*St. Miator Girls' Academy
Fourth Year; Moon Class*

Aoi Nagisa

A newly transferred Fourth Year Student to St. Miator Girls' Academy. She has been Shizuma's object of desire since her first day at school, and before she could even acclimate herself in this prestigious all-girl school, she was pulled into the *Étoile* Competition.

Aoi Nagisa

Precious Friends



St. Miator Girls' Academy - Fourth Year, Moon Class

Suzumi Tamao

Nagisa's classmate and roommate who has a crush on Nagisa.

St. Miator Girls' Academy - First Year, Flower Class

Tsukidate Chiyo

An underclassman who adores Nagisa. A well-mannered and modest young lady.



St. Spica Girls' Institute - Third Year, Class Un

Nanto Yaya

Hikari's classmate and roommate. Strongly desires Hikari.

St. Spica Girls' Institute - First Year, Class Deux

Okuwaka Tsubomi

Surefooted Student Council Secretary. Always full of energy.



St. Lulim Girls' School - Second Year, Class B

Hyuga Kizuna

Innocent girl who loves sweets and Chikaru-sama.

St. Lulim Girls' School - Second Year, Class B

Natsume Remon

Kizuna's classmate and member of Chikaru's Costume Club.



St. Lulim Girls' School - First Year, Class C

Byakudan Kagome

Childish and always carries a teddy bear.

Konohana Hikari

St. Spica Girls' Institute - Third Year, Class Un

Konohana Hikari

A quiet, timid girl, newly transferred to Spica. She and Amane, the campus star, are in love with each other.



St. Spica Girls' Institute - Fifth Year, Class Trois

Otori Amane

The leader of the "Five Great Stars" of the school, and called the "Prince." She entered the Étoile Competition with Hikari to fulfill the expectations of the fellow students.

Otori Amane

*St. Miator Girls' Academy's
Student Council President*

Rokujo Miyuki

Fifth Year, Flower Class. Daughter of an old, well-established family. A strategist, known as the "Princess of Rokujo-in." Rumored to have the ability to control evil spirits.



Rokujo Miyuki

*St. Spica Girls' Institute's
Student Council President*

Tomori Shion

Fifth Year Spica student known as the "Snow Queen." Very intelligent, but unlike her nickname, can become quite heated at times.



Tomori Shion

*St. Lulim Girls' School's
Student Council President*

Minamoto Chikaru

St. Lulim Girls' School Fifth Year, Class A. Has a graceful demeanor, but is a definite go-getter. Known as the "Shadow Empress"...



Minamoto Chikaru

The Beautiful Campus Leaders

Here we will introduce the student council presidents who bring together all three schools. They are highly respected and admired model students gifted with both intelligence and beauty. Each beautiful campus leader strives to have their chosen couple claim the Étoile crown for their school!

St. Spica Girls' Institute - Fifth Year, Class Trois

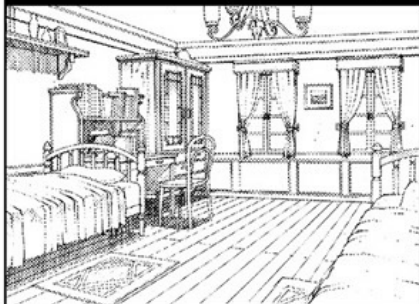
Kusanagi Makoto

Violinist who studied abroad in Russia after graduating Spica Elementary. Came back to Japan to return glory to Spica. Hates the Amane-Hikari couple.



Kusanagi Makoto

Astraea Hall (Strawberry Dorms)



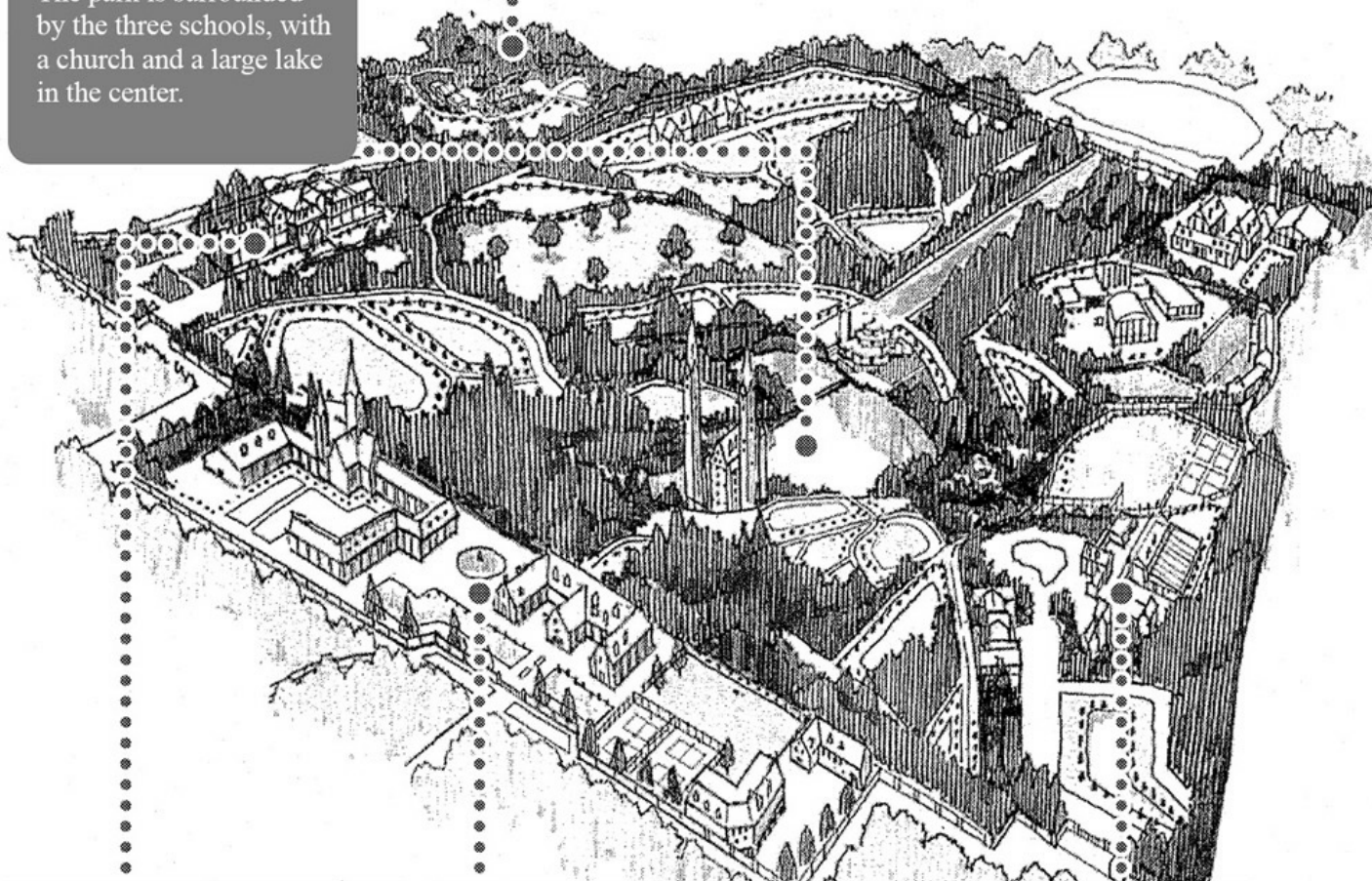
The dorm where Nagisa, Shizuma, and others live. Three buildings, one for each school, are arranged in a triangle.

Diagram of Astraea Hill

Here we introduce the facilities and other locations where the blessed young ladies enjoy their campus life. On Astraea Hill, there are the three all-girl schools, a dormitory, a garden, and a convent, which are isolated from the world.

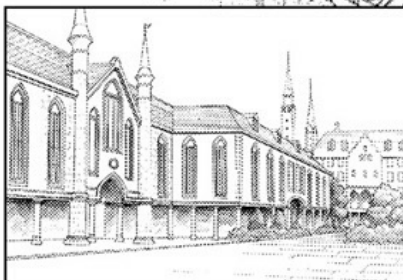
Maiden Park

The park is surrounded by the three schools, with a church and a large lake in the center.



St. Lulim Girls' School

A free, relaxed school with many interesting clubs. The building has a homey air to it and sits closest to the Strawberry Dorms.



St. Miator Girls' Academy

The oldest school, with its British architecture, has the strictest educational standards.



St. Spica Girls' Institute

This school emphasizes the development of women who will advance in society. Well-built facilities with horseback riding grounds and an indoor pool.

STRAWBERRY PANIC VOLUME 2

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Strawberry Panic

VOLUME 2

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SEVEN SEAS' COMMITMENT TO TRANSLATION AUTHENTICITY

JAPANESE NAME ORDER

To ensure maximum authenticity in Seven Seas' translation of *Strawberry Panic: Volume 2*, all character names have been kept in their original Japanese name order with family name first and given name second. For copyright reasons, creator names appear in standard English name order.

HONORIFICS

In addition to preserving the original Japanese name order, Seven Seas is committed to ensuring that honorifics—polite speech that indicates a person's status or relationship towards another individual—are retained within this book. Politeness is an integral facet of Japanese culture and we believe that maintaining honorifics in our translations helps bring out the same character nuances as seen in the original work.

The following are some of the more common honorifics you may come across while reading this and other books: **-san**— The most common of all honorifics, it is an all-purpose suffix that can be used in any situation where politeness is expected. Generally seen as the equivalent to Mr., Miss, Ms., Mrs., *etc.*

-sama— This suffix is one level higher than “-san” and is used to confer great respect upon an individual.

-kun— This suffix is commonly used at the end of boys' names to express either familiarity or endearment. It can also be used when addressing someone younger than oneself or of a lower status.

-chan— Another common honorific. This suffix is mainly used to express endearment towards girls, but can also be used when referring to little boys or even pets. Couples are also known to use the term between one another to convey a sense of cuteness and intimacy.

Senpai— This title is used towards one's senior or “superior” in a particular group or organization. “Senpai” is most often used in a school setting, where underclassmen refer to upperclassmen as “senpai,” though it is also commonly

said by employees when addressing fellow employees who hold seniority in the workplace. (Note: “Sempai” is sometimes used as an alternate spelling.)

Kouhai– This is the exact opposite of “senpai,” and is used to refer to underclassmen in school, junior employees at the workplace, *etc.*

Sensei– Literally meaning “one who has come before,” this title is used for teachers, doctors, or masters of any profession or art.

Oniisan– This title literally means “big brother.” First and foremost, it is used by younger siblings towards older male siblings. It can be used by itself or attached to a person’s name as a suffix (-niisan). It is often used by a younger person toward an older person unrelated by blood, in this case as a sign of respect. Other forms include the informal “oniichan” and the more respectful “oniisama.”

Oneesan– This title is the opposite of “Oniisan” and means “big sister.” Other forms include the informal “oneechan” and the more respectful “oneesama.”

French Guide

Aînée: Older sister *Cadette*: Younger sister *Étoile*: Star *Examen sur l'Astraea*: Exam about Astraea *Galette*: A type of crêpe, a pancake-like pastry *Garçon*: Waiter *Le Dernier Miracle*: The final miracle *L'Épreuve d'amour*: The test of love *L'Ouverture brillante*: The brilliant overture (beginning) *Petite couronne*: Small crown *Trois Lumières*: Three lights

Prologue

With the Goddess Absent, Tender Tears Fall from the Little Nymphet

P*itter patter pitter patter...*

Rain drizzled on the lush green forest of Maiden Park. It was the second week of June, a bit early for the rainy season.

Three famous all-girl schools sat atop the hill. Rain poured from the dark gray skies and soaked the whole area, acting as a precursor to the upcoming long monsoon.

Nagisa looked out from under the umbrella and sighed.

“Haaaah...”

She covered her mouth, surprised at the loudness of her sigh. In St. Miator Girls’ Academy, it was taboo to sigh. She didn’t know whether this rule was simply good manners to prevent others from feeling uncomfortable or a superstition to avoid bad luck, but she kept making little mistakes like these at this prestigious all-girl school. Fortunately, her classmates were well-mannered and didn’t treat her coldly, but...

Nagisa tilted her head and thought, *Oh no, I did it again!*

From under her umbrella, all she could see was the thick, green forest that surrounded her. She was alone on the wet path.

Yeah...

She wouldn’t chase me all this way...

She’s not allowed to be with someone unimportant like me anyway...

Nagisa detested her cowardice.

“Haaaah...” she sighed again.

She had become self-deprecating ever since she’d started attending this

school. Before that, Nagisa had never cared about nor paid attention to what others thought of her. She had used to scratch her head and laugh, and her friends had envied her simplicity...she was simply immature.

But Nagisa had changed quite a bit since she'd transferred to this school.

She reflected on things now, on her existence. And thought about what she could do for others.

This was merely a step toward maturity.

Nagisa tried to be optimistic.

Well, this is the first time I've been the center of attention at school, so...I should grow up a little... Tsk tsk, the star on campus is so influential, whomever the star likes, even if it's an ordinary transfer student like me...gets so much attention...

Nagisa wryly smiled, but deep inside...her heart tightened at the thought of the large shadow that had begun to fill it. The feelings swelled so much, she couldn't stare into her own heart.

She couldn't admit her true feelings to the one who had taught Nagisa to feel so melancholy...the one who had entered her heart and controlled her life.

That special person.

Ever since she'd met the goddess...

Nagisa used to spend her days peacefully, but ever since that fateful encounter, she had been attacked by violent waves of emotion that repeatedly rocked her feelings up to the heavens in happiness and at the same time dragged her to the bottomless pit of anxiety, over and over. And day after day.

Though it wasn't a conscious wish, somewhere in her heart she longed for something to happen.

Maybe I'll bump into her around the next corner...

Maybe, in the middle of a boring class, she'll burst through the door and ask, "May I speak to Nagisa-san?"

Nagisa's heart throbbed at the joyful anticipation.

But on the other hand...while the excitement of seeing the goddess surged through her like a tsunami, it was coupled with immense anxiety, freezing the pit of her stomach. Feelings of both joy and agony could overcome her at any given moment...

Ever since she had met Hanazono Shizuma, a large, mysterious shadow had begun to dwell in Nagisa's heart.

It was her heart's very first growing pains.

Another form of anxiety began to grow now.

"Will I never see her again...?" she started to lament, but stopped herself. *No, no way. This is only temporary. It's only for two weeks.*

And...it's been one, two, three...

Nagisa counted on her fingers the number of days she had been separated from Hanazono Shizuma, the number-one star on campus.

"See, it's been four days already," she tried to say cheerfully, but it was in vain.

Sigh... Oh, it's only been four days, and I'm already this miserable... It's like there's something large missing from my life...

She was depressed. *What's wrong with me, anyway?*

I haven't done so well today... At the science lab, everyone told me I looked so sad...

Even during breakfast with Tamao-chan, I didn't have much of an appetite. Tamao-chan looked at me with pity, like I was an abandoned kitty or something.

She even patted my head and said I was a good girl, trying to comfort me...

Oh, how did I get myself into this in the first place?

Come to think of it...

Chapter 1

The Hazel Comet Strengthens the Attraction of the Full Blue Tide

Ave...

Ave...

Verum Corpus...

Young, fine voices came from a distance.

This song...I think I heard it in class before. It wasn't an English song, but in a language from a strange country...a hymn.

Where is it coming from?

Hyuga Kizuna, St. Lulim Girls' School Second Year Student, B Class, looked at the trees that surrounded her.

A puff of breath left her small mouth. *Where am I...?*

She looked at the circle of sky above, closed in by the surrounding trees.

The clouds drifted along rapidly in the blue sky that continued infinitely upward.

"Wow, great weather!" Kizuna reached into the sky, almost throwing the paper bag she carried.

The scent of the green wood filled the air, and her double ponytails swung around as her little body skipped.

She was in the deep recesses of Maiden Park, which was behind her school, St. Lulim.

Not many people visited the deep, secluded areas of the forest. In fact, this was Kizuna's first time venturing this far.

Kizuna had entered the forest alone...because Chikaru, the Student Council President, had invited her to come. Her classmate, Natsume Remon, had also been invited, but Kizuna had had to stay back for clean-up duty after school, so...Kizuna had had to come later, on her own. She had tried to follow the directions on the map that she'd been given, but the more she walked, the more she got herself lost deeper in the forest.

She had walked for at least thirty minutes, but...

"Oh gosh...I'm lost."

Kizuna wasn't good at reading maps, so she glanced at the small one in her hand one last time before tucking it back into the paper bag.

"Instead of relying on a map...it's better to rely on your senses, right?"

Kizuna rubbed her tiny nose with her forefinger and closed her eyes. She concentrated on the singing voices...and sniffed around.

Vere passum, immolatum

in cruce pro homine...

As she closed her eyes, she heard the lovely, secretive song of a strange tongue, flowing like a magical spell...

Kizuna was drawn to the sweet, honey-like resonance.

Is it this way...?

She walked toward the soft voice, which seemed to invite her.

The singing voices came closer...

Suddenly, a bright light shone on Kizuna's closed eyes.

Ah...

Kizuna, surprised at the brightness, cautiously opened her eyes. In front of her

was not a thick forest, but a small meadow, softly illuminated by the early summer sun.

There were people in the middle of the clearing. She squinted to see them better...

The person who sat in the center was a white goddess. A slender, graceful, and beautiful goddess. Her lush black hair fell in waves—she wore a white Greek chiton and a semi-transparent rainbow-colored scarf around her shoulders, with a rattan basket placed on her knees.

The goddess raised the basket high into the sky, and an angel descended.

An angel in a tunic, with golden locks of hair and large white wings on her back, pranced lightly toward the goddess and...gently placed flowers into the basket.

The goddess tenderly stroked the angel's head...

The angel's mouth slightly opened.

Cujus latus

perforatum...

A free, innocent voice sang, softly lingering.

It was that hymn.

Drawn to the song, Kizuna entered the clearing. *Puff*...her foot sank into the thick grass with a strange softness.

Another small angel appeared in front of her.

This angel, with her hair tied in two buns, seemed a little more energetic, and she approached the goddess with a single flower in her hand, ready for offering...

But that angel stopped in her tracks. She noticed Kizuna and greeted her.

“Oh, Kizuna-chan. Great, so you’ve finished clean-up duty! I was worried about you since it was getting a little late. Were you able to find this place without getting lost?”

The friendly angel with glasses and hair buns was none other than Natsume Remon, Kizuna's classmate. She handed a flower to Kizuna.

"Ah! Remon-chan!" Kizuna, surprised, carefully inspected the scene. The beautiful goddess smiling at her was actually St. Lulim's Student Council President, Minamoto Chikaru.

Her long, lush black hair rippled about her, and the large red ribbons, which tied off the braids that draped beside each ear, looked hazy and illusionary under the bright sunlight, like red butterflies...

President Chikaru warmly welcomed Kizuna with a gentle gaze befitting her nickname, the "Holy Mother" of St. Lulim.

"Welcome, Kizuna-chan," Chikaru said softly. "Any later, and I would have become really worried. I'm so relieved. Come join us as we pick more flowers."

There was a thick book beside the basket on Chikaru's lap. The aged yellow page that read "Faceless Devil" flipped over as the leather cover closed.

The angel next to her, singing innocently, was Byakudan Kagome, a St. Lulim first-year student, who smiled happily.

Seeing that cheerful smile pleased Kizuna. She skipped toward the center of the field, because she couldn't wait to join them.

"Here, change into this outfit, my cute little angel," Chikaru suggested gently. She took the paper bag Kizuna was holding, opened it, and pulled out an angel's outfit for Kizuna.

"The Costume Club will dress as angels today. Let's gather lots of flowers to decorate our rooms at the Strawberry Dorms."

Kizuna replied, "Yes, Angel Kizuna will do her best!"

As Kizuna received her angel wings, she grinned and wondered if Chikaru-oneesama had baked a *financier*¹ as a reward for gathering the flowers.

Kizuna's smile was so sweet and delightful, and it made Chikaru blissful. *I want their school, St. Lulim, to shine more brightly.*

For a moment, a secret wish that she had recently begun to think about—and truly desired—resurfaced.

There were three prestigious all-girl schools on Astraea Hill, and every year they held an *Étoile* competition to choose the best students to represent the three schools. One week had passed since the end of the first round. While Spica and Miator had entered strong couple candidates and had fought fiercely in the *Étoile* competition, the apparently unmotivated students at Lulim had made it seem as if they were unaffected by this event, letting yet another peaceful school day pass by.

Of the three schools, Lulim was the youngest and had a laid-back atmosphere, uninterested in sending out a couple that would win the *Étoile* crown for the glory of their school.

In fact, most of the students there just wanted to have a pleasant girls' school life in which to enjoy their various interest clubs.

Even today, Chikaru had invited three of her favorite underclassmen to take part in an activity at the edge of Maiden Park, otherwise known as the "Rear House" of Lulim.

My girls are so adorable... I want them to...

Chikaru, while as content as she could be, still felt an underlying ambition from the past that she had thought was too much to ask for.

An ambition she had secretly fantasized about.

Seeing the smiles of her endearing younger sisters, though...

Well, maybe for my girls' sake, I should...put that plan into action...I suppose.

For Kagome-chan, Kizuna-chan, and Remon-chan... Because I now have the three of you, my new stars, finally...it is probably time to execute a plan I've had on the backburner for such a long time.

A dream I thought would never be fulfilled...until now.

Yes...

Everyone has probably long forgotten, but just like the dark green brilliance of Miator's emerald star, and the silver intensity of Spica's white star...the red, burning passion of Lulim's crimson star also shines...

Everyone must be reminded of this...

Chikaru placed a hand on her heart and closed her eyes.

To the beloved girl with beautiful, crystal-clear eyes, Kusanagi Makoto,

This year, during the month of May, the time for the fresh green leaves of spring has arrived. How have you been, Mako-chan? Things over here remain... chilly, I suppose. Though it has been a while since the new school term began, I am still alone... I still cannot bear the fact that I sincerely feel your absence.

Why did you choose to go to such a cold, distant country like Russia?

I am so...lonely.

Yet another beautiful and pleasant day has passed for the innocent girls living on Astraea Hill. Even though it has only been a few years since that incident, I sometimes ponder about the strangeness of it.

But...maybe it was for the best.

A beautiful memory like that shouldn't be shared by everyone, but rather by a few people, such as you and I, who truly knew her...and it should shine and be cherished in only our hearts.

While she attended school here...she was known as one of the Five Stars of Spica, whose spot was never to be filled again, an unprecedented glory that will stay with her for eternity.

Tsk...I recall your habit of making exaggerated declarations like that, Mako-chan. Maybe I picked up the habit from you?

But...

I have since removed myself from such rigid expressions, reputations, and pride, and transferred to the peaceful Lulim, where I have settled down as the Student Council President, but...

You know what? Mako-chan...if you'd only come back...

I sometimes wonder...what Spica would have become. The reason being...as the windy month of May approaches, Astraea's most popular topic is the Étoile

competition, of course. Had you been here, my strong-willed Mako-chan, you'd probably disregard this as an awful tradition of the all-girl schools, I'm sure—tsk—but in this year's Étoile competition, a new star has appeared.

A new star that would bring a wonderful, new wind to Astraea Hill.

In fact, it isn't just one—there are two stars!

News from Maiden Park crossed the ocean and traveled to the cold, northern country.

Fierce, gusty winds. A continent frozen over almost all year round.

A mosaic of stars shone above the cold Russian winds...

Crumple, crumple, crumple...

Kusanagi Makoto crushed the elegant letter from Chikaru with all her might.

She gripped it as hard as she could, not caring that she wouldn't be able to read the mangled paper ever again...

"I can't allow this to happen!!"

Her unbridled rage caused her fists to tremble. She felt the blood rising to her head.

She couldn't stand it anymore. She rushed to the window and swung the right and left window panels wide open, letting the freezing wind rush in and rustle her hair wildly.

The cold, continental winds of May chilled Makoto's cheeks. From the edge of the window, she glimpsed the thickly thronged Lenin Square in the distance.

Inside Makoto's humble apartment, where she had lived during her entire study abroad, she felt her old passion rekindled almost instantly. She closed her eyes and saw memories, flashing one after another in short clips.

The wonderful times she had spent with her dearly beloved, who was no longer there.

The tensed corners of Makoto's eyes gradually relaxed, but her face hardened like a cold porcelain doll's.

After years of surviving fierce competition and discrimination as a foreign student in Russia's St. Petersburg Music School, Makoto's smile had evolved to become just as horrific as the evil smiles of Alexander the Great and Ivan the Terrible. Her skin was a little lighter than a Caucasian's, and her pale but bright hazel hair was thin and straight, with razor-sharp ends falling over her light gray eyes.

She was small in stature but had well-proportioned limbs—it seemed as if she hadn't fully matured yet. But she had a womanly aura about her: cold and cruel, yet somewhat powerful.

Her eyes gleamed like a conquering emperor, lording over the world, and her thin peach-colored lips, which were delicate but seemed unyielding, finally moved.

"I...need to crush them."

She smirked. "I have to go back."

She clenched Chikaru's letter once more. Her grip almost tore the fragile stationery.

She glanced back at her room. It had been five years since Makoto had graduated from Spica Elementary School at the age of twelve and left to study abroad, so her room definitely reflected her tastes. Delicate antique furniture, black lace curtains, and a small chandelier purchased from the local flea market. Her closet was full of small, black tuxedos, and her cabinet contained several of her favorite violins.

Only those who have experienced life abroad, away from the luxuries of a wealthy home, could understand the starkness of these meager living conditions.

But even so...Makoto had chosen to live like this. She had made her decision after she had lost her beloved, back when she hadn't known any better, vowing to be true to her heart and to achieve her dreams for both herself and the person she had lost, ignoring her parents' objections to this path.

She gazed at the photo placed atop the bedside table.

Under the soft shade of bright young leaves, young Makoto sat on a makeshift swing that hung from a large branch. Pushing her from behind was an older girl, who sort of resembled Makoto but seemed a little gentler. She was quite beautiful, with an endearing smile. The older, slender girl wore the stylish white uniform of Spica—an outfit Makoto had often dreamed she'd wear one day. She was the only gloriously brilliant, beautiful goddess, indomitable in this filthy world.

She shines upon me forever like Apollo, the sun god.

Makoto tried to repress the image—which seemed like a bubble, about to burst.

An image flashed through her mind.

Phaethon, who looked up to his father, Apollo, rode the chariot into the sky but fatally plunged to Earth. She saw herself looking to the sky and being burned, getting too close to the sun.

Eventually, Makoto recalled the content of Chikaru's letter.

Spica is rumored to have a strong chance of winning this year's Étoile competition, because Spica's supposed number-one seed, Otori Amane, the "Prince," is in the running...

Many students from the three schools have predicted the victory of Spica's biggest star in history...

If she succeeds in defeating Miator's strongest candidate, Hanazono Shizuma, who is running in the Étoile competition for an unprecedented second time...she will surely make her mark in Spica's history as the best Étoile ever...

The Spica students seem to place so much hope on her, as if they waited for the Messiah...

But in reality, this self-proclaimed "shy, bashful" star of Spica is rather unmotivated, and we cannot overlook the fact that she openly displays favoritism toward a particular third-year student...

The Five Stars are not allowed to be monopolized by any single person, but as the top star, Otori Amane has abused her status and popularity to openly show her affection for one specific girl, mentioned above...

On top of that, the girl receiving her affection is a new transfer student who just arrived this spring...an average girl with no outstanding traits whatsoever... Because of Amane's desire for a cheap thrill with this new girl, one of the rules of the Étoile competition, which are based on Astraea's long traditions, was "revised" to accommodate this selfish couple...

Amid the excitement surrounding the rule-bending antics and the upcoming second round of the Étoile competition, Spica students who have upheld the traditions of Spica have begun to have deep-rooted concerns...

If Spica isn't careful, the clever sixth-year student, Shizuma—with the help of the crafty Miator Student Council President, Rokujo Miyuki—might claim the crown for Miator instead...

The soft-spoken Chikaru sprinkled her letter with beautiful, eloquent expressions...but Makoto got the gist of the situation.

Though Chikaru mentioned "two new stars of Astraea," she only focused on Spica's star—Makoto didn't think that was a problem.

But in the letter, Chikaru had written about last year's Étoile, Hanazono Shizuma—Makoto had heard her name back in elementary school. A gifted student from a prominent, influential family, who seemed to be infatuated with a rare transfer student who had arrived this spring...and even though sixth-year students like her were supposed to remove themselves from school activities... she had insisted on entering the Étoile competition for the second year in a row...

Makoto didn't care much about the Miator student, because she was obsessed with the situation brewing in Spica.

"I can't believe this..."

How could such a thing occur at St. Spica, the place where her dearly beloved had shone?

At Spica...the valiant and well-ordered St. Spica that Makoto's dearly beloved

had adored...

Makoto really had loved her. She had truly adored and admired the person who had been the reigning star of Spica.

That's why...

It's unforgivable. I can't let a fake star bring down the Spica she loved so dearly...before it gets any worse, I'll just have to...

Makoto pulled open the drawer to take out her passport, as she thought about the ending of Chikaru's letter.

The past several days...I don't know why, but for some reason I sense I'll be seeing you soon, Mako-chan. Even though I know it's not possible, since you still live in Russia.

Perhaps I was just dreaming. But it would give me pleasure if, perchance, you saw the same dream, Mako-chan...

I have enclosed a four-leaf clover, picked from Lulim's secret garden. I must tell you, it required a lot of effort to find it.

I hope the power of this legendary charm will somehow bring us together in our dreams.

I truly want to see your beautiful face once again...

*Your childhood friend who shares the same adoration of her,
Chikaru...*

Ding dong...

At St. Miator, the warning for the first dismissal bell rang.

"Oh no! It's time already..."

At the front of the classroom, Nagisa wiped the aging, cream-colored keys of the organ that stood next to the podium.

Nagisa's ponytail bounced energetically—it matched her bubbly personality—

and her brand new, charcoal-gray school uniform, with its classic and elegant design, rustled noisily.

Four fifteen...only fifteen minutes before the first dismissal bell.

Because Nagisa was not involved in after-school activities, she had to leave school immediately after clean-up duty, or she might not make it back to the Strawberry Dorms in time for the first curfew.

“Listening to all the fun conversations...made me lose track of time,” Nagisa remarked. She scratched her head with the hand that held a dirty rag, leaving a dust bunny caught in her hair.

“Goodness, Nagisa, don’t do that...your head will be filthy.”

Shizuma stood halfway inside the classroom doorway. She took a step closer and reached for Nagisa’s hair.

When Shizuma’s delicate hand brushed the nape of Nagisa’s neck, she shuddered at the sudden, strange sensation, and her neck twitched.

Shizuma made to brush off Nagisa’s hair, but because of Nagisa’s ticklish reaction, her hand stayed on the neck and instinctively moved...

“Kyahahaha!”

This time, Nagisa squirmed and trapped Shizuma’s hand under her chin.

Shizuma found herself amused at this unexpected turn of events...she hadn’t meant to tickle Nagisa, but...she decided to wiggle her fingers, caught between Nagisa’s chin and collar bone...

Tickle, tickle, tickle...

Nagisa responded to Shizuma’s tickles with a “Gyahahaha, eeeek!” and laughed loudly.

She was extremely ticklish.

“Ah, no, please stop, Shizuma-oneesama... I’m very ticklish! I have been since childhood...”

Nagisa, reacting in such an honest and innocent manner, blushed as she giggled, which only urged Shizuma to tease some more...

Shizuma snickered as she continued to tickle Nagisa. “Goodness, Nagisa, I want to let go, but...I can’t move my hand if you keep clamping down on it...”

“Kyaah, it tickles so much...oh no...”

By the time they stopped laughing, they noticed the stares.

Cold stares, from the other students on clean-up duty.

Jealous stares...

When Shizuma came to the fourth-year classroom to invite Nagisa to come to her home in Hokkaido, the other classmates were both nervous and elated to see the number-one star of the school, but at the same time they closely observed them...

Oh no, I did it again...

Nagisa shook her head and tried to remind herself. *I need to get used to this treatment when I’m with Shizuma-oneesama...*

About three weeks ago, after the first round of the *Étoile* competition had concluded in early May, Nagisa had made a decision...because during the first half of the first round, the *cadette* event, she had uncovered Shizuma’s shocking past.

Shizuma used to have a “younger sister,” whom she had truly loved. Her name had been Sakuragi Kaori—she had been a very beautiful girl—and she and Shizuma had been a perfect couple, accepted by everyone, but Shizuma had had to bid her a painful, eternal farewell.

Last year, Shizuma had claimed the *Étoile* crown just for her...

Nagisa felt that she didn’t have the right to stand next to Shizuma and participate in the *Étoile* competition... During the second half of the first round, the *aînée* event, she had wanted to disappear. When the round, the first of three in the *Étoile* competition, was about to conclude, Nagisa had wanted to withdraw from the competition, but Shizuma somehow had convinced her to stay...and had swept her away.

She had cried and embraced Nagisa. And after the event ended, Nagisa had discovered Shizuma’s true feelings. Once she understood Shizuma’s loneliness...

and her emotional scars...Nagisa, who didn't have much to offer, wanted to help Shizuma any way she could.

For Hanazono Shizuma, the proud star who had lost her most beloved.

Shizuma's most beloved younger sister in the past... It was agonizing to think about, so Nagisa vowed not to dwell on it.

She recalled what Tamao, her classmate and best friend, had said to her.

"Shizuma only seems at peace when she's with you... Shizuma-sama might just be flirting with you, though, so you can't be so serious about it..."

"After all, how often do you get the chance to partner with the school's number-one star—much less a person coming from one of Japan's most influential families? You should take this opportunity to have the experience of a lifetime and enjoy the Étoile competition for all it's worth."

Nagisa remembered Tamao-chan's calmness and lighthearted smile and felt relieved.

Okay, Tamao-chan...I'll go for it!

Nagisa reaffirmed her decision. After the *aînée* event, Nagisa hadn't had the heart to tell Tamao what Shizuma had revealed to her. She knew she shouldn't be the one to tell Tamao about Shizuma's deep sorrow and loneliness.

But Tamao had said something that rang a bell with Nagisa.

"Shizuma-sama definitely likes your happy-go-lucky attitude."

Nagisa said to herself, *If there's one thing I'm confident of, it's being cheerful... right? Even at my previous school my classmates said my most outstanding trait was being cheerful...*

So I shouldn't be depressed like this any longer. I need to bring Shizuma-sama's spirits up...

Collecting herself, Nagisa hopped around and spun toward Shizuma.

"But Shizuma-oneesama! Your home has a ranch so big that horses can run around? Wow! But I didn't know your home was in Hokkaido, Shizuma-

oneesama... With your family so far away, you must be quite lonely...ah, maybe the reason you like to have cute girls around you is to cover your loneliness or something.”

Shizuma was taken aback by Nagisa’s babbling. She just stared back. “Oh, Nagisa-chan, I have several ranches. The home in Hokkaido is just one of them...”

“No, don’t hide your feelings! I just...” Nagisa choked on her words.

Worried, Shizuma tried to peer into Nagisa’s face, but Nagisa blocked her with one hand.

“You came all by yourself from Hokkaido, so far away...you must have been really lonely. To tell you the truth, I was worried when I was told I was transferring to Miator. I didn’t know if I could handle living in a dormitory...um, but Shizuma-oneesama pulled me into one thing after another, so I never had a chance to feel homesick... Ahahaha,” Nagisa laughed in embarrassment.

Nagisa suddenly became serious and peered into Shizuma’s face for a closer look.

“Shizuma-oneesama, you’ve attended Miator ever since kindergarten, right?”

Shizuma was unusually surprised and over-whelmed by Nagisa’s intensity. “Y-Yes...that’s correct.” *What is my adorable little Nagisa up to now?*

Nagisa’s large eyes grew even larger, and she stared at Shizuma. “Shizuma-oneesama, I feel so sorry for you...”

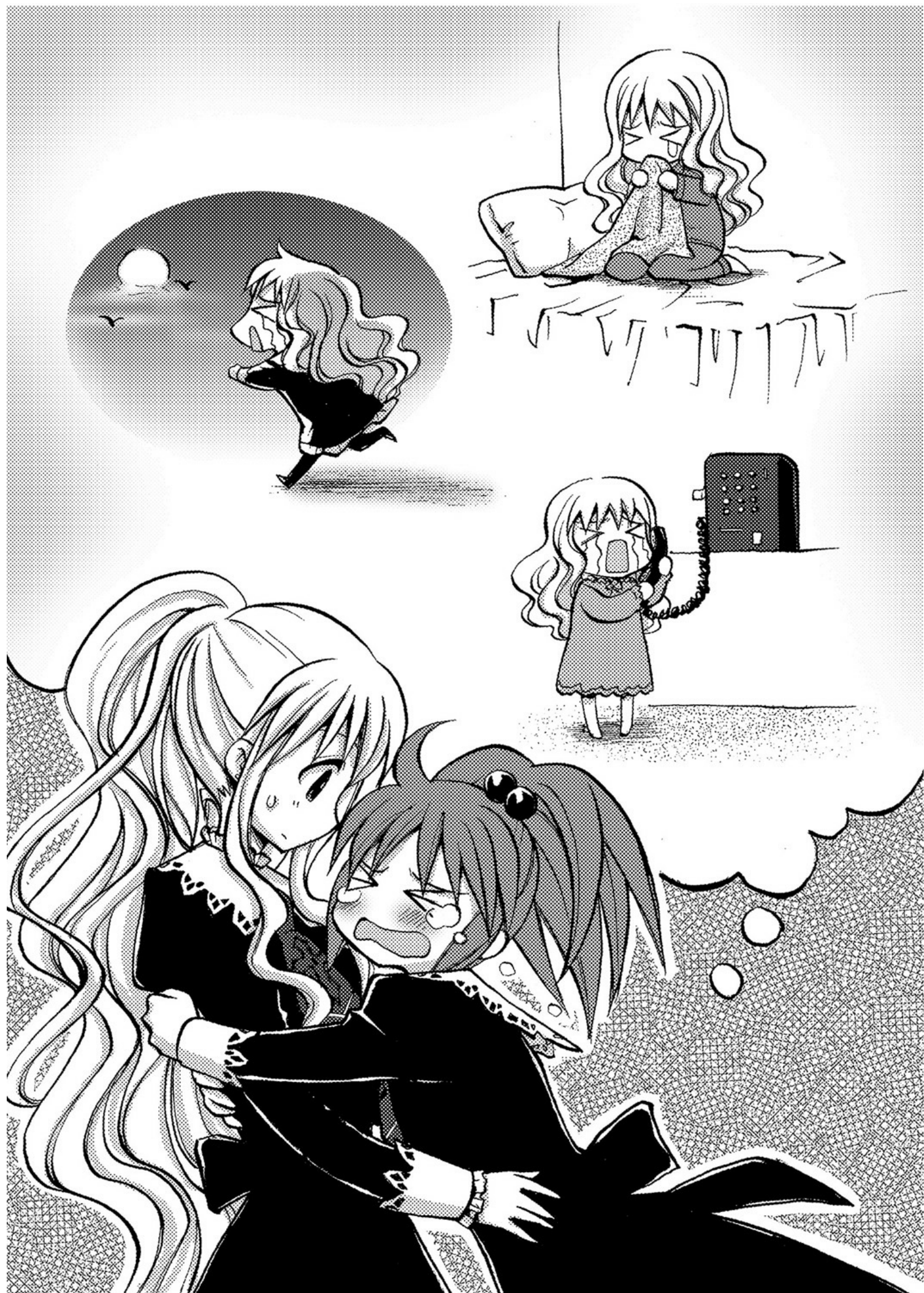
A small tear rolled out of Nagisa’s eyes. She hastily rubbed it away.

“You’ve endured so much since kindergarten, being really far apart from your mother and living all alone in the Strawberry Dorms...”

The world of *A Little Princess* came to Nagisa’s mind, and she imagined Shizuma as the character from the book.

Images of little Shizuma flashed one after another. Little Shizuma unable to sleep alone in her room, crying. Little Shizuma running toward the sunset because she missed her mother so much. Little Shizuma on the phone in tears as she talked with her mother...

“Nagisa...”



Shizuma was stunned by Nagisa's reaction, and was about to explain that her home in Hokkaido was just a vacation home, that her real home was only an hour away, and she visited her family at least once a month...but she couldn't.

What a kind-hearted girl...

Her heart felt so warm and fuzzy, and she slowly cradled Nagisa in her arms.

Most of the students here, including me, are used to this lifestyle, so as a new transfer student, you're probably more homesick than we are, Nagisa.

"Nagisa..." Shizuma said, as she raised Nagisa's face. She looked into Nagisa's tear-filled eyes and thought, *Oh, I messed up. Instead of inviting her for horseback riding at my home in Hokkaido, I should have asked her to visit a castle in Ireland or something. That way, Nagisa would have become even more flustered and cried out, "Oh, Shizuma-oneesama, I feel so sorry you're so far away from your homeland," or something like that...*

Wicked thoughts crossed Shizuma's mind as she placed a finger under Nagisa's chin.

This maneuver was quite natural for Shizuma, who was experienced with girls... Her face approached Nagisa's...and she planted her lips on Nagisa's forehead.

"Err, I don't mean to rain on your party...but may I interrupt for just a moment?"

"Ah... Aaaaaaah!" Nagisa cried out.

Shizuma and Nagisa were blocking the doorway. Beside them stood a girl, her black hair bobbed, the bladelike ends slightly swaying... Rokujo Miyuki, the extremely intelligent Student Council President of Miator. She hugged a large, black attendance roster book and leather folder to her chest.

Nagisa hastily pulled away from Shizuma and used her hands to wave off the puff of peach-colored sigh that Shizuma had left behind in the air.

Then they realized...all the other students in the classroom had left.

Miyuki's comment was cold. "Whatever drove you to flirt with her, even though she is..." She gave a sideways glance at Nagisa. "Even though she is a

rather plain transfer student, I believe you lack grace with such behavior, Shizuma-sama...”

Nagisa flapped her mouth, as if trying to apologize silently... *Oh no, I'm sorry for looking down...*

She noticed a different shadow arrive from behind her, and cautiously looked up to see...

“Ah, Tamao-chan...”

Tamao was a beautiful girl who was mature and calm for her age, with long, bluish-tinted hair tied up in a ballet bun, revealing her amazingly white and beautiful neck.

Tamao stood behind Miyuki and chuckled silently.

Shizuma caught Tamao's movement out of the corner of her eye and replied, “Oh, I don't believe so, because one of the great things about being with Nagisa-chan is the openness of our relationship.”

Shizuma stood before Miyuki, fully poised, and smiled in a way that was different than when she was alone with Nagisa...an expression that was somewhat cold and conceited. She looked down at Miyuki.

Nagisa noticed Shizuma-oneesama's eyes had a tendency to tighten at the corners a bit when she was around people other than herself.

Miyuki didn't flinch. “Tsk...well, I suppose I can overlook this today, because soon you won't be able to share intimate moments with her quite as freely...so please enjoy it while you can...”

“What do you mean by that?” Shizuma snapped.

Miyuki was pleased to have evoked such a harsh reaction. She smiled and lowered her eyes. “I cannot say it here... But if all of you are available for a bit... will you please follow me?”

Nagisa just stood there, gaping, and Tamao, amused at the sight, muffled her laughter. Shizuma just frowned in discontent.

While the uncomfortable meeting between last year's *Étoile*, the Student Council President, and the two girls ensued...

"Okay, is the hat tipped at the right angle?"

"Yup. Put that pipe in your mouth, and you're all set!"

"Let Mr. Teddy Bear join us, too..."

Inside one of the rooms at St. Lulim's Club Building. The Student Council President—or more accurately, the Costume Club President—Minamoto Chikaru, was in the center, with Kizuna, Remon, and Kagome surrounding her, excited.

They were changing into their outfits.

Clothes were strewn about the club room. On the sewing table lay a beige, caped trench coat with a Burberry checked lining, a large, glossy pipe, and the distinctive deer-stalker cap... Today's transformation theme was "Famous Detective."

Kizuna assisted Kagome, fumbling with her blouse buttons. Byakudan Kagome, a first-year student, was the smallest of the four, with her hair in spiral curls like a French doll—a distinctive feature not commonly found among St. Lulim students. For some reason, she was really fond of Kizuna and tagged along...and naturally, she had become a member of the Costume Club. Kagome looked really great in silky blouses with large frills.

"Okay, once you tie this ribbon, you're all set!" Kizuna said, but Kagome tilted her head to the side and muttered, "I don't know how to...tie a ribbon."

"Oh, of course...*I figured so*," Kizuna mumbled. She picked up a small ribbon from the table. "Shall I tie it on for you?"

Kagome responded with a smile, which in turn made Kizuna smile too.

Their exchange of smiles brightened the room like a warm spring day.

Next to the two girls... "I wonder...were there eyeglasses during the time of

Sherlock Holmes?”

Remon, sweating slightly, wore the coat and cap and fiddled with her glasses. The stems of the glasses didn't seem to fit inside the deer-stalker cap.

Watching Remon, Kizuna exclaimed, “What, so Holmes is a *real* person?!”

Chikaru clapped her hands, “Okay, no more talking! Those who are ready to play out their roles, please line up here.”

“Okay!” The three girls lined up.

“Well then, are you ready? My cute Kizuna ‘Holmes,’ Remon ‘Watson,’ and... my little Kagome ‘Mrs. Hudson.’ You girls have a secret mission to accomplish!”

Chikaru smiled gently. “Soon, a little prince will arrive in Spica. She is sad and lonely, but nonetheless is a pure-hearted and very cute prince. The three of you will help the prince...”

Chikaru stopped in mid-sentence and gave a teasing wink.

Back in Spica...

“She’s so snobby because Prince Amane likes her...”

“Shh...she can hear us, you know...”

The bitter criticisms could be heard from afar.

Konohana Hikari leaned on the window ledge and looked at the sky outside. When she heard the wisecracks, her back twitched a bit, but she didn't have the courage to turn and face the gossipers. Her facial expressions indicated her worsening insecurity, and she hunched her small, fragile shoulders even more.

She tried to ignore their comments as she looked to the sky. Her hair swirled about her shoulders, creating soft shadows on her white uniform.

Sigh... Hikari sighed in her heart.

White clouds slowly drifted across the vast blue sky above Astraea Hill. The green grass below billowed violently in the wind, almost to the point of snapping in half.

The air was damp. Maybe a storm was approaching...the rainy season would arrive soon.

The deep inner part of Hikari's nose suddenly became hot, and tears formed in her eyes. Teardrops rolled down her cheeks. She was ashamed of herself.

Before anyone noticed, Hikari wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

I can't...I can't cry over things like this...

She tensed her stomach.

I am allowed to be with Amane-sama. I can't cry over things like this...I need to be strong. I have to do my best for Amane-sama. Amane smiled and said, "I didn't want to enter the Étoile competition, but I can bear through it as long as I'm with you, Hikari..."

There's nothing special about me, but the least I can do is not be a burden for Amane-oneesama.

So, I can't cry over things like this...

The caustic remarks behind her back escalated.

"She doesn't realize how much trouble she's causing Amane-sama... Because of her, Spica is split between the Student Council followers, who have allowed Amane-sama's favoritism, and those who oppose the Student Council's decision...it's split the school in half! She's the reason behind the loss of Spica's unity..."

Ohh... Hikari couldn't hold back anymore. The tears trickled down uncontrollably.

Gadunk...

As Hikari began to cry...Nanto Yaya, who had watched Hikari the whole time, rose from her chair at the back of the room. Yaya's long, straight hair swayed, and underneath her sharp, jagged bangs, which hung down to the middle of her forehead, her eyes were full of determination.

"Hikari..." Yaya's tight uniform squeaked across her chest as she reached out

to place her hand on Hikari's back.

Yaya had mixed feelings.

She was definitely fond of Hikari. Ever since she had first laid eyes on her, she had known that Hikari was her type. She was cute like an angel, innocent and naïve, and of course shy but honest. On top of that, Hikari liked anything and everything beautiful, like paintings, sculptures, even interior decorations...which revealed a bit of Hikari's self-absorbed nature. There were times when timid Hikari acted out in bursts of unpredictable and outrageous behavior.

She was perfect in every way.

Hikari was Yaya's favorite type, period. Yaya wished she could pamper Hikari.

But she didn't want to protect Hikari. Not like Amane, the silent prince.

In Yaya's mind, Hikari didn't need any protection, since she had the inner strength to shine on her own. In contrast to herself, who had no doubts about her way of life, and lived it the way she wanted to...Hikari had a brilliant radiance and was quite precious.

Yaya believed the way she felt toward Hikari was indeed friendship. But somehow it didn't seem like a friendship...it just didn't sit right with her.

Somewhere in her heart, Yaya wanted Hikari's body and soul all to herself.

She enjoyed holding Hikari's hand as they walked. But in reality Yaya yearned for something more intimate. She wasn't satisfied with the casual physical contact gained from holding hands.

She wanted something more from Hikari...a more basic and instinctive desire to have somebody as her own.

Yaya knew Hikari's body had many hidden attributes, and she wanted to feel every inch of her body, to touch her...and to explore each other's bodies.

Ohh, I just want to tear everything apart and melt away with Hikari.

Yaya's desire was to connect deeply with the other girl...

Maybe...I should've been born a man.

Yaya sneered at herself. *If I was a man, I'd force myself onto her...and take*

Hikari once and for all. But of course I wouldn't dare say that to Hikari...

Even if I said it, I probably wouldn't act on it anyway.

Yaya's mouth went bitter with those thoughts, and she called out to Hikari once again.

"Hikari, don't stand there alone. Come here..."

Suddenly...*rattle rattle rattle...*

The classroom door slid open, and Yaya's voice was drowned out by its sound.

The whole class fell into silence at the sight of the person at the door. Yaya's hand stopped in mid-air.

"Hikari!"

When one visited a different classroom, the school custom was to announce your name and state the purpose of your visit to the student closest to the door...but the person at the door didn't bother to follow that rule. She just barged in and called out to Hikari.

The voice of St. Spica's tall, short-haired prince, Otori Amare, pierced the classroom, stopping everyone in their tracks. The reaction of the students in the class was a mixture of excitement and surprise.

The heroine of the scene, Konohana Hikari, spun around as she dried her tears. "Amare-sama!"

Hikari scampered across the room to greet Amare. The two of them rushed out of the room together and disappeared down the hallway.

The door slid back weakly.

As soon as it closed, the class erupted.

"What was *that* all about...?"

...Oh well. Yaya sighed to herself. Hikari takes all the heat, because Amare-oneesama is so boorish...

Yaya couldn't do anything about it but sigh.

Though Amare claimed to have no interest in girls, she somehow felt so

hopelessly attracted to Hikari. Yaya had a vague understanding of Amane's unexplainable feelings.

The couple acted like a boy and girl, attracted to each other, but didn't understand the true meaning of love.

Amane-oneesama is probably in constant suspense, watching frail little Hikari being so cute and tantalizing... She probably feels she must protect Hikari.

But Yaya didn't want to meddle in their affairs. She could have easily given advice—based on her own torrid affairs with girls—on how to avoid friction with other students.

The reason she refrained from giving advice was not because Amane was a superstar or an upperclassman. Whether Yaya realized it or not, her feelings held worry and anticipation intermixed...

Hikari and Amane were leaning precariously over a dangerous ledge, and they would either walk toward a happy ending or end in a painful breakup. Yaya wanted them to travel the natural course of fate and didn't want to alter it with her advice.

Amidst the flurry of excitement still buzzing in the classroom, Yaya walked to the window where Hikari had stood moments ago. And just like Hikari, she looked to the sky.

Thin gray clouds steadily drifted across the sky like muddy streams.

Envisioning Hikari looking to the sky and having obsessive thoughts of Amane tortured Yaya's heart.

"Oh well, what can I do now...?" Yaya murmured, while a bird—a pure white dove—flew across the dewy sky.

The dove flew in a gentle curve to the west and disappeared toward St. Lulim's School.

Marks of dried tears remained on Hikari's cheeks. Amane was brimming with anger when she saw Hikari's predicament, and she vented her frustrations. "I'll explain to everyone that you entered the *Étoile* competition just for me, Hikari,"

she blurted as they walked down the hall.

“I-It’s okay... If you did that, Amane-sama, then I would only cause...”

...Amane-sama to have more pain.

Hikari couldn’t finish the sentence, because she was too afraid...

Unfortunately, Amane misread Hikari’s silence. “Yeah...I understand. If I said that, then it would cause you even more trouble, right?”

Amane laughed...but she looked a bit sad. *I wish she’d depend on me more.*

“I’m sorry, Hikari. It’s all my fault. I can’t even help you at a time like this...”

Hikari saw Amane’s troubled look and didn’t know what to say next. “N-No... It’s my fault, because I’m such a coward.” She looked at Amane with eyes still moist from tears. “I’ve come to realize that maybe I don’t fit in at...at this school. I haven’t been able to keep up with Spica’s customs...and I sometimes feel like I should just vanish or something... It’s quite embarrassing, but I admit there are times when I’ve wanted to run away from it all...so I wouldn’t have to go through all this grief...”

She recalled the painful incident in the classroom just a few minutes ago. What Hikari had actually meant to say was “*with Amane-sama*” instead of “*at this school.*”

“But...if I did that...” Hikari’s voice shook. “If I did that...then I’d never...”

She tried to hold back her tears again. She didn’t want to be a crybaby in front of Amane. She bit her tiny lips as hard as she could, and looked off to the side to avoid showing her tear-filled eyes.

“I thought I’d never...see you again, so...”

Hearing Hikari’s quivering little voice was so enthralling, Amane curled her arms around Hikari’s shoulders.

*Squeeze...*the tight, form-fitting Spica uniform wrinkled at the shoulders.

At the same time, Hikari’s heart was also squeezed tightly. “A-Amane-sama...”

Amane brought her lips close to Hikari’s ear as she whispered in the sweetest, gentlest voice, “Hikari, please feel better.”

Her hair brushed Hikari's ear. "And...please be with me forever."

A light, peach-colored mist dizzily formed above Hikari's head. Amane chuckled in pleasure as she continued, "You know, Hikari, what a strange coincidence. I had the same thoughts run through my mind a while back. I also thought that maybe I didn't fit in at this school at all...and I wanted to run away from here once and for all..."

Amane remembered when she had begun to be called the "Prince" of Spica.

She hadn't received much attention during elementary school. But once she'd made it into junior high, the students had begun to treat her like a star. The shy and bashful Amane had felt really uncomfortable with the sudden attention.

The presents and love letters Amane had received only added pain to her grief, since she had just wanted to be left alone. Longing for a peaceful school life, she had often thought of transferring to a different school.

Amane could laugh about it now...because it had happened so long ago.

Her face lightened as she chuckled and thought, *Oh, when did I get over those feelings anyway...? Did I overcome this depression...when I met Hikari?*

Hikari, unable to believe that Amane had had a similar depressing situation, stared back at her, though it was still a sidelong look. "You felt helpless too, Amane-sama?"

"Yes, I did. I wanted to run away so many times from this restrictive hill full of girls. So I was just like you, Hikari." Amane smiled. "Well, let's go..."

Amane led Hikari down the hall.

She was looking for a place outside to be alone with Hikari.

Chapter 2

On Festival Night, the Omen of a Misfortune Avoids a Red Sign and Jumps

Despite the adverse conditions that surrounded Amane and Hikari, their love for each other deepened at Spica...and in the classroom on the top floor of the school, which overlooked the spacious Maiden Park, the students discussed the future of the couple.

The brilliant white star of Spica shone as bright young minds gathered in this room...known as the Student Council room.

“I told you so! If you had entered me in the *Étoile* competition, none of this would’ve happened!! But...instead that *little girl* is partnered with *my* Amane-sama...grr!”

Cough cough cough...

Kenjo Kaname got so excited, she violently choked on her own words.

Long limbs extended from Kaname’s tan, fit figure. She looked rather masculine, and her brutish mannerisms and attitude, coupled with a lack of feminine qualities, only emphasized her macho demeanor.

“Oh please, Kaname, just chill out.” Kiyashiki Momomi, who sat next to Kaname, offered her a cup of tea.

Coughing, Kaname dumped the tea down her throat in one gulp...

“Ack! W-W-What is this stuff...?”

“Oh, do you like it? I’ve been drinking *dokudami cha*² these days.”

“*Dokudami*...?”

“It’s good for health and beauty.”

“How lame! I don’t need a weird tea to improve my health or beauty! The

only person in the world who doesn't think I'm beautiful is probably Amane-sama anyway...don't get me off track now!"

"Aww, I just wanted to soothe your throat because you yelled so much, Kaname-chan."

"Enough! Anyway, I think we got ourselves into this mess because the Student Council is so half-assed."

"Gee, you're such a party-pooper, Kaname." In response to Kaname's raised fists, Momomi gave back a very fake smile with her non-Japanese facial features and mumbled something to the panda on her folding fan.

"Kenjo-san, this matter has been settled already!" Spica's Student Council President, Tomori Shion, pounded the table as she stood, but her eyes seemed dark and gloomy from fatigue.

The other students who sat at the large triangular table fell silent. Shion's slim body seemed thinner than usual. Her long, chestnut hair framed her prominent cheeks, which lacked their normal, intellectual sharpness. Even her chiseled chin seemed recessed and pointier than usual.

The table still vibrated from the impact. White papers slid out of a black envelope, and a folder glided out of a clear plastic portfolio, scattering across the table.

Kaname viciously eyed the black envelope, and so did Shion, looking at it with cold, hollow eyes.

Kaname huffed and calmly sat back down. Though she seemed to have been put back in her place, she spoke again as her reflected silhouette filled the crystal glass wall behind her.

"Shion, you might be acting high and mighty because you're known as Spica's intellectual Snow Queen and Student Council President, but maybe you were careless about this one. I can't believe you didn't choose me, a sure-fire winner, but instead chose a pathetic newcomer—a third-year transfer student who only arrived at Spica last fall—to enter into the *Étoile* competition as Amane-sama's partner. And taking advantage of our weak entry, Miator unexpectedly entered last year's *Étoile* for this year's contest, to compete for a second time!

“Well, they’ve got their problems too, and at least Amane-sama managed to win the first round, just barely. But knowing how Shizuma-sama hates to lose, she’ll strive to win the second round to regain her pride. Spica is split between the supporters and non-supporters of Amane-sama’s partner. And Amane-sama probably isn’t even aware of the concerns of the Spica students! Argh, I hate to say this, but Amane-sama has lost her senses, chasing after that transfer student!

“Humph. You know, the Miator Student Council President—the Princess of Rokujo-in—probably schemed this whole plot from the beginning!” Kaname scowled.

“Kaname-oneesama, your comments are a bit too harsh,” Okuwaka Tsubomi, a first-year student and Student Council Secretary, remarked cautiously, mustering all her courage to do so.

“Well, I knew this would happen! I was against this from the start, but the Student Council President supported Amane-sama’s stance and forced us to...”

Momomi cut in with a small voice. “But Kaname, you eventually agreed to the idea because you didn’t want Amane-sama to hate you, right?”

“Wha—? N-No, you’re wrong, Momomi! I agreed for the benefit of Spica!” Kaname was flabbergasted, her face red.

Tsubomi interjected again, “A-Anyway, Kaname-oneesama! Spica did win the first round, so please don’t attack President Shion so harshly.” Tsubomi wore a headband, which neatly gathered her long, peach-colored hair. She tilted her head and eyes toward Shion.

Shion, lost in her thoughts, stared intently at the scattered documents on the table. Kaname sensed Shion’s dilemma and finally zipped her lips. Everyone else at the table re-examined the opened documents.

On the black envelope, the addressee’s name was written in silver.

To All Spica Students

The contents of the letter explained at great length the writers’ dissatisfaction regarding the proceedings of the *Étoile* competition and concluded in an angry and almost threatening manner.

...Who is responsible for depriving Spica of the sure victory, which was supposed to be claimed with a flawless plan and Prince Amane's participation, but has instead resulted in such a mess?

We believe that all Spica students, including ourselves, have long awaited the day when Amane-sama would become a fifth-year student and enter the Étoile competition.

We cannot accept the fact that Amane-sama was forced to partner not with any of the Five Stars on campus, but rather an unknown, less-than-reputable girl...we can only imagine the tribulations of Amane-sama, having to deal with such a lame duck dragging her down, and Spica students will surely lament our star's dire predicament.

In fact, in order to give the new transfer student an advantage, a new rule, that worked against currently attending students, was forcefully established, causing the other schools to raise suspicions of foul play, and as a result we have utterly insulted St. Miator, our longstanding rival, by our lack of fairness.

The truth is, no matter what the obstacle may be, the invincible Amane-sama would have surely claimed victory. But because of poor, unnecessary decisions, resulting in an unfair advantage, Amane-sama's reputation has been marred...a truly unforgivable act.

The longstanding dream of regaining the Étoile crown brought all of the Spica students together, but these recent disturbances are great sins which have divided the unity of our students. The blunders of the Spica Student Council are much too obvious.

Be prepared to receive God's judgment.

May the wrath of God punish all of you for the arrogant sins you have committed...for you are all in the twisted Tower of Babel, about to fall to its doom.

Pheew... Shion sighed. She smiled self-mockingly and reached for the file next to the letter. She was apathetic as she flipped the pink plastic cover of the

report file open.

Sponsored by the Spica Student Council

Étoile Competition Round 2:

Love Ordeal (*L'Épreuve d'amour*)

Event: Astraea Cup

The Astraea Cup—a small tennis tournament held between *Étoile* contestants.

This sport, which had originated in ancient Egypt and had later been known as the French nobles' sport, was often selected as a competition event because it required fairness and teamwork between partners.

The tennis tournament was the second-round *cadette* event. The rules went on for several pages and ended with the tournament chart.

It was a doubles tournament. The nine couples that had survived the first round were listed in the tournament brackets.

The last couple listed on the chart was not placed in any of the brackets.

Exempt—will proceed to the third round:

St. Spica Girls' Institute

Otori Amane, Fifth Year, Class Trois

Konohana Hikari, Third Year, Class Un

Tap tap tap... Shion's forefinger tapped on the couple's names.

"You know...this was the result of the drawing, fair and square..." Shion muttered.

Tsubomi stood up again in excitement. "Absolutely! I'm the one who made

the drawing box and made sure there was no cheating involved when choosing the ticket! Besides, there were nine couples, so everyone knew one couple would be exempt from this round! When the ticket I chose last was Amane-sama, I was ecstatic to know that Amane-sama was not only beautiful and strong, but also had good fortune on her side...”

Momomi walked to the end of the room—where Tsubomi and the other underclassmen sat—and placed a hand on Tsubomi’s shoulder...

“Yes...we know that, Tsubomi-chan. But unfortunately, they’re not upset about that. The Spica Student Council is under suspicion for conducting the first round of the contest unfairly, and then Amane-sama’s couple ends up being exempt from the second round, based on Spica’s Student Council’s selection method...”

“Basically, people think it’s fishy the Spica Student Council did the drawing in secret, inside the room, rather than doing it out in the open. Do you get it, little girl?” Kaname interjected—deliberately cutting off Momomi. She pulled out a red rose and used it to indicate the black envelope.

“No matter how fair the selection was, if the result is this, then the skeptics will see everything as very black and very wrong. Especially with Amane-sama, who is seen as an impeccable prince on a white horse who can do no wrong. Suspicions swirl around her more than ever, so the blame easily flies towards scoundrels like us at the Student Council.”

Kaname eloquently pronounced “scoundrels” with a thick, heavy French accent.

“That’s why I should have been her partner...”

“No, the Student Council is not made up of scoundrels—no, no—you’re the only scoundrel here, Kaname-oneesama!” Tsubomi retorted.

“Wh-What!?” Kaname roared.

“Pfft, how true...” Momomi chortled. “You lost this one, Kaname-chan.” Smiling at Tsubomi, she eyed Kaname.

Please shut up already... Momomi thought. “So...Shion-chan.” She turned back toward the head of the table, where the Student Council President sat.

Momomi faced Shion squarely and asked in an unusually calm but serious manner, “Well, President Tomori—since you are called our Snow Queen—I assume you’ve devised a plan to get Spica out of this crisis? Will you please... share your thoughts with us?”

The room went quiet...again.

Shion, who until then had been flipping through the files silently, smirked. No one could tell whether her smile indicated certain victory or was just another self-mocking gesture. She responded to Momomi’s question with a chilly laugh.

“My thoughts...? I don’t have any...and even if I did, I assume nobody would care to listen to them...”

She glanced at Kaname.

Kaname felt awkward. “I didn’t mean it that way...”

But before the talkative Kaname could blabber on, Shion continued, “If...I have everyone’s trust and confidence...I might have a way to get Spica out of this crisis. But...this will definitely go against our Student Council’s policy to fully support Prince Amane—a total 180-degree turn.”

She looked at the file she was holding and bit her lip—full of regret.

“If everyone here is interested, I will introduce the person who brought this plan to me...”

She spoke slowly, articulating every word, as if she hated the words coming out of her mouth.

And outside the room...

Tnk tnk tnk tnk...

The top floor of St. Spica’s resembled an office building, full of white walls, glass, and steel—and the sound of graceful footsteps, echoing on the white marble floor.

The footsteps grew louder as they approached...

The silent Student Council room...

Creak...

One side of the large double doors opened.

“Oh my...everyone is here...”

Outside the open door, smiling...was St. Lulim’s Student Council President, Minamoto Chikaru.

“We were waiting for you, Lulim Student Council President...please, come in.” Shion looked defeated as she offered the chair next to her...to Chikaru.

A warm puff of air.

Warm steam rose, carrying the strong aroma of the thick and smooth Assam tea.

“Today I prepared the Assam Tiger tea with lots of golden tips!”

Chiyo, wearing an apron full of frills, offered the tea to the assembled girls. She had been assigned to Tamao and Nagisa’s room the previous week—as a room assistant. Room assistants were a tradition at the school: a first-year student would be assigned to a room of upperclassmen, where she was supposed to serve tea and assist with cleaning. Chiyo was always tagging along with the two girls, so Miyuki had caught her and strong-armed her into becoming the pair’s room assistant.

“Would you like some milk?” Chiyo’s cheeks flushed as she held the warm pot of milk, because she was delighted at this unusual gathering. There were five teacups on the round table.

“Just a little...” said Tamao.

“Yeah, I want lots of milk!” said Nagisa.

“I’ll have some,” said Miyuki.

“I...don’t need any,” Shizuma said.

Everyone stopped at that last piercing comment.

“Wh-What?” Hanazono Shizuma blurted, surprised as everyone looked at her. She received a barrage of protests.

“But...this is Assam tea?!”

“And because it’s served as afternoon tea, you’re supposed to have milk in it...”

“I cannot believe that you’d ignore our tea customs...”

But between the objections...

“Um, is it really...really...strange not to have milk in this tea...?” Nagisa inquired.

“Ahahaha... Oh, Nagisa...” Shizuma chuckled, feeling quite relieved and refreshed at last.

“Well, these girls are...how should I say this? Basically, they have very rigid, conservative mindsets. Assam tea must have milk in it, Earl Grey tea must be served as iced tea, and Darjeeling tea must be straight...it’s a ridiculous rule, really.”

“*Sigh*...so tea has all these rules... I didn’t know, since we only ever had teabags at home...eheheh.”

As Nagisa rubbed her head in embarrassment, Shizuma hugged her around the shoulders, looked at everyone, and stated proudly, “Goodness, Nagisa, you don’t need to conform to these standards—there’s nothing wrong with drinking straight Assam tea. We won’t get punished for that, will we? You should be able to drink it any way you’d like. And live your life any way you’d like...”

Other students looked toward Shizuma as her voice became unexpectedly high-pitched.

Roughly a third of the lounge located in Miator’s section of the Strawberry Dorms was occupied by students who had returned before the first dismissal bell and were enjoying conversations over afternoon tea.

A dark green—Miator green—carpet, with small star emblems scattered about, covered the floor. Small one-person and large three-person silver-gray couches were randomly placed throughout the room, and the warm afternoon sunlight softly illuminated the lounge, creating a relaxing atmosphere.

Behind the mantelpiece in the center was a large unused hearth, which was

decorated with many enormous Chinese peonies almost at full bloom. The tables were adorned with seasonal flowers—small roses—which added to the serene ambiance for the students enjoying their afternoon tea.

“Shizuma-sama...” Miyuki requested quietly.

“I know...” Shizuma lowered her voice.

“You garner a lot of attention, especially since you won last year’s *Étoile* competition, so you must be more careful...”

“I get it already!”

“No...I don’t think you fully understand. Please...”

Miyuki flicked a sidelong glance at Nagisa, which stopped Shizuma.

Garnering too much attention is not good, for Nagisa’s sake was what Miyuki must have been thinking, and Shizuma was forced to nod in agreement.

Chiyo sensed a bit of tension in the conversation, so she offered Shizuma another cup of tea. She was very attentive and good at reading between the lines. The tea she offered was a hot cup of Assam tea—served straight. It went well with the thick slice of banana cake she also offered.

Shizuma beamed as she thanked Chiyo.

Chiyo was stunned by Shizuma’s refined, beautiful smile—and suddenly became nervous at Shizuma’s overwhelming power. As she served tea to the other three—Miyuki, Nagisa, and Tamao—the china clanked slightly.

*Phew...*the warm tea made the girls relax.

“Well, may I begin?” Miyuki said, her voice calm. “I would like to explain something today. After seeing the results of the first round of the *Étoile* competition, I’ve thought of a few things...” Like a dealer in a casino about to challenge a professional gambler, she stared intently at the other girls as she spoke about the commotion at Spica.

Nagisa thought back over the events as they were being explained. She recalled meeting Hikari during the first-round *aînée* event, known as the Maiden Horse Race.

During the event, the other *cadette* candidates had been jealous of Hikari and had almost pushed her off the tower. Nagisa had assumed that the other candidates' jealousy had been born from their desire to win the *Étoile* competition—but she had been wrong.

It's so tough to go out with a very popular person...

She started to hunch her shoulders, but she stopped herself.

Oh gosh, what am I thinking...girls don't "go out" with each other! She'd thought she had become numb to this strange subject...and she scratched her nose in dismay.

But...I wonder...how is Hikari doing these days? I haven't seen her since that event... I hope she's doing well with her upperclassman, the handsome prince. Hikari was so eager and cute...and was a perfect match for the prince.

Nagisa smiled, lost in her thoughts.

"Um...there are more things to be worried about than other people's troubles, Aoi-san," Miyuki cut in coldly. "This directly involves you, of course..." She glared at Shizuma and Nagisa.

"Oh, what do you mean by that?" Shizuma mumbled, acting as if she were absorbed in busily eating her banana cake.

"Stop pretending that you don't know," Miyuki said. "While Otori Amane is Spica's most revered, number-one Prince...Shizuma-oneesama is St. Miator's Queen..."

She looked straight at Nagisa. "And you, the new transfer student? Though it may be one of the Queen's short-lived flirtations, you have been officially chosen as her partner. You are exactly like Spica's 'Snow White,' and the target of the jealousy of every Miator student—well, you're *supposed to be*, anyway."

Nagisa ducked her head in shame, and almost choked on the second slice of banana cake she had just gobbled.

Yes, I'm sorry for being with Shizuma-sama even though I'm not worthy... It's all my fault...

She suddenly realized something. *But huh? She said, "supposed to be"...?*

“Yes, supposed to be... You should have been the target of everyone’s jealous outrage. But...do you remember? The fake letter that lured you to the library?”

Miyuki, her face cool, drank her tea.

The letter luring me to the library—I’ll never forget that one! Nagisa gritted her teeth.

After the announcement of her entry in the *Étoile* competition, Nagisa had been called out by upperclassmen many times and picked on. So she had been relieved to read that letter, which had seemed to be a saving grace, but...

Telling Nagisa about Shizuma’s past had actually been a plot to depress her and set her up for failure in the *Étoile* competition.

Though Nagisa had been shocked that someone was jealous enough to send an anonymous letter and was out to get her, she had definitely felt a greater shock when she’d found out about Shizuma’s past.

Sakuragi Kaori—Shizuma’s most beloved “younger sister.” Kaori had passed away the spring Shizuma became a fifth-year student. Nagisa hadn’t known about her until the letter incident.

Shizuma was cheerful, strong, and beautiful, and she constantly teased me, being the playful Shizuma, so I couldn’t sense her painful past...

I was just so clueless...

Nagisa didn’t notice Tamao, who was looking at her saddened face with concern.

Miyuki continued, “Of course, being a new transfer student, you can’t possibly imagine the immense popularity of Shizuma-sama—so that letter was rather mild compared to the myriad of other horrendous things that *could* have happened to you. The truth is...the reason why you weren’t harmed any more than you were...is because of Shizuma-sama’s...virtuous presence, I suppose? Even from an objective perspective, Shizuma-sama’s love for the one she favors is rather overbearing...and I believe no one would dare to go against her wishes. Besides...most of them were half in doubt. Even when they saw Shizuma-sama’s name entered in the *Étoile* competition, they knew that she had won the *Étoile* crown last year already, so they didn’t really believe that she would participate,

especially since the students in her class are preparing for the college entrance exams—but Shizuma-sama actually participated. But because of Spica Student Council President Tomori’s plot...”

Miyuki looked down, her eyes darkening.

“Plot...?” asked Chiyo. She sat on the edge of the table, nervously listening to the conversation at hand.

“Yes, a plot. That question—‘Do you wish to be bound to the *cadette* candidate next to you as your one and only partner, both in this life and the next?’—was a total setup. I couldn’t believe Shizuma-sama had to answer that in public. I’m sure it caused the Miator votes to split. Had I known about this insidious scheme, I would have objected. But that question wasn’t in the list of questions attached to the *Étoile* competition schedule of events, which was given in advance to the Miator Student Council. President Tomori pulled a simple strategic maneuver to ensure that Spica would claim the *Étoile* crown. Considering President Tomori’s faithfulness to Spica’s creed of fairness, I was surprised by her sly maneuver...”

Miyuki turned deliberately to Shizuma. Shizuma sipped her tea, acting as if none of this affected her, and Miyuki continued.

“Unfortunately, the Spica Student Council President’s scheme has had its effect—Shizuma-sama, the glorious *Étoile* of last year, had to announce to all of her fans in Miator. Shizuma-sama...”

Miyuki nodded at Nagisa, her expression grave.

Huh, me...?

Nagisa was confused—but Miyuki chuckled. “Shizuma-sama proclaimed that she loved this newbie *cadette*, Aoi Nagisa, out of the whole wide world...”

“L-L-Looooove...?” Nagisa shouted.

“Shhh, no, Nagisa-chan, not so loud...” Tamao, worried about the murmurs around them, grabbed Nagisa-chan, who almost fell out the chair.

“So...what are you trying to say?” Shizuma asked as she blew on the tea.

Miyuki faced Shizuma and looked at her intently—and the tone of her voice

changed.

“At this point, whether your proclamation was true or not isn’t the problem. Those who believed it will, and those who denied it won’t...but...”

“But what...?” Shizuma didn’t raise her face, and kept staring at her teacup.

“The problem is that Shizuma-sama—whether it was the truth or not—declared her love in front of the whole school. Shizuma-sama’s declaration—true or not—may have caused those who voted for you in last year’s *Étoile* competition to feel betrayed. Of course...love takes many forms and could change over time. Even I...”

Miyuki took a breath. She thought for a bit...then continued.

“Even I...believe that love, as beautiful and perfect as it is, can change over time, or be lost. I think it is very natural that it should do so. Unlike the fantasies of many of the Miator students, there is no such thing as eternal love. In fact...the more perfect and beautiful it is...the more it could vanish in an instant, like a dream...”

She looked away. “But because you won last year’s *Étoile*, Shizuma-sama, many people placed their hopes and dreams in you—and the beautiful girl who passed away. There are still many students in Miator who saw the dramatic fate, the limitless love, beauty, and adoration between the two of you. Knowing that, your declaration...might have caused many problems. Hanazono Shizuma now loves Aoi Nagisa out of the whole wide world, and even in the next life—so where does that leave poor Sakuragi Kaori...?”

K-tink...

The place froze.

Sakuragi Kaori...that name again...

Nagisa came to her senses. *If the things in the Astraea School Directory and what Chiyo-chan said are true, then Shizuma-sama...can’t possibly love me more than Sakuragi Kaori...*

What Shizuma-sama said during the Mouth of Truth was just an act, to win the Étoile competition. No matter how clueless I am, that was obvious...

But I didn't care... I knew I can't even come close to...the beautiful girl who everyone feels belongs next to Shizuma-oneesama...

But...just for a bit...I wanted to understand their relationship...

It had been such a dramatic fate. A story of limitless love, beauty, and adoration.

In her heart, Nagisa heard Miyuki's words. Certain thoughts and feelings grew in Nagisa's mind.

Shizuma-oneesama told me to believe her. Though I just met her, I believe her...I believe this beautiful, beaming person. Looking at her powerful eyes, there's no way she'd lie or fake anything.

Shizuma-oneesama's feelings toward me can't be fake... Nagisa was sure she'd felt Shizuma's love.

But...

I'm curious about Shizuma-oneesama and her most beloved girl. What was Sakuragi Kaori like? And what were Shizuma-oneesama's feelings toward her? How did Shizuma-oneesama love and...care for her...and when did they have to say goodbye...?

"Um, about Sakuragi Kaori..."

Just as Nagisa mustered enough courage to ask her question, Shizuma's sharp and strong voice drowned her out.

"What sort of problem is supposed to affect *me*?"

As if she had been waiting for that question, Miyuki responded quickly.

"It is *definitely* a big problem. Let's disregard Aoi Nagisa's reputation for a moment—Miator students do not think highly of her, for sure, and to be blunt, regard her as garbage. An average transfer student with no significance whatsoever—oh, excuse me!" Miyuki coughed as she put Nagisa in her place.

Tamao laughed weakly.

Miyuki composed herself and went on. "To see this transfer student receiving a large amount of attention from Shizuma-sama certainly doesn't please your

fans at all. The fans accepted the special existence of Sakuragi Kaori, so they forgave Shizuma-sama's flirtatious behavior and admired from afar in a peaceful manner—caring for you. But even the Miator students who half-doubted your intentions heard your declaration and witnessed the dramatic dead-heat match of the *ainée* event, where you saved Nagisa-san as she fell from the tower...and they might be irritated. If we're not careful, a riot might occur."

Miyuki's tone was serious, but Shizuma laughed in her face.

"Tsk tsk... Riot? Oh great, I'd love to watch that happen...the peaceful Miator students causing a riot. It'll surely be a glamorous affair..."

"Oh, how true..." Tamao chuckled.

Miyuki's eyes tightened, and her face grew hard. "As the Student Council President...I don't want to see the Miator students lose their unity and squabble over this. I don't want to sit idly by if I can prevent what happened at Spica from happening here...and..."

She grinned fiercely. "I really hope we *do* win... *Étoile* two years in a row? A new historical record in Astraea. Wouldn't that be a wonderful glory for our legendary Queen, everyone?"

Nagisa's face went white at those words, while Tamao shrugged her shoulders in disbelief.

Chiyo gulped in surprise...and Shizuma, without saying a word, silently reached for her teacup.

Taking a deep breath, Miyuki said, "I have a plan." She scanned the faces of all four girls. "It will drive the Amane couple to certain defeat, raise Miator's odds of winning, and protect Aoi Nagisa-san from future petty, jealous antics, like the sinister letter."

The large gate of Maiden Park.

Maiden Park spread from east to west behind the three schools, and its main gate, which stood opposite the schools' front gates, protected the holy park of

maidens—so it was usually closed. It would only open during special events.

Standing in front of it that day, full of deep emotions, was a girl. Propped next to her was a large, dark blue suitcase, and she seemed to have just arrived from airport, because the airline's luggage tag still hung from the side.

From Russia...

“The time has finally arrived...”

Standing erect, she used her hands to sweep her bangs from over her eyebrows...with eyes ready for battle, she stared at the symbol on the center of the gate.

Three small iron stars.

Against the large gate, the girl, who was small for her age, looked smaller than ever, yet she had an overpowering aura about her.

I will save Spica in your place...



As she made the promise in her heart, a drop of rain fell on the tip of her nose.

From the gray skies, *drip drip*—small droplets came down.

It had finally started to rain...

Black clouds approached the foothills.

I need to hurry...

Makoto grabbed the suitcase strap. Her scrawny legs made unusually large, confident strides.

She headed straight toward...Astraea's holy ground.

Past Maiden Park, to a place officially known as Astraea Hall—and nicknamed Strawberry Dorms.

But before she went there, she needed to meet someone.

Makoto changed direction...toward Spica's school building.

"...that's pretty much it." *Grin.*

Chikaru gleefully finished speaking.

When she had first entered, the Spica Student Council room had stirred in surprise, but they had simmered down as the explanation continued. Now—the air had gone cold, and no one dared break the silence, even with a cough.

The pressure inside the room grew. Outside the large glass wall, the skies turned from gray to almost black.

Tsubomi broke the tense air of silence. "But..."

As she nervously shifted her eyes around, her young voice shrilled an octave higher, making her sound even cuter. She had just graduated elementary school the previous year.

"Um, if that plan is carried out...and the former Spica Elementary School graduate came back...the first round of the *Étoile* competition is already over so...isn't it too late and rather impossible to have that onesama enter the

Étoile competition...?”

Her voice released the tension in the room.

“Yes...it’s too late,” Kaname grumbled. She looked pissed as usual—but also seemed to be afraid of something.

“Well...that’s true,” Shion agreed. “Even if she did return to school, the first round has concluded already, so it would be difficult for her even to compete in the second round. Had she returned during the first round, we might have been able to do something about it. Of course, considering Spica’s current situation, even if we had forcefully pushed this new entry, the Student Council would surely have received another harsh wave of criticism—either way, I don’t think we can enter her in the *Étoile* competition at this point. It might be possible next year...”

Bam!

The Student Council room door crashed open.

Nobody had noticed the person’s presence—before now. Everyone turned to look. The outside air rushed into the stuffy room...

The double doors had been forcefully pushed open...

In the middle of the doorway stood a boy—no, a girl.

She had short, hazel hair that appeared almost luminous. Her frame was small, but her head was also small, so she was well-proportioned and had a beautiful profile.

Though she wasn’t voluptuous, and in fact looked rather androgynous, she stood in a manner that relayed her conviction, and she folded her arms like a fresh, handsome, and powerful boy.

Her unbelievably small face was perfectly composed.

“Hello...good day, everyone... I’m back.”

As she gestured with one arm, she seemed at the same time mysterious and alluring.

Everyone was taken by surprise at such perfect timing.

Everyone but Chikaru.

“Ahaha...oh, were you guys in the middle of a meeting? Or were you waiting on me, perchance...?” Makoto asked as she slipped into the room.

She looked at the papers in Tsubomi’s hand. “Oh...you were talking about the *Étoile* competition, right? Great. I’m glad I made it in time.”

Smiling at Tsubomi, she said softly, “Don’t worry—I’m back, so everything will be all right.”

Her smile was so beautiful—and captivating.

“Wh-Why do you say that?” *How do you know about this?* Tsubomi tried to ask, but Makoto had already shifted her gaze to Kaname.

She looked at the red rose placed in Kaname’s breast pocket and remarked, “I’m pleased to receive such an adorable welcome.”

She gave Kaname a proud and elegant smile. Kaname’s knees went weak, and she almost melted to the floor, but she braced herself and looked away.

Makoto finally made her way to the furthest spot in the room—Student Council President Tomori Shion’s seat, with the large glass wall behind her.

“It’s been a while...Shion-kun, do you remember me? Even when I transferred to Russia, I always thought about Spica—because I was proud to have been a Spica student. Do you understand? It has to be a place of pride, for eternity—I can’t allow it to be anything else.”

Makoto smiled again, like a totally pure and innocent angel.

She came close to Shion’s face. A strong but dizzily sweet, musky aroma wafted in the air. She whispered into Shion’s ear.

“Leave everything to me. You’re foolish, Shion. Instead of relying on the unmotivated Prince Amane, you should have asked for my help in the first place. Or...did you hesitate to call me back from Russia, Shion? Aww...don’t worry, just watch. I’ll defend Spica’s honor in your place. Oh gee, don’t ruin your pretty face. You don’t need to look so scared anymore. I’ll take on your heavy burden...”

She smiled happily, like a pure, beautiful angel...

Or rather, like an evil, cunning devil...

Shion's face quivered in sudden astonishment.

The winds drifted away, leaving behind thick, dark clouds...

"I...I hate the commotion my beloved Spica is experiencing...and I can't stand to see the students fighting each other. The strong, white star of Spica, glowing in the beautiful sky...that was the star I came to adore. It was the image I held onto in faraway Russia. Spica, my favorite school, was the source of my pride."

Makoto's last sentence ended in a sad tone.

Her boy-like, pure sorrow moved everyone's heart.

We love Spica just like you do. For Spica's honor...we all share the desire to win the Étoile crown, for the school...

"So I want to do what I can for Spica. Of course, I went to Russia to chase my dream—to become a professional violinist. But Spica is more important than that... I finally realized I needed to keep the star of Spica shining brilliantly. So I left everything behind... I know that's dumb...but I knew I had to—so I came back."

...Yeah. The only thing my beloved left behind was the star of Spica and its honor...

Makoto couldn't hold her anguish inside. She looked away to hide her pained expression...but everyone misunderstood her behavior and felt bad.

Tsubomi was miserable. *We made even made a student studying abroad worry and feel troubled...*

"Though we appreciate your coming back...what *can* you do at this point...?" Momomi wondered.

Makoto suddenly chuckled. "Oh—well, actually..."

Her laughter sounded so innocent and fun—as if sunlight had broken through the dark clouds. It was like a pleasant moment after the quelling of the storm, and it spread warmly into everyone's hearts.

The beautiful, carefree angel continued, “Well...I have a wonderful idea. I’m pretty sure everyone will be surprised at it. But...Spica is really loved by God. I had a sudden revelation come to me, like an angel descending from Heaven...”

Giggling, Makoto resembled a mural of the young, playful angel Michael.

Her eyes turned cruel—for just a second. This was show time.

Makoto—the Emperor’s—cold, cruel true form was revealed for only a moment before she spoke.

“I request that the *cadette* event of the second round of the *Étoile* competition be the Faceless Devil!”

The jovial atmosphere in the room turned into bewilderment.

Momomi left her mouth open, and Kaname’s face turned blue.

Tsubomi and the other council members were flustered—really flustered—at the ominous phrase and refused to accept it.

Makoto was pleased at their shocked reactions and smiled innocently at Shion.

“This event will allow me to enter the competition at this stage. Right, Shion-kun? And...Spica students—especially Prince Amane fans—will surely enjoy this selection. What do you think?”

Shion’s face crumpled as if she had eaten a bitter bug.

“Don’t look like that,” Makoto said sweetly. “I’m pretty sure that by the time I enter and the *Étoile* competition’s second round is finished, you won’t have to rely on Prince Amane anymore. But...she wasn’t interested in participating in the *Étoile* competition in the first place, right? You know, we should allow the prince and princess to live happily ever after on their own. I’ll be the star of Spica in their place. I left for Russia without realizing that Spica would turn out like this—I’m so sorry. But now that I’m back, there’s nothing to worry about.”

Makoto went to Shion’s side and hugged her shoulder as if they were long-lost friends...

She looked directly into Shion’s eyes, as if she were challenging her.

“I will be Spica’s new *Étoile*. I want to revive the brilliance of the Five Great Stars...with my own hands.”

Inside the Strawberry Dorms lounge...

“First, I would like to propose a change of events for round two.”

Miyuki’s bold comment caused Chiyo, Tamao, and Nagisa to gulp. Watching the puzzled looks of Nagisa and the others—except for Shizuma, who was indifferent as she sipped tea—Miyuki continued to explain in her cool, demure Student Council President manner.

“According to the announcement from this year’s *Étoile* competition host, the Spica Student Council have chosen to have a tennis tournament for the second round—a very Spica-like choice, since they’re known for their strong athletics program.”

She smirked. “But this event follows the previous Maiden Horse Race...an arbitrarily chosen event that also gave Spica an obvious advantage. President Tomori is so simple-minded—well, she probably plotted to select as many sports events as possible to ensure Spica’s victory. Of course, Shizuma-sama is very skilled in tennis...and at least Nagisa-san seems to be physically capable, so Miator still has a strong chance to win this round, but...”

Nagisa gulped during Miyuki’s pause.

“Based on the reasons I stated previously...we cannot afford to miss this opportunity. As the St. Miator Student Council President, I propose a change of event—to give our school the highest advantage.”

Tamao and Chiyo looked up and eagerly awaited Miyuki’s next words.

“We propose that the second-round event be—the Faceless Devil.”

Ukk... Tamao and Chiyo were horror-stricken.

“Instead of a boring tennis tournament, as the Student Council President I believe that this event is more appropriate for the long history and traditions of the *Étoile* competition. Does everyone agree with my opinion?”

Miyuki gently smiled at the group. Tamao and Chiyo ducked their heads in

fear, and the clueless Nagisa shuddered at the sight.

Shizuma quietly sipped her tea.

“Well then, everyone. I need to fill out some paperwork so I can move into the dorm, so please excuse me. Uh, can someone show me the way?” Makoto scanned the room with her sparkling eyes.

One of the second-year students came running from the far end of the room, leaving behind her pile of work. “Yes, I’d be honored to, Makoto-sama!” She was overcome by Makoto’s charm, her face flushed and eyes moistened.

Out of the corner of her eye, Makoto saw St. Lulim’s Student Council President, Chikaru...

Makoto turned away. *Okay, I’m back...Chikaru.*

Your letter...is an overture for Spica’s revolution!

After Makoto departed, the Student Council room was filled with an eerie silence and a series of colorful, beautiful smiles.

Like an expensive, foreign kaleidoscope...the faces changed expressions. Each was exquisite, quite captivating and mysteriously attractive...

Tsubomi was stunned...pale-faced Kaname bit her lips...and Momomi stared at Shion painfully.

Shion...glared at the meeting table.

Her original thought had been to rely on Spica’s pride and the great star Prince Amane, even though she had a weakness in her personality, and to claim the *Étoile* crown, which Spica had not won for a long time.

She had known that she had to accomplish this feat—for the glory of Spica.

But her own hidden agenda—to create Astraea’s first male-like couple of Amane and Kaname—had crumbled with the appearance of Konohana Hikari.

And Prince Amane, who claimed to be normal, who found girl-girl couples to be strange—had actually fallen in love with a girl.

Shion had believed victory was still attainable even with this unexpected turn

of events.

In fact, she had hoped that the forthright Prince Amane would become more masculine—and turn into a real prince—to protect her new love.

But that decision had taken a turn for the worse. While nobody disliked Amane, the school was being dominated by jealous outrage and resentment toward Hikari.

Now...a new star had appeared.

Would this star be a premonition of victory, or merely a trap leading to the downfall of Spica?

Shion didn't know. But for now...she had no choice.

Lifting her determined face, she said, "Well, I suppose we have no other option. Okay, everyone..."

She was interrupted.

Knock knock knock...

Someone softly knocked on the door.

Had Makoto come back? Tension ran through the room again.

But the person who quietly opened the door and entered was a Miator student, wearing their charcoal-gray uniform. She carried a tray with both hands.

"Excuse me. I am here to deliver a message from the Miator Student Council..."

The tall, slender Miator student bowed at the door. Keeping her face down, she slipped into the room and walked straight toward Shion.

She finally lifted her face and stared at the Student Council President.

Shion thought, *I've seen her before. She's one of Miator's Four Saints...*

But before Shion could remember her name, the girl spoke.

"Are you the Spica Student Council President?"

"Y-Yes..."

The Miator student never smiled. Her face was emotionless and mask-like as she offered the lacquered tray at chest height.

“I am here to deliver a message from the Miator Student Council President.”

In the center of the tray was an envelope stamped with the Miator seal.

Shion carefully retrieved the envelope—and the messenger from Miator bowed her head and took a few steps back.

Shion nodded in confirmation. Without speaking another word, the messenger quietly retreated.

Shion was dumbfounded, but immediately opened the envelope.

She read the letter out loud.

Request to Change the Event for the Second Round of the Étoile Competition

Regarding the current situation, in which the Spica Student Council is under suspicion of foul play in the Étoile competition...

While I do not believe that any unlawful acts have occurred, our school believes in strict adherence to the traditions and preservation of the Étoile competition, and feels this grave situation should not be taken lightly.

In addition, regarding the announcement of the second-round event, it was written that Spica's strong candidate, the Otori Amane couple, has been exempted from this round and automatically proceeds to the next round...

As the St. Miator Student Council President, I truly believe the selection process was conducted in the fairest manner, but if the results of this selection were to be announced, it would only add oil to the fire that has already ignited at Spica—and could spread to Miator, bringing out the hidden resentment at our school...

“And so, this may be a bit presumptuous, but I request a change of events...”

For some reason, Shion stopped.

“What's wrong, Shion-chan?” Momomi asked, worried.

Shion continued in a quaking voice, “We request...for the event...”

“What?” Kaname and Tsubomi piped up.

“The Faceless...Devil...”

Shion’s knees gave out, and she slumped back into her chair.

What an astronomical coincidence...

Chikaru took in the whole situation.

She sensed the arrival of a turbulent storm. She actually felt pleasure, waiting for the inevitable storm. There was a strange tingling down her spine.

Ohh...silly me... I actually...love this thrilling situation.

As she chuckled to herself, she thought of a particular Lulim student.

“What is the Faceless Devil anyway?” Nagisa inquired carefully.

“Well...” Miyuki answered...eventually. “The Faceless Devil is...”

The Faceless Devil was one of the *Étoile* competition events, much like the Mouth of Truth and the Maiden Horse Race.

But it was a very unusual event that had been chronicled but was rarely conducted.

It hadn’t been conducted for a long while because...it was boring and actually quite cruel.

The *Étoile* couple, revered as the best “oneesama and her younger sister,” had once been more pure and idyllic, an object of adoration among the girls.

Over time, though, as the fans had become more organized, and the popular students had begun to show unique qualities, the students had grown away from the original intent of finding the couple with the purest, strongest emotional ties, and the *Étoile* competition had evolved into a search for the popular star of the schools.

So recent *Étoile* competitions had involved more events that showcased the

candidate's "showmanship," rather than the tests of true love, and the Faceless Devil had been used less and less.

Even Miyuki and Shion, who were pillars of their respective schools, had never seen this event being conducted. Only the concept had been passed on, as a legend.

...Why?

The rules of the Faceless Devil...

1. For two weeks, the aînée and cadette will not be allowed to see or speak to each other.

2. During these two weeks, they must endure and affirm their love toward each other.

3. Those couples who have succumbed to the temptations of the devil will be disqualified.

4. Those couples who have resisted the temptations of the devil will proceed to the next round.

The *aînée* and *cadette*—Shizuma and Nagisa—would go to school as usual, but for two weeks they must not see each other. They must endure a long-distance relationship for two weeks.

And during that time, the devil would tempt them.

A student from another school—in this case, probably a Spica student—would be selected to tempt the couple. That student would never announce that she was the devil, of course.

So this nameless, unidentifiable devil would come to them unannounced and without suspicion. With a sweet smile, the devil would tempt either Nagisa or Shizuma.

The devil would try to squeeze certain keywords out of the lonely, depressed

target by any means possible.

For example, direct statements such as “I like you more than Shizuma-sama” or “Please take me away.”

The devil would turn in a list of pre-selected keywords beforehand, and if the targeted individual uttered any of those keywords, the devil would win.

When the devil approached the target...and the target swayed...or seriously fell in love with the devil, then the target couple would be disqualified from the *Étoile* competition.

And the devil would be able to choose a partner and participate in the second event of the second round. Or the devil could choose *not* to participate in the *Étoile* competition.

This event had originally been used by weaker schools to reduce the number of strong candidates from their rivals—it was like a system of checks and balances. But except for the parties involved, the Faceless Devil wasn’t particularly dramatic or entertaining. The two weeks would pass by quietly—and it was a very boring event for the spectators.

At the same time, the general consensus had been that it was a sinister event, designed to tempt the couples or break them up, and it didn’t seem appropriate for the peaceful *Étoile* competition...

Thus, this dark, hair-raising *L'Épreuve d'amour* (Test of Love) event had been buried for a long time.

Shizuma chomped on yet another slice of banana cake. It was her third.

Miyuki remarked, “For now, our biggest threat is Spica’s Prince Amane and her partner, Konohana Hikari. But this couple...consists of the shy, bashful, and un-prince-like lead character, and a partner who has newly transferred, and who also happens to be very timid and shy.”

Hmm, that’s true... Hikari didn’t seem too strong, Nagisa thought. She seemed really sweet, cute, and sensitive...

“And it seems that they can’t hold back their puppy-love affections for each other, even in public...basically, it’s a *morganatic love*—like Cinderella. Of

course, it also includes a whole crew of mean older sisters around them...”

Morganatic love—Nagisa winced at the dramatic choice of words. *That’s such an outdated phrase.* But she couldn’t laugh at it.

Miyuki tapped the table. “To be blunt, this couple will probably freak out at the thought of not seeing each other for just two weeks. We don’t even need to send in a devil—if the event is changed to the Faceless Devil, this couple will be disqualified in no time.”

Miyuki’s evil grin and eyes were frightening. They made Nagisa gulp fearfully.

The Student Council President went on, “And next...oh yes, Aoi-san...I found out who wrote that letter to lure you into the library—are you interested in knowing who it was?”

Rattle rattle rattle... The table shook violently as it shifted.

It was Shizuma who stood up. “Who? Who was it?! Who troubled my dear Nagisa...!”

Shizuma’s lips trembled, and her hair flared violently about her as she confronted Miyuki. She had turned red with anger, and Miyuki was overpowered, rendered speechless.

Oh, she’s quite serious...

A brief pause.

“...Oh my, Shizuma-sama, please don’t get so worked up, even if it is about your adorable little Nagisa-san!” Miyuki remarked sarcastically.

Shizuma came to—and blushed slightly. Bashfully, she fumbled to fix her hair. But she shot back, “But...the culprit did such a terrible thing to my Nagisa... I’m much too curious to find out...”

Shizuma-sama is blushing!!

Pfft... Chiyo and Tamao covered their mouths to keep from laughing out loud.

Miyuki looked at the group with deep emotion. *How long has it been since Shizuma-sama...showed such emotions? No, this may be the first time I’ve ever seen her get so flustered...*

She took a deep breath. *This is it. I need to convince all of them to agree with me.*

“Ahh, I thought so...” Miyuki put on her most pitiful expression.

“*What* did you think...?” the irritated Shizuma asked.

“Well...though the Faceless Devil would prove to be a disadvantage for the Prince Amane couple...it would be a disadvantage to Miator too—because we have the same weakness.”

Miyuki further probed Shizuma’s guilt. “Compared to Prince Amane, Shizuma-sama is rather invincible, of course. But with your reaction just now, Shizuma-sama, if something—no matter how small—happened to Aoi-san, it would worry you, possibly causing you to break the rules to go and see her. Considering that you previously said ‘My words *are* Miator’s rules’...ohh, even if my request to change to the Faceless Devil event goes through, it might be our Miator that crumbles to ruins...”

“I’m not...that foolhardy,” Shizuma muttered.

“Then do you agree to this idea, Shizuma-sama?”

“Hey, hold it. I don’t agree to this at all—I can’t bear to be away from Nagisa for two weeks...”

“...Oh, of course not. I knew you wouldn’t go for it. This is just an idea, but...” Miyuki gave the most delectable smile.

“Regarding the ‘library culprit,’ I believe it was one of Shizuma-sama’s fans.”

The words rolled off her tongue so easily.

The next moment, Shizuma froze. *Does Miyuki know something...?*

Miyuki continued, “The incident occurred behind Shizuma-sama’s back, and was an effort to make Nagisa-san withdraw from the *cadette* event. Judging from the motive, they are the only suspects. It could possibly be someone really close to Shizuma-sama—which is all the more reason they don’t want Shizuma-sama to know about it. But we can use this to our advantage.”

She paused. Shizuma had finally fallen silent.

A lightbulb turned on in Tamao's head as she realized—*so that's why I was invited.*

“During the Faceless Devil event...the two of you will have to stay apart,” Miyuki said. “That means the enemy—the library culprit—will know about the separation. She will surely take advantage of this chance. She will definitely try to lure Aoi Nagisa-san into another trap.”

“Eeehh, oh nooo! If you know she'll do it, then why can't we just catch her...?” Nagisa whined, which caused Tamao to laugh.

“Oh gosh, Nagisa-chan, have you forgotten a very important person? Tsk tsk,” she said, all smiles.

“Important person? Are you going to participate in something, Tamao-chan?” the bewildered Nagisa asked.

Miyuki responded cheerfully, “Oh, if you haven't gotten it by now, then this plan might actually work. During Shizuma-sama's absence, the library culprit will be...”

“...nabbed by...” Tamao took over with a broad grin, “...your very important and reliable friend, Suzumi Tamao-san!”

Chiyo smiled too. “Woow...that's splendid!”

“Well then, Suzumi-san—please stick close to Aoi-san for those two weeks. In addition to the library culprit, Spica might send in a devil or two...but you're sharp, Suzumi-san, so I'm confident of leaving you in charge. Yes, in fact...I keep saying you'd make a great Student Council President. Are you interested? I can bring you on as one of the executive committee assistants, so please consider a role in the Student Council...”

“My...oh goodness...I've declined several times already. I wouldn't be able to handle such a heavy burden. And...I don't like to take on too much responsibility. I just want to spend my days in peace, with a cute girl like Nagisa-chan...”

Tamao hugged Nagisa.

“Kyaaaah!” Nagisa couldn't comprehend the conversation.

Ehh? Then that event—the Faceless Devil—will actually become the second-round event? That means...I won't be able to see Shizuma-sama for two weeks...

And...I want to know...Shizuma-sama's true feelings...

Satisfied that her idea had gone through, though in an unusual manner, Miyuki gleefully pointed at Nagisa.

"Hello, Aoi-san, snap out of it. I need you to do something during those two weeks. You're not good at dancing, are you?"

"Huh, dance?"

Nagisa was dumbfounded. How many times had she said "huh" today?

Miyuki answered, "Yes, dance. Social dance. The main event of the Faceless Devil is a dance. After two weeks of separation, the couple will dance, for the *aînée* event, in front of a large audience. It will be a test of compatibility between the two people who have been separated—the separation is only the first half of the test. Those couples who lost to the devil's temptation will be disqualified immediately, but those who endured will need to prove their close bond with their partner with a perfectly matching dance. It is the hardest part of the event. In Astraea, all the schools have dance classes, but I doubt your previous school had them, so you probably don't have much experience..."

"Eh, Nagisa-oneesama's old school didn't have any dance classes?" Chiyo asked, surprised.

"Oh...then we must do lots of dance practice!" Tamao's smile broadened at the thought of an additional task.

Miyuki looked on, content.

"Dance...? I've never danced in my life...!" Nagisa wailed.

Trrriing...

A soft organ melody rang through the speakers in the lounge.

"Strawberry Dorm residents...it is almost time for the Social Exchange Dinner...we ask all residents to make preparations... We say again...Strawberry Dorm residents..."

“Ah!”

“Oh gosh, it’s time!”

Chiyo and Tamao blurted in unison.

They noticed the lounge was almost empty.

Miyuki felt a bit guilty. “We were quite engrossed in our conversation...”

Nagisa turned around to see Shizuma, sitting alone.

She was lost in her thoughts.

Chapter 3

A Prophet Appears, Dividing the Obstructive Sea and Showering Manna

The Bell Walkways was a three-way aerial bridge that connected the buildings of the Strawberry Dorms. It was usually vacant year round. The bridge had three entrances, and it was the only passageway that connected the dorms. Though the dorms formed a strawberry shape when seen from above, from the inner garden below the bridge that joined them looked like a Y in the sky.

Except for official business, the use of this hall was restricted. Thus, the Bell Walkways were usually quiet, with a few students conducting school business shuffling across it occasionally.

But that night the Bell Walkways bustled with girls.

Girls lined up properly in single file, announced their names at the entrance, and entered the skywalk.

“St. Miator Girls’ Academy, Fourth Year Moon Class, Suzumi Tamao, passing through!”

“St. Miator Girls’ Academy, Fourth Year Moon Class, Aoi Nagisa, passing through!”

The excited girls’ voices rang through the hall. Nagisa held a quiet conversation with Tamao as she walked across the Bell Walkways for the first time.

“Hey, Tamao-chan...this is...a really large gathering.”

“Yes, it is...because it involves all dorm residents. Ah, that’s right... Nagisa-chan, this is your first time, isn’t it? Your first Social Dinner. We hold one every quarter.”

“Yup! I’ve never seen another school’s dining hall, so I’m really excited... And it must be luxurious, with a special menu and all, right? I really like that sort of stuff, like the rainbow fruit bowl with seven different kinds of fruit at kindergarten birthday parties, and the steak cutlet lunches they served on field day in elementary school, so that we could *teki ni katsu!*”³

“Fruit bowls and *teki ni katsu*, huh...”

Tamao looked at Nagisa with pity...but Nagisa’s eyes sparkled innocently.

Tamao gazed at her with gentle eyes. “Yes, those can be quite fun, too. But today’s menu might not be to your liking, Nagisa-chan...”

“Eh, Tamao-chan, you know the menu? Wow, what’s on it? Spica is so extravagant, so maybe it’s stew or steak... I can’t wait...”

Nagisa drooled a bit.

Sister Fujii came out of the duty room at Miator’s hall entrance and walked down the line of girls.

“Now, now, refrain from unnecessary chatter. Don’t disgrace Miator!”

Nagisa and Tamao both straightened their postures.

“Yes, ma’am!”

Sister Fujii was Miator’s strictest and scariest dorm mother. If you were caught by Sister Fujii, you’d go straight to the Repentance Room...and worse yet, miss out on the whole dinner.

Eek—if that happened, that would ruin everything! Nagisa thought.

Nagisa and Tamao ducked their heads and tried not to stick out.

“St. Lulim Girls’ School, Second Year Class B, Hyuga Kizuna, passing through!”

“St. Lulim Girls’ School, Second Year Class B, Natsume Remon, passing through!”

From Miator to Spica.

From Spica to Lulim.

And from Lulim to Miator...

The line of girls continued to grow...

Knives and forks clanged softly in the dining hall.

Black iron and glass tables with carved legs lined the room, placed on top of the stunning royal blue stone floor.

The white walls had bold, geometric patterns. The oval tables, each with room for twelve, were lined up in an organized fashion, with perfectly draped white table linens that had no wrinkles.

Several side tables were placed against the walls, decorated with vases full of white roses.

The low, soothing music of Schubert floated through the room.

This was Spica's main dining room.

Pheew...

Nagisa grew tired of eating and sighed as she looked down at her plate. In the center of the huge dish were duck confit, wild rice, and salad.

The two plates, stacked one on top of the other, were definitely too big for the portion of food, and Nagisa awkwardly fumbled with her utensils, wobbling the top plate.

It's so difficult to eat...aren't there any chopsticks?

She bit the end of her fork in frustration and blankly stared at the menu sheet, but Tamao laughed at her antics.

"Oh gosh, what's wrong, Nagisa? Does it taste bad?"

"N-No, that's not it... I'm having trouble eating it...because I didn't expect it to be so extravagant..." Nagisa rubbed at her head.

"Really? Well, they do serve special meals for Social Exchange Dinners so we

can practice our table manners...oh wait, you prefer Japanese meals, don't you, Nagisa-chan? You're always saying you love tofu. It's all right. Even though they served French today, there are days when they serve Japanese food. They'll perform a tea ceremony and use tea ceremony dishes. And of course, you'll use chopsticks..."

Nagisa breathed a sigh of relief, because the smiling Tamao totally understood her frustrations.

The other people at Nagisa's table were two Miator upperclassmen, four Spica second-year students, and four Lulim fourth-year students.

The groupings at the Social Exchange Dinner were split by class and year—Miator's Snow, Moon, and Flower Classes...Spica's *Un*, *Deux*, and *Trois* Classes...and Lulim's Classes A, B, and C—to avoid seating the same students together every time.

This dinner wasn't the boisterous kind, but rather was a "social exchange" in which the students would have soft, pleasant conversations with their neighbors.

According to Tamao, the sisters observed students for proper table manners as they ate, so it wasn't much of a party. The only part that was exciting was the lively conversation held over dessert.

Despite the strictness of the event, Nagisa, the new transfer student, was fascinated to see the uniforms of the two other schools.

"Hey, is that student sitting at the back table...the Spica Student Council President?" Nagisa asked in a low voice.

"Yes, that's right. Tomori Shion, Spica's smartest student, known as the Snow Queen. Miator's Miyuki-oneesama seems reeeally smart too, but Shion-sama has a different coolness about her. Why, do you know her, Nagisa-chan? Do you...like her?" Tamao smiled.

"N-No way! That's not why I know her..." Nagisa stuttered. "I saw her at the *Étoile* competition...because she was the hostess of the program. So I sort of remember her face..."

Shion sat at the table furthest from Nagisa. She wasn't really engaged in any

friendly conversations and ate silently.

“Oh, that’s right. She was the one who asked the cruel question. There’s no way you could forget her, huh...”

Tamao wiped her mouth with a napkin and turned to Nagisa.

“Speaking of the *Étoile* competition, that reminds me...Nagisa-chan?”

Tamao’s sudden seriousness made Nagisa a little nervous. “Yes...?”

“Nagisa-chan, what did you think about Miyuki-oneesama’s conversation earlier?”

“What did I think? What do you mean?” Nagisa didn’t understand her question.

“I’m talking about the Faceless Devil, of course. Are you afraid of the devil approaching you...”

Nagisa laughed and waved off Tamao’s question. *Jeez, I’m not scared of that...*

“Or are you worried about not seeing Shizuma-sama for two weeks...”

“Well...” Nagisa was at a loss for words. *Oh yeah, that’s what happens, huh...*

It finally hit Nagisa.

Miyuki-sama said all sorts of things one after another, and I couldn’t digest them all...but...

If President Rokujo’s plan goes through, then I can’t see Shizuma-oneesama for a while...

Something...burst inside Nagisa’s heart and dissolved. *But...*

“N-No way...it’s no big deal! It’s only for two short weeks, so I’m not worried about it at all!” Nagisa replied, as cheerfully as she could.

“Besides, normally I would never have had a chance to meet a sixth-year student like Shizuma-sama anyway...so that fact that we even *met* at all is so strange...and unimportant little me isn’t worthy to see Shizuma-sama...”

Nagisa tried to talk down to herself.

Tamao replied slowly, “You don’t believe that...do you?” She sighed in her

heart. *Why do you say that about yourself, Nagisa-chan...?*

“Oh well. If you can handle it, then it’s okay—I can stick really close to you for two whole weeks without being interrupted by Shizuma-oneesama!”

Tamao gave Nagisa a hug...but it caught Nagisa off guard, and she almost spilled her glass of water.

Tamao continued, “But...was Miyuki-oneesama speaking the truth...about that?”

“Eh?” Nagisa didn’t expect that remark, either.

“You know, about knowing the identity of the library culprit. Well, to be more accurate, she said, ‘I have an idea who it is’...”

“Yeah, come to think of it...she didn’t mention any names.”

“Yes, she probably...was prevented from saying the name.”

“Prevented?”

“Yes. She could only hint that it was one of Shizuma-sama’s fans, right? From the looks of it, the culprit is probably very close to Shizuma-oneesama...”

“Very close to Shizuma-oneesama...” Nagisa repeated her words like a dumb parrot.

She became...a bit scared. Her nervous body locked up...it caused her to clatter her fork and knife on the plates even more.

“Ah, s-sorry...”

As she said that... *Fling.*

Her duck meat flew under the table.

“Here, Hikari, have one more. It’s delicious.”

While Nagisa was flinging her duck confit out of unexplainable anxiety over her future with Shizuma-sama...Yaya, at another table, offered Hikari a piece of bread from the basket she was holding.

Ever since she came back to the Strawberry Dorms, Hikari has been quite

cheerful, for some reason. She's so obvious. She's happy because she was able to walk back to the dorm with Amane-oneesama...

Yaya wasn't amused, though. She was suspicious of Hikari—smiling in a positive, almost confident manner, enjoying dinner.

So...Yaya inadvertently...made a slip of the tongue...

"Oh, Hikari, you're so elated...just because Amane-oneesama came to see you. I'm a bit...jealous."

"Oh gosh, Yaya-chan...no... Amane-sama felt obligated to come see me because I was chosen to be her partner in the *Étoile* competition...so there's no reason for you to be jealous, Yaya-chan. I can't meet with her that often... because she's such a star..."

Yaya-chan is so funny... Hikari giggled and her cheeks reddened.

Hmph! What's up with that? She's so sure of herself... Yaya was frustrated. Hikari wasn't even aware of Yaya's feelings toward her.

"You say that, but I'm sure you'd prefer to have Amane-oneesama sitting next to you rather than me, right? Oh gee, it's too bad Amane-sama isn't in the same class as you."

Yaya pouted, acting jealous... *This is...weird.* She couldn't attack more aggressively...she felt something different inside and seemed somewhat vulnerable. Did Hikari sense Yaya's feelings at all?

"Don't say that, Yaya-chan. You're my special friend. If you weren't here...I wouldn't know how to survive Spica..."

Hikari's voice trembled at the end of the sentence.

Yaya understood Hikari's feelings. Hikari was having a hard time at Spica. She knew what Hikari was going through and wanted to provide support for her, but the one who could comfort her most was Amane-sama...so Yaya had mixed feelings about the whole thing. She knew she was confused, too...

"Oh...really?" Yaya asked sarcastically.

Hikari replied confidently, "Of course," and smiled like a pure white lotus flower.

Looking at Hikari's smile made Yaya's body tingle—she felt a lustful desire brewing inside her. When out of the blue...

“Oh, wonderful—you must be the little white princess of Spica. I finally found you...tsk. So, how was the dinner?”

A girl in a monochrome waiter's outfit approached them.

“Oh, Chikaru-sama!” Yaya exclaimed.

“Eh, Chikaru-sama...?”

Surprised, Hikari turned around to see the St. Lulim Student Council President, Minamoto Chikaru, wearing a white shirt and black necktie—a typical waiter's outfit.

Smiling, Chikaru said, “Good evening. So, did you have a pleasant dinner tonight?” The black ribbon on her chest bounced. “It's so nice to meet you. Congratulations on winning the *Petite couronne* in the first round of the *Étoile* competition. Our school was excited to see a new star appear in Spica, too.”

She smiled and talked to Hikari as she swept away bread crumbs with her silver crumb scraper.

Hikari was so stunned her mouth stayed open. “Wh-Why is the Student Council President providing table service...?”

“Tsk...isn't this wonderful? St. Lulim's Costume Club members sometimes offer to provide table service at Social Exchange Dinners. Of course, we'll only do it if we're allowed to wear new outfits. So, how do I look in my *garçon* outfit? Ooohhh, would you like to wear this outfit too, Hikari-chan? I think you would look very cute in it. Unlike the rigid and veery scary Spica and Miator, you can transfer to Lulim *anytime*! Tsk...if you'd like to, that is. But of course, your white prince on a horse—Amane-chan—wouldn't allow that, would she?”

“Ah, are you friends with Amane-sama?!”

“Yes, sort of, because I've been in Astraea for a long time... But I've heard about your tribulations...just because Amane-chan seems to adore you, you've been treated badly, right? Poor girl...”

Chikaru seemed overly concerned.

Hikari replied, “Well...but it’s understandable, because...it’s quite brash for a new transfer student like me to enter the *Étoile* competition. It can’t be helped. But some students, like Yaya-chan and Tsubomi-chan...treat me very nicely...so I’m okay.”

Hikari bravely smiled back, making Yaya feel somewhat unsettled.

“Oh, really? You’re such a good girl, Hikari-chan. And so cute... I want you to join my Costume Club even more.”

Yaya sensed something strange. *Something isn’t right about Chikaru’s jolly behavior. She’s attentive and gentle as usual, but her excitement is quite odd. Maybe she’s excited because she’s in the middle of her Costume Club activities... or...*

Maybe she’s up to something...

Chikaru raised her voice on purpose. “Oh, it’s almost time for dessert! I need to go back and help out. There are eight different kinds of dessert, but I recommend the *groseilles*—and-*fromage* tart. I’ll bring it to you later.” She collected the plates from the table.

As she started to push the black service cart away...

“Oh yes...Hikari-chan? This is a secret but...I’ll tell you since you’re such a good girl. Umm...” She whispered in Hikari’s ear, “I believe another student will transfer to Spica. Soon you might be able to break free from the craziness surrounding the *Étoile* competition. If that happens, I hope you’ll be with Amane-chan happily ever after. At first, I hoped Amane-chan would become the *Étoile*...but after seeing her and you together, I changed my mind. It was the first time I’d ever seen Amane-chan so happy and carefree. I am a secret supporter of both you and Amane-chan.” Chikaru winked in such a charming, leave-it-to-me sort of way.

“Ohh, I must hurry back...” she cried as she trotted off, pushing the cart.

Hikari didn’t know what to make of situation.

“Hey, Chikaru-sama, what did you say to her...?” The impatient Yaya caught at the departing Chikaru’s shoulder.

Behind them, about three tables further along, near the wall...

“Hey, Tamao-chan...should I pick that up myself?” Nagisa asked bashfully.

“Oh, please...the *garçons* will take care of it. That’s etiquette...” Tamao answered, and she dabbed at her mouth with the napkin.

“But that piece of meat sticks out like a sore thumb, and I feel bad for making them pick it up...”

“No, it’s fine. By the way, the Lulim’s Costume Club is helping out the *garçons*...”

“Eh, what’s that?”

“Lulim’s Student Council President, Minamoto Chikaru. Oh, you probably don’t know her, Nagisa-chan. She usually stands at the front stage during the combined Mass...and she’s a very sweet and gentle person, known as Lulim’s Holy Mother. She’s very smart, and rumored to be a strategist, much more than our Miator’s Princess of Rokujo-in...”

“Oh, what rumor is that?”

Tamao started at the voice behind her. “Ch-Chikaru-sama...”

The surprised Nagisa turned around and saw Chikaru, smiling, standing beside her cart in her waiter’s outfit.

“Ohh, that piece of meat, right? Pity, you dropped the largest piece...did you have enough to eat? I’ll pick it up, so don’t worry. It’s all right, I’ll do it discreetly so nobody will notice...”

Chikaru dropped a white handkerchief...and picked it up, along with the meat. In two seconds, the meat was gone.

“Th-Thank you so much!” Nagisa said.

“Oh gosh, it’s part of my duties. The meat must have been tough. It’s not your fault, Nagisa-chan. I will notify the kitchen staff and ensure this won’t happen again.”

Chikaru's nonchalant smile stupefied Nagisa.

She's such a nice Student Council President. So different from Miyuki-sama. But why is she dressed like that and serving us...?

"Oh, you're giving me strange looks too," Chikaru said. "Do I look bad in this outfit...?"

"N-No, absolutely not! You look great! And you're so nice and very helpful..." Nagisa said, flabbergasted.

"Oh, really? That makes me so happy. You're so nice, Nagisa-chan. All the transfer students this year are so sweet. Ohh...I want you to transfer to Lulim too, Nagisa-chan..."

Chikaru smiled innocently as she looked at Nagisa. "Ah, but if I said that, it might upset Shizuma-sama?" She stuck out her tongue.

"Oh, Chikaru-sama, you know Shizuma-sama?" Nagisa asked, her cheeks reddening as she beamed with pride, talking about her favorite onesama.

Chikaru noticed Nagisa's cheerfulness and smiled back, thinking—*my, she looks so happy.*

"Yes, of course I know her. And about her dealings with you, Nagisa-chan. But what an enviable story...to have the gorgeous and proud Shizuma-sama...fall in love with you at first sight."

Chikaru clasped her hands in front of her chest and looked at the ceiling.

"Oh, how romantic...the Queen, who closed her heart after the loss of her beloved princess...met a sweet, honest angel that descended from the skies...and thawed the Queen's frozen heart..." Chikaru opened her arms as if to embrace Nagisa.

"Nagisa-chan is Shizuma-sama's rescuing angel. Come to think of it, Sakuragi Kaori was also very calm and lovely...and a frail, beautiful girl," Chikaru recounted sadly.

"The young lady returned to Heaven quite early, because her beautiful soul was loved by God...so they say. She was probably too pure and beautiful to remain on Earth. That's why she had to depart so soon..."

Nagisa felt a piercing stab in her heart.

“After she passed away, Shizuma-sama...lost her usual kindness. She had me worried. She played it off with her usual flirtatious behavior, but I somehow knew... Shizuma-sama was very lonely...”

“Chi-Chikaru-sama...” Tamao murmured.

“Oh, I’m sorry for talking about this...” Chikaru let go of Nagisa’s arm, which she was still hugging. She peered into Nagisa’s face.

“Nagisa-chan...the Miator students may say all sorts of things to you. But... Shizuma-sama is definitely cheerful when she is with you. Please stay with Shizuma-sama, no matter what. If things get worse, Shizuma-sama will probably withdraw from the *Étoile* competition, as a last resort. Please don’t lose sight of what’s important, regardless of what people around you say, okay?”

Her smile was like that of a goddess.

Shizuma’s smile was dignified and almost overpowering, like a Greek goddess, but Chikaru’s smile was warm and comforting, like a gentle spring breeze.

“...Yes...” Stunned, Nagisa almost choked on her answer and couldn’t say another word.

Chikaru patted Nagisa’s shoulder. “Good, Nagisa-chan...that’s the *Étoile* candidate representing Astraea that I know. We are lucky to have so many wonderful transfer students arrive this year. I just met Hikari-chan a few minutes ago...you know, the new Spica transfer student?”

Nagisa finally began to focus on the conversation. “Oh, yes...I met her in the Maiden Horse Race... I was just wondering how she was doing.”

“Oh, so you’ve already met her? She’s adorable, too. She’s cute, sweet, and quite sharp...and she seems strong-willed, to withstand the bullying by Amane-chan’s fans.” Chikaru chuckled.

Nagisa looked where Chikaru pointed—and saw Hikari-chan, sitting two tables away.

Hikari noticed them and waved back shyly.

“Come to think of it, you and Hikari-chan seem a lot alike. Nagisa-chan, if you

ever get tired of Shizuma-sama...won't you transfer to Lulim? If you and Hikari-chan join me, then the Costume Club will be sooo fun..."

Tamao laughed at Chikaru's joke.

"Hmm—so, Kagome-chan, you never attended school until you entered Spica's junior high?"

Kagome gave a small shake of her head in response to Miyuki's question. "No."

They were in the St. Lulim Girls' School dining hall.

Bright maple wood floors and off-white plaster walls were easy on the eyes. A large fireplace stood at the far end of the room, but there was no fire in it during this warm season.

A domed ceiling made the room seem spacious, and in the center of the large hall was an oval table, roughly five meters wide, that held numerous pink roses in a vase and had a spotlight shining down on it.

The tables and chairs had bright, casual colors, and the central table's motif was pink—Lulim's school color.

It was time for dessert, and the atmosphere had become relaxed but lively.

This dining hall gathered students from Miator's Flower Class, Spica's *Trois* Class, and Lulim's Class C.

Many of the tables were close to the center. Sitting at the head chair of the center table next to the grand piano was the Miator Student Council President, Rokujo Miyuki.

Miyuki was curious about the tiny girl who sat across from her, clutching a small teddy bear. She talked to her and found out that she came from a very affluent family.

She was a first-year student, but she had just come back to Japan recently with her wealthy parents, and she had had a private tutor teach her at home until now.

Miyuki thought... *A child like her could...*

“You’re very cute. If you transferred to Miator, there’d be many onesama who’d love to take care of you as their younger sister. You’d be extremely popular,” Miyuki said with a smile.

Kagome, feeling lonely, muttered, “But...Kizuna-onesama isn’t at Miator.”

“Oh, you already have a favorite onesama? Don’t worry, we have many lovely onesama too...”

As the Student Council President, Miyuki couldn’t shake the habit of scouting everyone for her school.

A sudden restlessness swept the room, beginning at the entrance.

“What is it?” Miyuki slowly turned around.

A student, being led by one of the sisters, entered.

What’s going on, at such a time as this? Is someone tardy? Or...

The student, who wore the white uniform of Spica, made a beeline to the center table where Miyuki sat.

Spotlights shining from the walls seemed to create shadows that first ran ahead, then bounced behind, as if chasing the walking student—which made her stand out even more.

Miyuki...squinted. *That face...*

Excitement filled the whole room. The sister stopped next to the grand piano, right under the main spotlight shining from above...and clapped her hands over her head.

“Everyone, be quiet... I would like to introduce a new transfer student who has moved into our dorm today...”

Before the sister could finish her introduction, the transfer student stepped in front of her. She introduced herself with a clear, smooth voice—which matched her sleek, white Spica uniform.

“Everyone...good day, I’m Kusanagi Makoto. I’m a fifth-year student in Class

Trois... Nice to meet you."

Everyone was in awe of her energetic voice and beautiful profile. The small-framed girl was shorter than average but had long, skinny limbs. Her figure lacked womanly curves and looked androgynous—like a boy.

Yes... The spotlights revealed a skinny but poised uniformed figure that looked boyish—a really handsome boy.

The bangs of her short hair fell upon an unbelievably delicate face, with prominent nose and eyes and an expression of mingled elegance and self-composure. It caused the crowd to sigh in admiration.

She's so handsome...yet so cute... Miyuki thought. Who in the world is she...?

Makoto pulled a single large rose from the center table's vase, sniffed its wonderful scent, almost closing her eyes—and flung it aside.

Like a dart.

The rose-arrow flew straight for Miyuki, who was clutching the back of her chair as she turned to look behind her at Makoto.

What in the world...

Before she could finish her thought, the flower nicked Miyuki's cheek, continued its flight to the table beyond her...and landed on a dessert plate.

The light pink rose bloomed on a slice of devil's food cake.

The dessert sat in front of...

Otori Amane.

Hah!—Miyuki turned back around.

Amane's face crumpled. She slowly looked in the direction of the dart-thrower.

Makoto, poised for action, glared menacingly at Amane, her body seeming to give off a purple aura. She finally broke the silence.

“Are you Prince Amane? Nice to meet you. I’ve returned to Astraea Hill, just to save you,” she sneered. “Oh, how shall I say this? For the longest time, even before I attended Spica Elementary School, Spica was a shining star, a pure garden of maidens. But now I’m back, and I see Spica has turned into...a chaotic place, much like the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which received God’s wrath. It’s been tossed about over ridiculous romantic involvements, and all because of the cheap love affair of one foolish prince. On top of that, even the holy *Étoile* competition has been reduced to nothing more than a tool to capture her love...ohhh, I can’t stand it anymore!”

Looking to the heavens, Makoto grabbed her head in exaggerated agony.

“That’s why I challenge you, Prince Otori Amane...”

She pointed her forefinger at Amane. In Astraea, it was a gesture that was regarded as a challenge to a duel.

Amane didn’t say a word, so Makoto snickered.

Chuckle... “Well, you certainly are a beautiful, pure, and wonderful prince, eh? But are you really Spica’s number-one star? You really don’t seem like much of one. But from now on...you are no longer Spica’s number-one star!” she suddenly roared.

“The true leading star of Spica is, and will always be...” Makoto closed her eyes, enchanted. “The star whose position as one of the Five Great Stars has never been filled since she left...that star!”

Most of the upperclassmen...were slightly agitated.

The star that had left one of the positions of the Five Great Stars open...for eternity.

Several years ago, a legendary star had won the *Étoile* competition, but she had left the school while she wore the crown, for some unknown reason...

In order to leave a record of her glory in Spica’s history, the Five Great Stars system always kept the top seat vacant...to remember the most powerful Star of all time...

Now that you mention it...Makoto looks like her, Amane thought.

“Are you related to her by any chance?” she inquired. She remembered seeing that page in Astraea’s school directory. She had seen the picture on the day she had decided to enter the *Étoile* competition...even Amane had been convinced that the person in the picture was worthy of being an *Étoile* and being adored by all....

Makoto opened her razor-sharp eyes. “Maybe, who can tell? It doesn’t matter anyway. You don’t have the right to ask any questions about her. Especially because you are the one who has ruined the honor of beautiful Spica—something she left behind—over a ridiculous romantic affair!” With that retort, she lightly stalked between the tables.

“I love only her out of the whole world. That’s why I want to protect Spica, the school she dearly loved and protected. That’s all.”

Amane watched, flabbergasted. *Is she trying to make sure everyone sees her face...?*

Makoto called to the entire room, “So, everyone—follow me from now on! The silliness of this year’s *Étoile* competition ends here. We, as residents of Astraea Hill, don’t need peach-colored romance. She, the first star, said so herself. There is no such thing as choosing which girl you love. She said that everyone should be able to live in an all-girl world, with a larger mindset and more generosity, working together and looking to the future. So...this brief time of youth shouldn’t be wasted on cheap romance, which is like a firecracker, an alluring, but temporary, burst. Nor should it be wasted on jealousy, which stems from an attraction as powerful as the gravity of the planet Venus, but which reduces humans to cruel beings. Your present beauty should be gathered with others to live a whole and peaceful life together, as one, just the way she hoped. Everyone here has a pure heart, beautiful as a pearl. So...you shouldn’t use that positive energy for something petty, like jealousy or romance.”

Makoto reached toward the domed ceiling, as if she were talking to the heavens.

“We need to live more freely... We must find...” Her face sparkled under the chandelier lights hanging from the ceiling. “The pure, beautiful, and precious treasure in all of us... That’s why I will love all of you alike...”

Makoto spread her arms as she faced the crowd, like a radiant ancient Roman statue.

“I will give my love to everyone. So I ask for you to love me in return...”

Makoto’s searing gaze pierced through all the students’ hearts. The hall fell silent...then...several students sighed deeply... *Ooohh...*

She is...so beautiful and brimming with confidence...

We were looking for her to lead us...

The Spica students blushed. Even the Miator and Lulim students felt a bit jealous of Spica.

Snap... Makoto snapped her fingers, and two Spica students came out, holding a box about a foot square. They opened it.

They were already under Makoto’s spell, so when she thanked them for bringing the box out to her, their faces turned beet red. From inside the box, Makoto pulled out a large number of sparkling blue items.

Kyaaaah!—cries and screams intermixed as the students at the center table went wild first.

Makoto explained matter-of-factly, “As a token of our meeting...I brought a little gift. Please accept it. This symbolizes my feelings for everyone here. Starting today, all of you are my precious family. I’ve come alone to Spica...so I welcome anyone that loves me to please come to my room. I will always welcome you. I don’t like ugly romance...but I love to give hugs and kisses to my precious family and sisters...”

She gave a wicked smile.

Eager to see Makoto, the students seated at the far tables kicked their chairs over as they stood.

“Aoi Nagisa...right? Thank you very much for helping me the other day!” Hikari bowed. She had stopped Nagisa as she was leaving the dining hall, headed back toward the Bell Walkways.

Nagisa waved her hands bashfully. “Oh, don’t worry about it... Anyone would have done that.”

“But it was my fault you almost fell from the tower instead of me... And the atmosphere at Miator and Spica became sour after that, so I wasn’t able to say thanks... I’m so sorry.”

Tears welled in Hikari’s eyes. Nagisa gently placed her hand on Hikari’s shoulder. “No, really...don’t worry about it. You didn’t do anything wrong, Hikari-chan...”

Hikari was relieved to hear Nagisa’s reassuring words, and she felt her heart warm.

Nagisa continued, “But, umm, can I ask you something? You’re also a transfer student, right, Hikari-chan?”

Hikari looked up. “Yes...”

Nagisa, observing a tiny teardrop in the corner of Hikari’s eye, said, “Hikari-chan, how do you feel about being in the *Étoile* competition, even though you just transferred here?”

“How...?”

“Well, you know...did you feel like it was more than you could handle...or something that absolutely freaked you out...?” Nagisa struggled to explain her question.

Hikari finally understood what she was being asked. She smiled shyly as she answered, “I always feel everything is more than I can handle. But...”

“But...?”

“Amane-sama told me...even she wanted to run away, long ago. So, I should stay by her side...” Hikari blushed as she continued, “The only thing I *can* do is be by Amane-sama’s side...”

Hikari’s beaming smile was too bright for Nagisa.

That evening, the students who had eaten at the Lulim dining hall spread

rumors like wildfire.

“Wow, is that a real sapphire?”

“Of course! Makoto-sama wouldn’t give out any fake jewelry.”

“But real sapphire pendants for everyone—even though we have many students from wealthy families in Astraea...this may be crude, but...I wonder how much it all cost?”

“Oh, forget the price... Makoto-sama doesn’t care about money. I’ve finally realized she is the only one who truly loves Spica and Astraea with all her heart! That’s why her overflowing love became a beautiful sapphire and...”

“Hey, why do you call her ‘Makoto-sama’...?”

“Ah... Well, that’s the only thing we *can* call her. I wish you’d been at the Lulim dining hall to see the whole thing, Yoshi-chan... She was really beautiful. Proud, poised, and strong...”

“But I swear you talked about Amane-sama like that yesterday...right...?”

“Oh...but it can’t be helped. Amane-sama is also very lovely, handsome, and really beautiful when she’s riding horses...she is like a real prince of Spica. But...”

“But?”

“But you know...Amane-sama...is... Well, Amane-sama used to say she wasn’t interested in girls, but...didn’t you see her at the *Étoile* competition, Yoshi-chan?”

“Yeah. I was pretty shocked, too...”

“Shocked is an understatement. Sad is more like it. The cool Amane-sama, who never batted an eye at anyone, so...frantic...for that girl...Konohana Hikari. The image I had of Amane-sama sort of crumbled at that moment...but...you know, Yoshi-chan...”

“What?”

“As a fan, I still wanted to see Amane-sama claim the *Étoile* crown... I was so intent on cheering for her. I was sad that Amane-sama liked that girl, but a true fan must wish for the happiness of Amane-sama. But...”

“But?”

“But...after the way Makoto-sama explained it... I don't know...how shall I put it? Compared to Makoto-sama, I wonder how Amane-sama feels about us. It somehow made me sad. Yes...we knew it all along. Amane-sama was shy from the get-go, and didn't like to show off, and blushed at the thought of having fans in the first place. Her bashfulness was one of her most endearing qualities. Amane-sama is the prince we look up to, but...she doesn't care about Spica as a whole...so I became a bit sad. I know it's not Amane-sama's fault, but...”

“I see...”

“Makoto-sama is very strong, noble, and confident...and absolutely awesome. I was instantly drawn to her, and I feel I can follow her. Makoto-sama will...take care of us...and Spica and Astraea...and lead us from the front.”

“So basically...you're going after your desires, right?”

“Oh gosh! Yoshi-chan, that's not it... Well, if you see Makoto-sama, you'll see. She's really great! Almost as great as...Amane-sama. I didn't know much at first, but she claims to hold the traditions passed down to her from the legendary star that holds the unfilled position...”

“Hey, what are you talking about? Legendary star that holds the unfilled position...?”

“I didn't really understand that part, but...the upperclassmen obviously knew about her. Ah, but...that's beside the point. Makoto-sama was really beautiful, confident, and overflowing with brilliance! So Yoshi-chan, let's go see Makoto-sama tomorrow!”

After a few minutes...the room lights were turned off.

The dark Strawberry Dorms at midnight.

Nagisa couldn't sleep.

She kept tossing in her bed.

“After she passed away, Shizuma-sama...lost her usual kindness...but I somehow knew...Shizuma-sama was very lonely...”

Chikaru's words echoed in Nagisa's heart.

So she was...such a special girl. Sakuragi Kaori-san...

Tamao really tried to downplay it, claiming Chikaru-sama tends to exaggerate things, so I shouldn't take her that seriously, but...everything Chikaru-sama said seemed so...true.

Everyone else hesitated to tell me about the truth behind Shizuma-oneesama's past. Chikaru-sama was quite different from Shizuma-oneesama, but to me she seems like a kind and gentle beauty.

To hear a person like that speak about the girl in such a way...

"Sakuragi Kaori was also very calm and lovely...and a frail, beautiful girl... She was probably too pure and beautiful to remain on Earth..."

Chikaru's words continued to pierce Nagisa's heart, but she tried to comfort herself.

The day the first round of the Étoile competition ended, after the coronation ceremony, Shizuma-oneesama asked me to believe in her.

Right now, Shizuma-oneesama wants to be with me. I believe Shizuma-oneesama, even now. She really cares about me, I really felt that. Sometimes I'm overwhelmingly happy, but—I've finally become accustomed to it.

But Shizuma-oneesama also said she didn't want to deny her past...the beautiful memories that were like a dream...and the painfully sad days that ripped her heart...

The girl Shizuma-oneesama had strong feelings and bonds with...Sakuragi Kaori.

I only know her name...and a few stories about her elementary school years from Chiyo-chan. A frail, beautiful girl who was perfect for Shizuma-oneesama—the first girl the flirtatious Shizuma-oneesama had a serious relationship with.

But she was stricken by a disease without a cure, and less than a year into their relationship she left the school—and eventually passed away.

When I first heard it, I was a naïve fifteen-year-old who didn't quite get it, because it seemed like a fairy tale. But now...I've heard the story from Shizuma-

oneesama, Tamao-chan, and even from Chikaru-oneesama...

About Shizuma-oneesama's past.

And how Shizuma-oneesama feels about me.

Is Shizuma-oneesama comparing me and Kaori?

Instead of Chikaru's words of encouragement, the story of Sakuragi Kaori stayed in Nagisa's heart...and echoed.

What was Sakuragi Kaori like...?

And Hikari's confident smile at the Bell Walkways...it also pricked my heart.

Chapter 4

Vulnerable Girls Blossom Under the Conquering Shadow of a Young, Gallant Emperor

“There are more students here than usual.”

Otori Amane, as always, stood at the front gate of St. Spica Girls' Institute, which shone in the white morning sunshine. She stared at the long line of girls waiting for her on the other side of the gate. There seemed to be almost twice the usual amount.

She felt dizzy. Despite the various rumors that were flying around, ever since the *Étoile* competition had begun the number of Amane-sama wannabees had increased by the day.

Amane refused all fanclub activities on campus, so the only chance her fans had to express their love was at this gate.

Last night...a mesmerizing Social Exchange Dinner, a peculiar transfer student jumping in to pick a fight with me...and now this humongous crowd this morning...

She shook her head, wondering how much worse things could get.

Did I do something wrong? Or am I extremely unlucky? Or possessed? She pondered her predicament, which was unusual for her.

She pressed on her temples. *My stomach feels queasy. I wonder why...maybe the pressure from competing in the Étoile competition is getting to me. Shion told me the next cadette event is a tennis tournament.*

I'm okay at tennis...but I wonder if Hikari can play? If she hasn't played too much, I'm pretty sure she'll get really nervous... I'll have to back her up as much as possible... But if Hikari gets into any danger, like what happened in the Maiden Horse Race, then I'll...

As Amane got lost in her thoughts...*Ding dong...*

The first warning bell rang from Maiden Park.

Oh no, not again. Amane always fidgeted in front of the gate until it was time.
I need to go.

Giving up, she tried to enter the gate between the rows of fans.

“Oh, excuse me.”

A Spica student flitted past Amane like a breeze. Her short hair waved in the wind, and an aroma of authentic musk lingered in the air.

Amane, surprised by the sudden turn of events, heard loud screams break out...

“Kyaaaah, Makoto-sama has arrived!”

“Makoto-sama, we’ve been waiting for you...!”

“Our new star, Makoto-sama!”

“Kyaaaah, Makoto-sama, please kiss us...!!”

Half of the students lined up at the gate were waiting for Makoto.

In one night, the news had spread throughout Spica. The students at the gate were Spica students who had become instant Makoto-sama fans and other students that those fans had dragged along to ogle Makoto-sama.

It was almost time for school.

Makoto had probably waited until the last minute to see how far the rumors had spread.

Her fans raged with excitement, and the Amane-sama wannabees, wearing their trademark black chokers, glared at them with envy.

Makoto raised her hand high and boldly walked the gauntlet of fans.

Her erect posture enhanced her graceful strides. It was a very alluring sight.

Even the Amane-sama wannabees, waiting for Amane’s long-anticipated arrival, locked their eyes on Makoto’s movements.



When Makoto entered the gate, she blew kisses at the crowd. High-pitched screams filled the air.

“Kyaaaah, Makoto-sama, you’re so wonderful!”

Amid the commotion, a student scampered toward Makoto. In her hand was a small, wrapped gift.

“Umm...here...” the girl said in a frail voice.

“This is a gift in return for the sapphire necklace I received from you last night—though it might not be much of a gift...but I...umm...”

The other students were agitated by the girl’s selfish act, but Makoto quietly raised her hand and controlled the crowd.

“Thank you... I’m so glad. Not for the gift itself, but rather your proper feelings of wanting to give me a return gift. I’m deeply moved by the thought. Thank you, my sweet little star of Spica. I love you.”

Makoto hugged the second-year student’s shoulder, pulled her over, and kissed her cheek. The second-year student was a bit taller than Makoto, but Makoto’s actions made her seem larger than life.

Kyaaaaaaaaah!

A mixture of screams and cheers rang through the air.

Makoto waved at each student and entered the school building.

“I love you, my little stars of Spica. I’d like to kiss all of you...but I’ll just send you my feelings. I will accept everyone...so please don’t hesitate to come to me.”

The wannabees looked at Makoto with a bit of hatred. But they were still a little jealous.

“Awwwww, only if Amane-sama would be like that, too...” a young first-year student lamented.

“Shh, stupid. Amane-sama’s coolness and sensitive nature make her alluring...” a third-year student, following Makoto with her eyes, commented.

Amane saw the whole ordeal. *I'm amazed to see she isn't embarrassed to do all that...*

A person like her should be in the Étoile competition...not me...

The revolutionary fire slowly spread.

A Revolution.

The small Emperor, Makoto, had arrived, and the news created big waves in Astraea.

In the hall in front of Spica Second Year Class *Deux*...

“Hey, have you seen the Emperor, Kei-chan?”

“Yes, of course. She gave gifts out already.”

“Ehh, really?! Oh...what luck. You should have taken me out there, too. So, how was it?”

“How...?”

“Well, there are rumors saying that the Emperor will receive all gifts and thank the gift-bearers with...a kiss...”

At the Lulim inner garden bench during break time...

“Hey, did you hear? Something exciting is happening in Spica!”

“Yes, I know. It all began at the Social Exchange Dinner, right?”

“Oh yeah, the girl who gave out sapphire necklaces to everyone. It's rumored she's aiming to enter the *Étoile* competition...”

“*Étoile*? That's impossible, since round one is over already. Besides, Spica's Prince Amane won it anyway, so they don't need to try so hard anymore...”

“Well, the girl who passed out the sapphires keeps picking fights with Prince Amane. And they're in the same class. They say the air in the class is so tense...”

“Hyaaaah, Toki-chan, you know so much. Ah, of course, you were such a Prince Amane fan, weren't you, Toki-chan?”

“Awww, if the Student Council President, Chikaru-oneesama, would just enter the *Étoile* competition, Lulim would be a little more excited... Don’t you think it’s a great idea? Lulim’s Holy Mother, Chikaru-sama! Her Madonna smile would worry the Miator and Spica candidates, for sure...”

“No, it won’t happen. She hates those kinds of things. Doing it would cut down on her time at the Costume Club, watching cute girls in outfits. And she doesn’t like to call attention to herself anyway. She’s definitely Lulim’s number-one star, but...for some reason, I think...Lulim shouldn’t get involved in such a mess...yeah...”

In Miator’s Student Council room...

“President Rokujo...did you hear?” Marikoya Aiko asked as she lowered a heavy box full of documents from the shelf.

“Hear what?” Miyuki shifted her dust mask to answer.

“About Spica’s new transfer student. According to the rumors, she’s a really showy character. I was curious about her, but I haven’t had a chance to see her yet. I believe you saw her in the Lulim dining hall during the Social Exchange Dinner?”

Aiko’s stern, virtuous face was unusually filled with curiosity.

If Aiko, the most monotonous person, is curious about Makoto, then Astraea Hill must be overcome with the “Makoto-sama” windstorm... The thought worried Miyuki a little.

“Yes, I saw her. She came back from Russia, where she was studying music. She was powerful...and quite impressive.”

“Impressive...?” Aiko said, bewildered.

“And let’s see...she was very confident. She was quite small, though...really small. But she had so much presence I didn’t notice it. And since she was small, she seemed pretty androgynous...kind of boyish, I suppose? She definitely has the looks to be really popular. Especially in Spica, since macho stars are their claim to fame.”

Miyuki laughed at her own comments.

“She actually promised to rebuild the slightly ruined Astraea, bringing it back to its former glory...an egalitarian who loves everyone equally. She had the gall to hand out sapphire necklaces to everyone as a token of appreciation. I’m surprised Sister Fujii didn’t stop her from bribing everyone in the room—such an indecent act, mind you. Maybe she overlooked it because Makoto had just come back from Russia or something.”

Aiko placed her forefinger on Miyuki’s lips to stop her. “I’ve heard quite enough, Miyuki-sama. A troublesome person has arrived, hasn’t she?” she asked bluntly.

“Absolutely...” Miyuki inspected the old labels on the box. “This has become quite bothersome. But...”

Ah... Miyuki smiled at the box she had been looking for and pulled it out.

The old, faded letters on the cover were barely visible... “Astraea *Étoile* History... But currently...” *Cough cough cough*...Miyuki coughed on a cloud of dust.

“Are you all right, Miyuki-sama...?” Aiko—who was usually emotionless—was flustered as she hastened to Miyuki.

“Yes, I’m fine. We at Miator should lay low for a while, to see how things develop. Even if a new so-called hero has arrived, the fact of the matter is that she can’t do much because she’s new to the place. And the bane of her existence is Otori Amane. If we allow the Spica students to fight among themselves, Miator might have a better chance of winning the crown. As the saying goes, ‘If you chase two rabbits, both will escape.’ Let’s just pray the Amane couple will be eliminated...”

With the change in the second-round event, the Amane-Hikari couple would surely be disqualified...and by using Tamao’s wall of defense, the anti-Nagisa movement inside Miator could be eliminated, and the devil that Spica would probably send to tempt Nagisa—Kusanagi Makoto—could be deflected, thus preventing Makoto’s entry into the *Étoile* competition.

Miyuki laughed quietly as she thought—*I can kill not two, but three birds with*

one stone.

Aiko looked worried as she said, “If you say so, Miyuki-sama...” and smiled weakly.

As the chaos continued...

The notices for the *Étoile* competition’s second round were posted.

ANNOUNCEMENT

This year’s *Étoile* Competition **SECOND ROUND**

Starting next week, the second round of the
Étoile Competition will be conducted.

– SECOND ROUND –

L’Épreuve d’amour (Tests of Love) Birth Month of St. John the Baptist, for two weeks and a day after the Day of St. Meriadoc

PRELIMINARY CADETTE EVENT

Faceless Devil

Location: Astraea Hill **Time:** *Two weeks, starting from the Day of St. Meriadoc

MAIN AÎNÉE EVENT

Return from Temptation

Location: St. Miator Girls’ Academy Koubu Hall

PARTICIPANTS LIST

(in ranking order from the first round)

ST. SPICA GIRLS’ INSTITUTE

Fifth Year, Class Trois: Otori Amane

Third Year, Class Un: Konohana Hikari

ST. MIATOR GIRLS' ACADEMY

Sixth Year, Snow Class: Hanazono Shizuma

Fourth Year, Moon Class: Aoi Nagisa

Total: Nine (9) Couples

REMARKS:

* Due to the unique characteristics of the *Cadette Round, Faceless Devil*, there will be nine anonymous participants, equaling the number of couples during this event.

* If an anonymous participant claims victory over a participating couple, that participant will be allowed to enter the competition, starting with the main event, *Return from Temptation*.

* Detailed rules will be provided on a separate document at a later date.

—Étoile Competition Executive Committee

While the announcement was being posted on bulletin boards, Tomori Shion sat alone in the Student Council room, drinking tea.

A very strong and bitter green tea, which matched how she felt.

She thought about Makoto. Why had she suddenly returned, and why now?

Shion remembered when she had been in the same class as Makoto, in elementary school. Compared to the brainy Shion, who had received a lot of attention even back then, Makoto hadn't stood out much.

Makoto had a very pretty face, but she looked really childish then... I think I was in her third-grade class...I remember having a conversation with this non-

charismatic girl.

Considering that's all I can remember about her, we probably weren't that close.

She said she really loved her older sister. They were far apart in age, but they got along very well, and she looked up to and respected her.

Her sister used to go to Spica—and, she said bashfully, that she wanted to attend Spica just to be like her sister.

Around that time, she began to play the violin.

Shion stood at the large glass wall and gazed out. From there she could only see the wide sky and the thick green forest of Maiden Park.

What is Makoto doing right now?

Shion was dubious about Makoto's claims of wanting to save Spica from its downfall and to revive sisterly love in Astraea.

And why is she so bent on taking down Prince Amane? Why did this girl, intent on becoming a violin player and studying abroad since junior high, suddenly give it up...and come back here at such a strange time?

How in the world did she know about Spica's current situation?

A flock of white doves skimmed over Maiden Park's forest in one straight, beautiful line...

Shion recalled the day Makoto had come to Spica.

That day...were the doves flying like this, too?

As the birds flew toward St. Lulim Girls' School,

—I wonder if Lulim has a "White Dove Lovers" club?

Shion chuckled at her own sick joke. She thought about her beloved St. Spica Girls' Institute, and the future of Amane and Hikari...

She was a bit glum.

At the furthest end of St. Lulim Girls' School's inner garden, where light-

colored, delicately variegated box elder, maple, and ivy grew, there was an inconspicuous arbor, hidden under the shade of the trees.

Kizuna, Remon, and Kagome had been told to guard the area.

Today's theme was "Police." They wore sharp police uniforms, complete with patrol caps, and surveyed the area with watchful eyes.

"Inspector Remon, what is the situation?"

"Inspector Kizuna, no suspicious persons at this time!"

"Yes, Mr. Teddy Bear agrees!" Kagome chimed in gleefully, holding the bear with a necktie tied around its neck.

"Oh, that's great..." Kizuna patted Kagome's head, because she seemed so happy.

"What is this? Why did you call for me...?" Miyuki inquired. She sat on the arbor bench under the warm shade.

"Oh, I just wanted to invite you for some tea because the weather was so wonderful, President Miyuki. There's no need to be so paranoid." Chikaru smiled as she opened a can and offered it to Miyuki. "But unfortunately I only have *oshiruko*⁴ instead of tea..."

Miyuki tried to hide her displeasure. "That's fine...thank you."

"Oh, wonderful! Miyuki-sama, do you like *oshiruko* too? A lot of Lulim students love sweets, so at their request we have *oshiruko* served in the cafeteria all year round. You're more than welcome to come and drink it at our cafeteria any time."

Miyuki didn't really like *oshiruko*, but she forced herself to drink it.

She grimaced. *It's so sweet...*

"Miyuki-sama, did you know that Makoto-chan has come back to Spica recently?" Chikaru beamed.

"Yes...I hear she's quite popular." Miyuki tried to get rid of the sweet taste in her mouth.

She looked around—the arbor blocked most of her view—and noticed four

more cans of *oshiruko* sitting next to Chikaru on the bench, but no hot-water pots.

“Makoto-chan likes to be showy and exaggerated...tsk tsk.” Chikaru laughed deliberately.

But Miyuki felt odd about it—Makoto-*chan*?

In contrast to Chikaru’s laughter, Miyuki’s face was serious as she looked straight at Chikaru.

“Did you...call her back...?” Miyuki asked.

“Yes. I’m the one that told her. I flew a white dove all the way to Russia...tsk. Miyuki-sama, isn’t it fun to write letters by air mail? I like the very thin air-mail stationery—it’s almost see-through and so pretty. I even acted like a noble lady and used quill and ink...” Chikaru tilted her head and smiled as she explained.

“Why did you do it?” Miyuki asked, dumbstruck.

Chikaru suddenly looked disheartened and hung her head. “Ohh...I’m so sorry... I wanted to apologize about that...which is why I called you here today.”

She looked really apologetic as she explained her actions.

“I really didn’t think it would blow all out of proportion like this... I always wrote letters to Makoto-chan...because I liked to use air-mail stationery. So in my letter this time, I just told her what was going on at school. Makoto-chan was a Spica student, and I thought she would like to hear about this year’s *Étoile* competition, so...”

Chikaru smiled softly, almost nostalgically, as she recounted the events, but Miyuki seemed doubtful.

“Are you sure that’s it?” she asked.

Chikaru’s answer was just as Miyuki expected.

“Yes, of course. Would there be any other reason? This year’s *Étoile* competition is mainly a fight between Spica and Miator. Lulim students, including myself, will just sit back and enjoy the show.”

“But President Chikaru...don’t you want Lulim to do well in the competition

too...?”

Miyuki went straight to the heart of the matter, but Chikaru didn't bat an eye.

“Yes, of course. I have those hopes. But...”

She pointed to the arbor entrance. “Look at them. The future stars of Lulim are these adorable girls. They definitely have potential, so when they become fifth-year students, they'll have a good chance, but...at this point, they're still too young.”

The three girls who were supposed to be guarding the area were now leaning against each other as they slept, with Kagome resting her head on Kizuna's lap.

“Lulim will probably have a golden age after I graduate. I might not be able to witness it, but...” Chikaru's face turned moody for the first time. “But it's okay... as long as these girls are happy. All I can do is teach them everything I know... prepare them for a glorious future. So Miyuki-sama, please don't worry about Lulim.”

“I see,” Miyuki said sympathetically.

Lulim was a relatively new school with only a few students who were well versed in school politics. In Miyuki's opinion, the only person who fit the bill was Chikaru, the reigning star of Lulim. Miyuki even felt pity for Chikaru, a lone star with no peers of her caliber.

“Chikaru-sama...if you were in Miator, you'd be more...” Miyuki started to say, but Chikaru smiled.

“No, don't say that. I dearly love Lulim...”

“I'm sorry,” Miyuki said sincerely. *No wonder she's Lulim's Holy Mother. I don't even come close to Chikaru's immeasurable kindness.* But Miyuki's greatness was in the fact that she could admit to these things.

Chikaru continued, “Oh, I'm sorry...I got so gloomy. I'm the one who's supposed to apologize, Miyuki-sama. I'm very sorry Makoto-chan suddenly declared her intention to enter the *Étoile* competition and became the cause of all this turmoil...”

She grabbed another can of *oshiruko*.

“Would you like seconds?”

“N-No, thank you, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? Please don’t hold back. Or...are you still angry...?”

Chikaru seemed so remorseful, and Miyuki hastily comforted her, then announced that she had to leave.

Before she left, Miyuki emphasized that Chikaru wasn’t responsible for Kusanagi Makoto’s behavior since she’d arrived, and Miator wasn’t all that affected by it, so Chikaru didn’t have to worry.

Miyuki scurried away, saying it was almost time for the afternoon classes.



Chikaru, watching Miyuki disappear, thought, *Are you relieved now, Miyuki-chan? I'm sorry for giving you sweet drinks you don't like...*

Fwooooo...

The winds whistled loudly. The dewy, stormy winds were still a bit chilly on the skin, but they carried a warm moistness.

Nagisa leaned on the roof railing and looked to the clouds in the sky. She held a small piece of paper.

This is real, right?

The person she was waiting for hadn't showed up yet, so she was a bit worried.

During lunch break, I will wait for you on the roof.

—Shizuma

It was a simple note, passed to her at the beginning of fourth period.

Who did she give it to in my absence?

It was such a spontaneous act, and was so very like Shizuma-oneesama, Nagisa had burst out in laughter when she'd read it.

Her heart thumped at the thought of meeting Shizuma, but these days instead of feeling nervous she actually felt refreshed—and her heart swelled with anticipation.

During lunch break, the announcements for the second round of the *Étoile* competition were to be posted, so the class had been filled with excitement. This was a great excuse to get away from it.

But...I was targeted immediately after the posting of the first-round announcements...

Groups of scary upperclassmen called me out and taunted me about not being

worthy to be in the Étoile competition, especially as Shizuma-sama's partner...or they left me stuck with cleaning duties by myself...and that library incident culprit...

Looking back, I guess it was inevitable. I didn't know until I saw the Astraea School Directory...

Ah...

Nagisa realized. The Étoile competition announcement...getting called out...and the fake letter...

Don't tell me this is another...

Nagisa's face went white.

"Nagisa!"

A low, powerful, and lustrous voice came from behind her.

It's Shizuma-oneesama's voice. So it wasn't a mistake.

Nagisa didn't realize, as she sprang toward Shizuma, that she was more happy to see Shizuma than relieved about the note not being a trick.

Shizuma had just opened the door at the top of the stairs, but as soon as she saw Nagisa bounding toward her she opened her arms wide for her darling girl.

Nagisa's smile broadened some more.

Jump... Nagisa scampered up the three steps to the stairway entrance where Shizuma stood and bear-hugged her.

Shizuma-oneesama—Nagisa felt sort of nostalgic.

She burrowed her face into Shizuma's chest and felt happy, her worries melting away.

"Nagisa..."

Nagisa heard Shizuma's voice—which sounded lower, because it was traveling through Shizuma's body and echoing in Nagisa's ears.

Ah... Nagisa tried to hear what Shizuma wanted to say next, but...

Thump thump thump thump... All she could hear was the faint sound of

Shizuma's heartbeats.

A very soft, warm sound. Nagisa felt excited to be so close to her, but also felt a strange sense of familiarity, a very blissful, soothing feeling...

She was enveloped in happiness, about to float away...

"Goodness, Nagisa...what's wrong? Were you feeling lonely? My darling little girl..." Shizuma softly laughed as she rubbed Nagisa's shoulder with her large hands.

Nagisa was coaxed into comfort, but... *Hah! I wonder if Shizuma-oneesama thinks I'm strange, since I bear-hugged her so suddenly...*

But when she looked up, she saw...the gentlest, kindest expression on Shizuma's face...

She tried to pull away, but Shizuma's arms locked her in, preventing her from moving.

Shizuma looked at Nagisa for a brief moment before saying, "Goodness, so Nagisa does like me, at least a little. I'm so glad." Her face moved even closer to Nagisa's.

Nagisa was pulled into Shizuma's beautiful eyes, full of strong will and determination, as the realization zoomed up on her...

Ah...she's gonna kiss me...

Nagisa closed her eyes to prepare for it, but...Shizuma sweetly nibbled her ear instead.

Nagisa's ear turned red, and a little wet. A brisk wind went by, and the dampness on her ear was chilled by the strong winds blowing across the roof.

Shizuma drew her face back and spoke. "Soon I won't be able to see you...so we need to hold back a bit."

O-Oh...so that's what it's about.

"A-Ahahahaha..."

Nagisa felt her body go limp and dropped to her knees.

Shizuma led Nagisa over next to the railing, the best vantage point to see the

whole expanse of Maiden Park.

Shizuma's beautiful silver-gray locks waved in the wind. Nagisa felt as if something had been drained out of her as she stood next to Shizuma and looked at the sky.

The same sky that she'd been looking at as she had thought about Shizuma.

Shizuma-oneesama...Shizuma-oneesama, as you look at the sky, what are you thinking about?

Nagisa tilted her head as she pondered that question.

Maybe...maybe Shizuma-oneesama is thinking about...Sakuragi Kaori... The pure-hearted soul... Her most beloved girl who left the skies...

Shizuma-oneesama seems so sad...

Nagisa's anxiety poured out.

"Umm...are you feeling lonely, Shizuma-oneesama?"

Shizuma quickly turned to her. With a dumbfounded look, she said, "Oh, of course."

Oh, I thought so... Nagisa was disheartened.

"I'll be really lonely, knowing I can't see you for two weeks..."

Shizuma looked to the sky. "I'll be so lonely, I might want to die."

Huh...?! No, that's not what I meant...

It wasn't clear if Shizuma sensed Nagisa's concern or not. Shizuma licked her lips...

"Hey, Nagisa. For two weeks, don't cheat on me, okay? Truthfully, the Faceless Devil is such a drag, and I really didn't want to do it. Maybe I shouldn't have entered the *Étoile* competition after all."

Shizuma raised her arms up in an exaggerated way, as if to say *Ohh, God...*

"But I suppose I'll have to stick with it for Miator's sake...and as Miyuki said, I'm a bit curious to see how Prince Amane and her partner handle this event..." Her eyes had a mysterious twinkle.

“Well, my love is definite and strong, so I won’t falter, but those two...seem like they won’t be able to handle a long-distance relationship, don’t you think? I’d love to see that tightly contained Prince Amane—who claimed to have no interest in girls—go stir-crazy with jealousy, you know...?”

Shizuma cracked up, but Nagisa was appalled.

“Gosh, Shizuma-oneesama...how could you say that! How mean... I feel sorry for Hikari-chan! She was almost thrown off the tower during the first round... I’m glad everything turned out all right, but if that sort of thing happened again, Hikari-chan would be so hurt...”

“Oh, Nagisa, what are you saying? You were the one who ended up hanging off the tower! You were lucky that I caught you right when you fell, but if I’d been late...”

“Aaah, well, that’s true, but...”

Nagisa pouted as she recalled the incident. It had been right after Nagisa had found out about Sakuragi Kaori and Shizuma’s past, which had made her want to withdraw from the *Étoile* competition—but then she had been saved by Shizuma’s strong arms...

Shizuma continued, “Goodness, Nagisa, you’re too nice...but I suppose that’s one of your endearing qualities. Still...”

She wrapped her arms around Nagisa from behind and squeezed her tightly. Nagisa felt so much she couldn’t say a word. She heard Shizuma’s voice behind her.

“If you keep thinking about other people, your precious Shizuma-oneesama will be soooo worried about you...and won’t be able to handle being away. Do you understand? So for two weeks...don’t cheat on me, okay? I’ve already warned Tamao, too...”

What kind of warning?—Nagisa’s heart jumped at the thought.

“I agree that you need a bodyguard while I’m away. But remember this...if you run into any kind of danger, or if I find out you’ve become too friendly with someone...I will surely run to your side. At that point, the Faceless Devil will disqualify us, and it will be game over. So...if you don’t want to drop out and

disappoint Miyuki, Chiyo-chan, Tamao-chan, and the other Miator students—
behave for two weeks, okay? I...really don't care about the *Étoile* competition.
My only wish is to be with you..."

Shizuma brought her face to Nagisa's neck. She carefully swept aside the stray
hairs that covered the young girl's neck.

Nagisa's exposed neck felt cool as the breeze blew past.

The next moment.

Ah...

A warm, moist sensation as Shizuma kissed the nape of her neck.



Nagisa blushed, and her heart tightened...and she still couldn't say a word.

If something happened to Nagisa, Shizuma-sama would probably give up the *Étoile* competition just to be with her.

Oh, she's so hopeless—Nagisa thought happily.

“Will you two be able to handle staying apart...for two whole weeks?” Yaya asked as she put away tubes of paint. This was after school, in Spica's Third Year Class *Un* classroom.

Hikari answered Yaya's question with a bashful smile as she changed the water in the flower vase. “Gosh, Yaya-chan...I'll be okay. Since Amame-oneesama is such a lofty star...I can't see her much anyway. So unlike the other couples, who might have a hard time staying apart, I'm used to not seeing Amame-sama for more than two weeks at a time—so I'm actually glad they chose an event this easy.”

Yaya narrowed her eyes and teased Hikari. “Yeah, but haven't you seen Amame-sama every day recently, Hikari?”

“Ah, well...it's just coincidence. It's not like Amame-oneesama and I make promises to meet, and we're not in the same clubs or anything...it's really a coincidence. We bump into each other in the lounge or in the hallway, that's all. Oh gosh, you should know that, Yaya-chan,” Hikari giggled.

“That's why...geez, Hikari, you're so dense! Or are you telling me this to convince yourself? So you don't get in over your head...?” Yaya stood next to Hikari, working at the sink.

“I'm not telling myself anything...” Hikari looked troubled, lowering her eyes, her cheeks coloring themselves pink.

Hikari is so adorable—Yaya shut her inner feelings off and continued.

“It can't be a coincidence! Amame-oneesama normally doesn't go out of her way to do things, and in fact she doesn't really leave her own classroom...in order to avoid her fans all over school. That Amame-sama has been acting strange since the *Étoile* competition began—no, long before that...though no

one else knows about it, I'm sure...since the day you got homesick. Do you seriously think Amane-sama would mill around in the Third Year Class *Un* hallways for no reason...heck no!"

Yaya threw her hands up in disbelief.

"Oh golly..." Hikari's voice trailed off.

"That's why I'm telling you. I seriously doubt you two can stay apart for two weeks. You'll be okay, Hikari, but I don't know about Amane-oneesama. Truthfully, I don't want you to stick to Amane-sama, but since you two are now representing Spica, I don't want you to ruin the school's reputation with a dishonorable blunder, and..."

Yaya gnashed her teeth. "That Kusanagi Makoto!! I don't really care about some long-forgotten star with a permanent seat or whatever...isn't it really dirty to lure us with gifts?! I really hate people like that! She jumped into the situation without getting the whole picture, saying all kinds of crap and promising to rebuild Spica by being the next *Étoile*... I wish she'd stop blowing all that hot air. I'm pretty sure she'll jump into the Faceless Devil as one of the devils, but that's so obvious. Nobody will fall for that one!!"

Yaya, waving her fists in the air, finally stopped, panting for breath.

"Yaya-chan..." Hikari-chan was taken aback as she looked at Yaya. "Makoto is so pretty...I just assumed she was your type, Yaya-chan..."

Yaya smiled, embarrassed. "Well, I do admit she is pretty...really pretty. But Hikari, don't forget..."

She placed her hand on Hikari's neck and brought Hikari's face close to hers. She stared intently into Hikari's face.

"I really like you, Hikari. It's not like the pure, beautiful, sisterly love that Kusanagi Makoto touts, either."

The image of Hikari glancing down, veiling her eyes with her long eyelashes, burned itself into Yaya's mind. Yaya's heart jumped.

"What I'm talking about is a hot, burning desire. I want to...free you."

Oh gosh, I said it...!

Hikari, who was looking down in embarrassment with slightly reddened cheeks, lifted her face... She wore a puzzled look.

I want to free you...means...

Yaya tried to find a way out. Somehow.

“Well...” Yaya fished for words. “Well, umm, err...”

It was unusual for her to panic. Her inner voice told her to kiss Hikari and get it over with...but something stopped her from doing so.

“I mean...” She let go of Hikari and turned around. “I mean, I don’t want Kusanagi Makoto to take over this place! That pure...equal sisterly love doesn’t exist, at least for me...”

Her voice shook at the end of her statement.

“So... So you and Amane-sama need to win, for me...”

“Yaya-chan...” Hikari was nearly crying.

“Wh-What’s...wrong?” Yaya turned around. *Did I say something to make her cry...?*

Hikari was full of emotions as tears welled up in her eyes.

“Yaya-chan... Yaya-chan, thank you... I... I...”

Tears rolled down Hikari’s cheeks, and—she jumped into Yaya’s arms.

Hikari buried her face in Yaya’s chest and let tears stream down her face.

“I was actually really scared...at the thought of not seeing Amane-oneesama for two whole weeks. I was terrified to think that...maybe Amane-sama would find someone cuter than me...and leave me...”

She sobbed and tried to hold back her tears. “And I couldn’t bear the thought of not seeing Amane-oneesama for more than a day, because I get so scared and worried...and I want to see her so much...two weeks will just drive me crazy. But Kusanagi-sama’s arrived, insulting and denouncing Amane-sama—it’s all my fault—so I decided to stay strong and win the *Étoile* competition to regain Spica’s and Amane-sama’s honor...”

“Stupid...Hikari...” Yaya stroked Hikari’s hair. Her heart tightened, because

Hikari was so endearing.

“But Yaya-chan, I’m glad you’re supporting me... Thank you, Yaya-chan. I’ll do my best for Amane-oneesama. I’m going to do my best to win the second round...yes...”

Hikari was absorbed in her convictions...

While Yaya...had mixed emotions...

Chapter 5

A Black Wedge is Driven into the

Towering Pile of Stones

It was the Month of St. John the Baptist, and the Day of St. Meriadoc...or June 7.

It was also the start of the rainy season.

It had been ten days since the students had switched over to their summer uniforms—it was the first time Nagisa had worn this version. The short-sleeved white blouse had intricate lace patterns in several places, and the jumper skirt was bright green. The summer uniform was boldly different in design from the winter uniform, but was nonetheless very classy and cute, like Miator, and was as popular as the winter uniform.

Nagisa came to school in the depressing rain and absent-mindedly stared out the window, watching the rainwater stream down the panes. She didn't have the luxury to enjoy her new uniform.

"Hey, are you daydreaming? You don't have time to do that, Nagisa-chan! Let's get ready to go!!" Tamao snapped.

Nagisa sluggishly turned around. "Awwww, are we doing it again todaaaay...?" she asked groggily.

"Of course! We were authorized time to practice on our own, so we can't waste even a minute!" Tamao placed her hands on her hips. She was in a rare lecture mode.

"We're gonna practice again after school, so can't we take a break this morning?" Nagisa pleaded.

"No, no, no! Are you kidding! We only have ten days until the main event! You don't have time to lose, Nagisa-chan!"

"Aww, but my whole body is so sore..."

"That's because you don't exercise regularly! You seemed pretty athletic, Nagisa-chan, but I never expected you to *suck* this badly at dancing!!"

“I-I’m soooooorry...”

Nagisa sounded really pathetic, but Tamao dragged her out of the room.

Their classmates chuckled at the sight; Nagisa’s efforts were finally being accepted at Miator.

“One, two, three...one, two, three...”

Tamao clapped her hands in rhythm. *Clap clap clap...* The sound echoed through the vast Koubu Hall. It was the only ballroom or dance hall in Astraea, and was part of Miator’s school complex. The ceiling above the wooden floor was at least five meters high and was made of stained glass. It depicted birds and flowers, drawn in a beautiful Japanese style. It had the feel of a retro-modern *Taisho* Era⁵ building.

The main event of the second round of the *Étoile* competition—Return from Temptation—would be held in this room. Those couples who had resisted and triumphed over the devils’ temptations would reunite with each other, dance with each other despite not having met for two weeks, and display the strength of their love.

“One, two, three...one, two, three...come on, don’t be so timid! Go more smoothly...yes, like that...aah, you’re out of step!”

Tamao sounded irritated. “I taught you the back step on the first day, right? You keep taking an extra beat when you do that, Nagisa-chan. You’re probably trying to do it in four beats, but the event dance will be a waltz, so it’s a three-beat dance. This is actually the easiest step for a novice, so you need to master it really quickly...”

Tamao realized her words had been too harsh, because Nagisa shrank down in shame.

Tamao tried to make up for her tone. “Well, you know, Nagisa-chan, you’re pretty athletic. I know your P.E. test scores. You run 50 meters in 7 seconds, and jump at least 50 centimeters high, and your bust is 79 centimeters, and you can reach down 30 centimeters past your toes...”

“H-h-how do you know that!?” Nagisa gurgled.

“Tsk, because I was interested in you.”

“Even so, good heavens...” Nagisa was open-mouthed.

“Great, you’re back to normal. Besides, you have potential, Nagisa-chan, so you could excel! But why are you so messed up? You’ve been out of step and clumsy...”

“Am I that messed up?” Nagisa asked, full of shame.

“You’re usually so cheerful and give your all in everything you do, but...you don’t seem to be with it, you know?”

“I’m sorry,” Nagisa apologized weakly.

“Don’t apologize...just keep trying. If you don’t get better, who knows what Shizuma-oneesama will do to me...”

The image of Shizuma glaring at them as if she’d just beheaded an ogre crossed both of their minds. *“Hmph! You two pretended to practice dancing, but you fooled around instead, huh? Ohh, goodness! I need to inspect Nagisa-chan for any hickeys on her body...come here, Nagisa...”*

The two girls looked at each other, sighed...and nodded.

“So...why are you having problems? Do you absolutely despise dancing or something, Nagisa-chan?” Tamao asked seriously.

Nagisa gulped and finally decided to make a major confession.

“Tamao-chan, look...”

With the most pathetic look ever, Nagisa pointed below her waist—at the white organdy petticoat, with several semi-transparent layers. She wore a black, short-sleeved, full-body leotard, but the long petticoat over it almost reached to the ground.

“I...can’t concentrate in this totally embarrassing outfit...” she whined.

Tamao burst out into laughter.

The Return from Temptation was different from Astraea’s normal dance parties, because it was a competition, meaning there were judges and scoring.

It was customary in Astraea to be creative—because that was one of the

scoring categories. The creativeness was achieved by dressing up in costumes, of course.

During the *cadette* events, veils were worn, and for *aînée* events, costumes. For this dance, exquisite outfits were required. But because the three prestigious all-girl schools discouraged skimpy outfits, the dance outfits were all elegant, wide-skirted gowns, the type worn by noble ladies in the Renaissance.

“But you’ll be wearing a heavy, layered dress, so your steps will be restricted... it’ll be useless if you don’t practice with this on...” Tamao couldn’t believe she had to explain this.

But Nagisa persisted. “But...this outfit is soooo embarrassing... I probably won’t look good in it...and look at my hair... Ohh, Tamao-chan, do I really have to wear it...?” Her voice trailed off.

“Of course you do! You might not know this, Nagisa-chan, but during the actual event, spotlights will be shining on you, and a chandelier will be hung from the ceiling, like in the Crystal Palace...and it will all look really glamorous! And all the spectators look forward to the *cadette* dressing like a real princess. If you don’t wear that outfit, then you won’t be a match for the other couples!”

“R-Really...?”

“Yes! Absolutely!! Oh jeez...I can’t believe that was the reason you couldn’t concentrate...no more slacking, Nagisa-san, because I am going to whip you in shape.” Tamao laughed. “Otherwise...you will be thrown into the Repentance Room!”

Nagisa’s replying laugh was weak. “Ohhh...please don’t imitate Sister Fujii...”

“One, two, three...one, two, three...”

The cold voice echoed in the gymnasium. Another group was practicing dancing.

Konohana Hikari wore a practice dress as she danced in the St. Spica Girls’ Institute gymnasium.

“Hey! There! Your arm is dropping, and you need to stand up straight!! You’ve

got to turn more rapidly! As you turn, you need to keep your face like this...turn right here!"

With both hands, Kenjo Kaname grabbed Hikari's face, covered with sweat from the intense dance practice, and yanked it toward her.

They seemed to be practicing a very difficult dance, levels above what Nagisa and Tamao were doing.

"I can't believe you were allowed to come to Spica without mastering these simple basics! Okay, again from the top! Concentrate with your whole body..."

Kaname was one of the top five dancers in Spica. Her expertise was the male leading role.

Because she had been asked by the Student Council, she had reluctantly agreed to coach Hikari. At first, Kaname had rejected the idea out of spite, but Momomi had begged and cried, and said it was "for Amane-sama's honor." They couldn't afford to have Amane be a laughing stock at this event...

Kaname got fired up. *Perfect... I can torture this girl—whom Amane-sama is infatuated with—all I want.*

Kaname threw another scathing comment. "Hey! There! Your hips are off! Don't think you're hot stuff just because Amane-sama likes you!"

"Yes!"

Amazingly—Hikari somehow survived Kaname's torture.

Kaname was surprised. *You know...she has...potential... But this is the minimum standard, so she'd better not screw up.*

Hikari maintained her composure and continued to dance, not even wiping the sweat from her face. Kaname paused and actually examined her.

You know, she's actually really cute... She looks like the angel portrayed on the chapel's stained glass window...

Oh, I can sort of understand why Amane-sama would fall for her...

The jubilant "Kitten Waltz"⁶ played in the gym.

Whump... Hikari slipped on her own sweat.

Kaname acted instinctively. “Are you all right...?”

She was about to run out to Hikari...but stopped in her tracks, frozen.

She looked at her outstretched hands. She had been about to...embrace Hikari.

Cold sweat covered Kaname’s palms.

Meanwhile, Amane was quite worried.

She sat in the classroom and stared at the grain of her wooden desk in agony.

It had been four days since she’d last seen Hikari. During breaks between classes, she had used to wander around the campus, but these days she holed up in the classroom, with nowhere to go, and sat at her desk.

This is boring, Amane thought.

Until then, she hadn’t realized that she always left the classroom during breaks.

But it finally dawned on her. *I was...looking for Hikari every chance I had.*

She’d used to think she left because she wanted to avoid her persistent fans—because they were so annoying. But that wasn’t it.

Hey, Hikari...Even now, I want to see you so much... I wish I had said that to you before we separated...

As she stared at her desk, Amane recalled their final meeting, four days ago.

“I’m...really scared.” Hikari’s voice cracked; she sounded like she was about to cry.

The evening’s gentle breeze drifted across the patio. It was the night before the second round of the *Étoile* competition—when they would have to separate for two weeks. Amane had asked Hikari to meet her at midnight.

Right outside the Spica Dorm lounge was a large patio that faced the forest of Maiden Park. Amane usually avoided public places, but that night she boldly chose a romantic rendezvous. She found Hikari, who was wearing a slightly babyish nightgown, and thought she looked awfully cute.

“To tell you the truth...” Hikari admitted shyly. “I think I’m really selfish, and I didn’t want to say this to you, Amane-sama. But...once the *Étoile* competition begins, people who don’t like me will probably say things to you...and by chance, if something happens...like what happened at the Maiden Horse Race...I wouldn’t know how to handle it alone...so I’m terrified. And if you meet a wonderful person in my absence...and like her more than me...then I don’t know...”

Looking at Hikari, not listening to her nervous ramblings, Amane was captivated by her innocence...and chuckled.

“Tsk... You’re so cute, Hikari.”

Amane caressed her hair. Hikari flinched...and looked at Amane.

Illuminated by the patio light, Hikari’s tears sparkled as they rolled a thin path down her cheeks, which were smooth as porcelain.

“Amane-sama...you’re not afraid...?” Hikari’s voice grew small. To hide her face, she walked toward the fence and gazed out at Maiden Park.

Amane chased after her. “Ah... I’m sorry, Hikari...that’s not what I mean...”

Hikari continued her silent objection, but Amane enveloped Hikari from behind...placed her hand on Hikari’s hand, and gently squeezed.

Amane tried not to peer into Hikari’s face, but looked at the Maiden Park forest with her.

“Hey, Hikari. Two weeks will go by fast. Of course I’ll be really worried about not seeing you, too.”

Hikari’s heart pounded faster as she listened to Amane’s voice.

Thump thump...

Amane went on, “But...if you’re worried...I’m sorry. I must be causing you to worry, Hikari...”

“No...it’s me...and I just...” Hikari felt her face get hot.

“But I want you to believe me... I’m so horrible...and I don’t think I can say this right, but...I just love you very much, Hikari.”

Amane let the word “love” slip smoothly out of her mouth.

“You might find this weird, Hikari...but this is the first time I’ve felt like this... ha ha...so I don’t know how to describe it...” Amane, embarrassed, mumbled her last words.

Hikari’s heart jumped with joy and surprise, almost painfully...then...suddenly she was so embarrassed.

I don’t know why, but somehow I knew Amane-sama’s feelings all along...

Oddly enough, I don’t feel presumptuous for thinking like that.

Maybe Amane-sama’s feelings reached my heart...before her words...

Hikari had been waiting for her special feelings to be given a name.

The name that described the feelings that bloomed in both of them...

Amane’s words—I love you, Hikari...

Hikari’s heart took in those words...naturally... They gave her strength.

“It’s all right. It’s my fault for doubting you, Amane-sama...”

“I want you to know...you don’t need to worry about me. Please believe in me. I promise not to do anything you don’t wish for, Hikari.”

Amane hugged Hikari. *Squeeeeeeze...*

Hikari’s heart was squeezed along with her body...

“I’m really worried about you, Hikari. I’m also afraid you might find someone that doesn’t cause you as much trouble as I do...a more dependable person... and you might be happier without me...”

“No! I can’t think of doing this with anyone else but Amane-sama, even if I go to Heaven, I swear...”

Amane laughed at Hikari’s forceful, exaggerated response.

“Even if you go to Heaven...are you sure? But...I’d be sad if you died so soon,

Hikari...”

Locked in each other’s arms, Amane’s laughter vibrated through Hikari, causing her to giggle too.

“I’ve attended Spica for eleven years, since elementary school. In all those years, I’ve never fallen in love with anyone. I have lots of friends, sure. And I respect a lot of people, too. Back then, I thought it was strange for a girl to fall in love with another girl—I just assumed it was nothing but a very close friendship...and probably just another way the students broke the monotony here...by over-exaggerating the little things... That’s why I tried to understand the reason they were raving about me, but at the same time I wanted them to leave me alone. Besides, I’m not the type that should be regarded as one of the Five Great Stars.”

Hikari sympathized with Amane—*but you’re definitely the brightest star on campus, so it’s no wonder all the girls love you.* That was the thought in her heart...but she only nodded in silence.

Amane looked off into the distance as she continued.

“I wish I could tell you exactly how I feel, Hikari. But...even I don’t understand my feelings. It’s not a friendship. And it’s not a simple adoration of a cute underclassman... But...love and having a relationship...well, since we’re not man and woman...you know...”

Since we’re not man and woman... Amane painfully repeated that phrase in her mind...and looked down.

Amane and Hikari were not man and woman... So if she said she loved Hikari as a woman...she was afraid of what would happen to them next...

Amane’s bashful nature still prevented her feelings from pouring out.

“...It’s okay.” Hikari pulled away from Amane and softly placed her hand on Amane’s cheek.

“...I’m sorry, Amane-sama. I...I just... Just being with you, like this, is enough for me to be happy.”

She faced Amane...and looked into her eyes, her own eyes misty.

After a long pause, Amane gave a short reply. "...Yes, me too."

She gently...really gently...embraced Hikari, tenderly, as if she was the most fragile object in the world.

Their feelings for each other were all that was between them. But they didn't know where to go from there...

What direction to take...

They just didn't know. The naïve couple didn't know how to express their overflowing affections toward one another...

They stayed together for a while longer, just listening to the angels sing from the heavens.

They were like two little birds, standing at the edge of a cliff, afraid to fly.

Amane lifted Hikari's face.

Seeing the taller Amane smiling so tenderly, Hikari lifted herself up on her toes...

Amane widened her eyes, startled.

The tiny bird pecked a kiss.

The little kiss lasted merely five seconds.

Hikari's heels eventually landed on the floor.

Neither of them really knew...how to feel. As they eventually broke their embrace, they smiled at each other.

"I'll take you back to your room," Amane said, and they left the patio.

On the way back, Amane thought about their happy future.

"I don't care about the *Étoile* competition any more. If Kusanagi Makoto wants to take my place and defend Spica's honor..." She smiled. "I'm ready to throw it all away..."

The rainy skies cleared. Strong sunshine poured between the trees.

In the inner garden of the Strawberry Dorms, on the first Friday afternoon

after the second round had begun...

“Umm...is it okay to keep my glasses on...?” Remon asked with a shy duck of her head.

“Tsk...well, it’s a bit strange, but since you look so cute with them, you can keep them on, Remon-chan!” Chikaru responded in a satisfied way, and she slipped a pair of bunny ears onto Remon’s head.

“Okay, that leaves us with...” Two more girls.

“Wow, the bunny tail is so fluffy!”

“Why are there stockings attached to a swimsuit?”

Kizuna and Kagome hadn’t changed into their outfits yet.

My, my... I have to pamper them, don’t I...? Chikaru’s heart fluttered.

The inner garden of the Strawberry Dorms was usually carpeted with grass, with a small fountain off to the side. But a large pool, fifteen meters in diameter, had appeared out of nowhere.

From the second week of June to the end of summer vacation, the triangular inner garden became host to a one-meter-deep, octagonal, temporary pool.

To liven up the Strawberry Dorms, every year at this season the pool was set up. Wooden decks were laid around it, with resort deck chairs and a drink bar that served free drinks on non-school days—a gorgeous setup that matched the style of the luxurious all-girl schools.

Today was the first day, Pool Opening Day.

Chikaru, the party-loving Costume Club President, who never missed a chance to wear costumes, had volunteered her club to serve as pool attendants.

Today’s theme was “Bunny Girl.”

“Here, you need to stick out your butt...because I can’t see.”

Mmmm...! Kizuna, red-faced with embarrassment, scrunched her face and poked her butt out to Chikaru.

Chikaru, kneeling behind Kizuna...stared intently at Kizuna’s butt.

What a cute butt, Chikaru thought as she repressed her urge to spank it...and slid her fingers along the French-cut edges of the suit.

Uhyayaha! Kizuna squirmed.

“Come on, stay still...”

Chikaru grasped Kizuna’s hands to calm her. Kizuna endured the tickling sensations as Chikaru slowly and deliberately continued her movements.

She randomly rubbed Kizuna’s butt, fondled it...and some-times pinched her softly...which surprised Kizuna each time.

And finally...treating it like a precious treasure, she gently placed her lips on Kizuna’s butt...and kissed it.

“All right, that should do it. Don’t worry...it’ll stay in place, no matter what.”

Chikaru had been making sure that the French cut of Kizuna’s swimsuit wouldn’t shift.



“Okay, that should be everyone,” she called to Remon and Kagome, who were already changed into their outfits and setting up a deck chair.

Looking at Kagome, still clutching her teddy bear, and Remon, still wearing her glasses, Chikaru pondered... *Oh well. They look so cute anyway.*

Chikaru decided to let them be, satisfied with their outfits. She laughed to herself. *I hope more students will join my club when they see these girls...*

“Well, Costume Club members...let’s have fun and do our best! We’re here to serve as bunny-girl pool attendants. Don’t let anyone touch you or get mixed up in any funny business. Be cheerful and cute! Let the party begin!”

“Yeaaaah!”

As she saw the three girls yell out together, Chikaru shuddered with excitement.

“I wonder if Shizuma-oneesama is coming to the pool?”

“She probably excused herself today.”

“Excused herself...?”

Tamao and Nagisa, wearing their dark blue Miator school swimsuits, arrived.

Nagisa loved baths, so she naturally enjoyed pools too, but—she seemed bashful. She probably wasn’t used to her new swimsuit.

“You know the Faceless Devil has already begun, right? Even if it is Pool Opening Day, it would be horrible if you accidentally met each other here...and Shizuma-sama probably predicted you would want to come to the pool, since you’re new here...so she excused herself today. See...you don’t see any other stars here, do you?” Tamao asked.

Nagisa looked around and understood her point.

That’s true...Amane-sama and Hikari and the other Étoile candidates aren’t here.

“They’re probably in their rooms right now. They need to avoid all kinds of dangers, you know.”

“I see...”

Nagisa was pretty sure Shizuma-oneesama would have wanted to see her wearing the new swimsuit, so she was a bit let down.

“Oh...that’s too bad, Nagisa-chan.”

The voice came from in front of them. Nagisa raised her head and saw... Chikaru at the poolside bar, smiling. She offered Nagisa a sweating glass, filled with an icy-cold drink.

“It’s too bad you can’t show your wonderful swimsuit to Shizuma-sama...” Chikaru said as she approached Nagisa. She looked at Nagisa from all sides and tilted her head.

Nagisa was shocked at Chikaru’s bunny-girl outfit. “Wow, your Costume Club wears these daring outfits too...?”

She couldn’t hold back her curiosity. She reached out and... *pat*...Chikaru’s breast was softer than she had imagined and bounced back delightfully. The material was...slippery.

“Oooh...” Chikaru, touched by Nagisa, exaggerated her swoon.

Nagisa hastily pulled back her hand. “I’m sorry, I...I...just wondered what the suit felt like. But...wow, it’s so slick...”

Nagisa smiled bashfully at Tamao.

Both Tamao and Chikaru’s eyes twinkled.

“Oh, Nagisa-chan...are you curious about this bunny-girl outfit?”

Their voices came out simultaneously. Tamao and Chikaru stared at each other in amazement. The next moment, they nodded as if they had made a silent agreement.

What? What are they doing? Nagisa didn’t have time to think about it, though.

“If you like it so much...you can change into a bunny girl! We’ll help you put it on.”

The two girls dragged Nagisa out of the pool area.

“Umm...does this look all right? Isn't it...weird...?” Nagisa hesitated, but Chikaru reassured her.

“Oh no, it's fine. You look good in it, but...”

But...? Nagisa was suddenly scared.

In the locker room next to the inner garden, several wooden lockers were lined up. There was a sense of mysteriousness about it. Nagisa stood in an unfrequented area of the locker room as her heart thumped at the bold outfit she had on.

“But...we should fix it a bit...” Tamao commented.

“Oh, you think so too?” Chikaru added.

Fix what...? Nagisa was still confused.

“Excuse me...” Tamao's hand slipped into Nagisa's breast.

She pushed her hand into the tight space between the suit and Nagisa's breast.

Tamao and Nagisa felt a squishy sensation.

Squish squish... Squiggle squiggle...

Ohhh, nooo... Heedless of how uncomfortable Nagisa felt, Tamao slid her hand to Nagisa's underarm area and pushed Nagisa's maturing breasts into the bunny-girl outfit's bra cup.

Only Nagisa's right breast filled the bra cup, and pointed up.

“Now that's sexy,” Tamao grinned. “You're...so big, Nagisa-chan.”

Nagisa's face blazed at Tamao's comment.

“Let's do the other side...”

“N-No, I'll do it myself...”

Nagisa tried to decline, but Chikaru cut in.

“Are you kidding, Nagisa-chan? If you fix it yourself, it won’t settle in properly. Oh my, please don’t tell me you’ve been doing it yourself all this time? Poor soul... Don’t worry, you’re in Astraea now! Tamao-chan and I will do it today... but I’m sure Shizuma-sama will do it for you from now on.”

Shizuma-sama touching Nagisa’s breast... Nagisa almost fainted at the thought.

Nagisa waved her arms. “Th-That will not happen...!”

Tamao hugged her. “Oh, of course, I know. It would be too insulting to have Shizuma-sama bow down just to fix your breasts, huh? But you’re fine with me doing it, right? Tsk... I’ll do anything for Nagisa-chan! You’re better off with me, Nagisa-chan, since you aren’t nervous around me. Ohh...let’s fix your other side, too.”

Tamao winked, turned Nagisa around, and dug her hands into her breasts.

This time...she slithered around deliberately.

Ahh...aaaaahhh... Nagisa writhed as little explosions went off in her head... and silently she screamed for help.

Shizuma-oneesama...am I supposed to be doing this...?

“Kyaaaah, so Makoto-sama, you lived in Russia since junior high?”

“Yes. I went there in order to become a professional violinist by sixteen...”

“By yourself?! Without a maid?”

“Yes. Of course, my parents wanted to send one, but I thought I might end up spending time making friends with the maid instead of studying, so...”

Makoto’s smile caused the girls sitting around her to blush.

“Oh wow...if that’s the case, you should have taken me, Makoto-sama! It must be pretty lonely, living in a foreign country, so if I’d been there I could have comforted you...”

The girl said it on purpose, so she could bring her chair right next to Makoto... and lean against her.

Makoto and her fans sat in Spica's pool dome. It had been a week since the Faceless Devil event had begun. Makoto hadn't done anything yet, but two couples were disqualified already.

Out of the three schools, Spica was known for its sports programs, so it had many specialized facilities, such as the horseback riding grounds, tennis courts, giant gymnasiums, and this pool dome.

This impressive pool facility had a 50-meter pool with depths ranging from 1.2 to 1.8 meters, a diving pool with a platform as high as 5 meters, and a glass-paned scuba tank.

Next to the pool, on a raised platform, was a small café for the students. The café had ivory-colored parasols over each table, and Makoto, the center of attention, was surrounded by a slew of fans. She sat and relaxed.

The swim classes seemed to have ended. Makoto's black and silver swimsuit—she hadn't had time to order Spica's white one-piece school swimsuit—and matching shorts of the same pattern hung off her slender hips. She stood out in the crowd of white.

Students sitting at other tables began to notice her...

One of her fans spoke in a high-pitched voice.

"I'm looking forward to your mini-concert! It's so great for you to do a special performance for the Strawberry Dorms residents and show off your violin skills, fresh from Russia... I'm thrilled. You've defeated two couples already, so I wonder how many more fans you'll make... I just can't imagine. By the time the third round comes around in July, you'll surely be the world's best *Étoile*!"

"Ahahaha..." Makoto laughed out loud. "I hope so. I look forward to it, too. A star is supposed to garner attention, be praised by everyone, and shine. I believe Spica's white star should shine not only on Spica students, but on everyone in Astraea. I refuse to accept a star who doesn't like the attention. I think she must say that because she isn't confident of herself...she needs to have an escape route in case things don't work out."

Makoto's words became harsh. "Besides, a star shouldn't ever be monopolized by one person! A star is revered by everyone...so she should

never...ever be monopolized by one person!”

Makoto’s lips quivered, and the student next to her flinched. Makoto, noticing it, waved her forefinger in front of her face—*Tch tch tch tch!*

The girls focused on Makoto’s expression.

“She...fell in love with a humble transfer student...and ruined Spica’s chances of winning the *Étoile* competition...what a cheap story. That’s why I came, to save Spica from the fake star and pull it out of the ruins. I want to shine Spica’s white star on all of you,” said the Emperor.

With that, Makoto stood up. “Otori Amane...is not the true star of Spica!”

The conversations around the café disappeared, and the students focused their attention on Makoto.

Meanwhile, Amane wanted to take a quick swim to gather her thoughts. The athletic prince wanted to work off her loneliness and worries about missing Hikari—with exercise.

She finished changing, grabbed a towel...and pushed the glass door to enter the pool dome.

She noticed the strange atmosphere as soon as she stepped inside. She didn’t know the reason at first. She walked down the side of the pool and stood at the end of the lane.

Then...she realized.

She had no audience.

Every time Amane came to the pool, rumors would spread as soon as she entered the locker room, and by the time she reached the pool, a small gathering of fans would be watching from afar.

But today, when she looked around...no one.

There was a large crowd at the café.

Wondering if there was an event there, she glanced at it briefly, then looked down and tried to pass through...but...

“Hey, wait!”

A sharp voice, coming from the far side of the café, interjected.

Amane stopped. *Is she talking to me?*

When Amane looked up, not only was she surprised, but the crowd looking back at her was too. In the middle of the crowd, as if she was basking under a spotlight...stood Kusanagi Makoto.

Makoto...

Amane finally had the opportunity to look at Makoto up close. Amane was in the same class as Makoto, but by the time the students entered their fifth year, they had more elective classes. Amane took more science classes, while Makoto took more arts classes, so they only saw each other during brief homeroom periods in the morning and afternoon.

And ever since Makoto’s arrival at the Strawberry Dorms, their fans—well, Amane considered them her “friends”—stuck closely to them and ensured that they didn’t bump into each other.

And Amane...honestly...didn’t have any negative thoughts about Makoto. In fact, she completely agreed with Makoto’s opinion that girls loving each other romantically was totally wrong, and she would be relieved if Makoto would replace her as the star.

Amane seriously thought the *Étoile* should be a star who wasn’t bashful.

That’s what Amane wanted to say to Makoto—who hated Amane’s guts. She wanted to say, *If you want to do so, I have absolutely no objections, so please do your best and claim the Étoile crown for Spica in my place. I quit.*

But...Makoto, standing on the other side of the pool, was surrounded by fans...so Amane couldn’t even have a heart-to-heart conversation with her.

Amane forgot that she had been stopped...she shrugged her shoulders and tried to leave the pool.

“I told you to stop!”

Makoto, with her thin wispy bangs fluttering, walked toward Amane slowly and triumphantly.

Amane stopped once again and turned around to see Makoto, poised for action...

“Prince Amane, great timing! I challenge you to a duel!”

Makoto pointed her forefinger at Amane’s nose.

The air tensed.

Pointing at someone’s nose was Astraea’s sign of challenge. This was the second time.

Even the gentle Amane felt something rustling inside of her, but she just swallowed hard and acted dumb. “Duel?”

“Yes, a duel to determine who will represent Spica in the *Étoile* competition. Let’s settle this once and for all.”

Makoto seemed a bit more excited than usual...probably because she’d just let off some steam.

“We can settle this in the actual *Étoile* competition. Why here? You’ll just disturb the people here,” Amane said.

Makoto’s fans had followed her, and soon enough a large audience surrounded the pair.

“Oh, running away, eh? Are you afraid? Since we’re here and both have swimsuits on, let’s have a swim race. Oh, don’t tell me you can’t swim...?”

The gallery murmured.

“Amane-sama is good at swimming. In fact she’s good at...horseback riding, kendo, cross-country, dance, and so on...everyone at Spica knows she’s a gifted athlete.”

“Why did Makoto challenge her to a swim match?”

“Either she really doesn’t know Amane-sama, or maybe she’s confident of her skills...”

Amane was not interested in competing. “I don’t want to cause trouble with other students using the pool during lunch break.”

Makoto egged her on, undeterred. “Ahah...what a pathetic excuse. That just

won't do. Look..."

The pool was empty. The students who, moments ago, had been swimming, had seen the confrontation and gotten out of the pool to witness the event.

Amane remained silent as Makoto continued, on a roll.

"Well, if you're not confident, you can run away from this challenge. But if you do, I'd feel sorry for the Spica students who thought you should be the leader of the Five Great Stars..." Makoto's voice grew louder.

The crowd became unsettled.

"Is Amane-sama going to run away...?" The concerned voices were angry at Makoto's insulting comments... "Amane-sama didn't do anything, and surely doesn't deserve those comments..."

Suddenly Amane turned her back on Makoto.

I have no time for this... Without a word, Amane tried to walk away.

Makoto immediately grabbed Amane's arm to stop her.

The tension sparked in the air, then dissipated.

Facing away, Amane stood still. In the next instant, she turned around and glared at Makoto.

Their eyes locked. There was at least a twenty-centimeter difference in height. Makoto looking up...and Amane looking down.

Makoto gulped, suddenly feeling oppressed.

Amane had a determined look. Had the sleeping lion finally awakened?

She looked straight into Makoto's eyes. "I have no reason to fight you."

Amane's stare was neither coy, adverse, nor disrespectful...she just stared right into Makoto's eyes. She almost felt sorry for Makoto, trying to find a reason to fight her...

And Makoto thought Amane's eyes looked almost like her dearly beloved's...

Makoto snapped out of it. *There's no way she resembles my dearly beloved... She doesn't look like her but... You shouldn't be worried about what others think*

of you—just do what you really want to do...

For a moment...Makoto thought she heard her dearly beloved's voice.

It's true, Prince Amane... There is absolutely no reason for you to fight me.

Instantly, her fighting spirit rekindled.

But...I have a reason...yes, a big reason. If you are the Lion King, then I am the Black Dragon. I will breathe scorching fire, hot enough to melt metal, in order to get rid of you—and erase the record of a Spica star that fell to Earth.

For my dearly beloved...I vow to protect St. Spica Girls' Institute and its maiden holy grounds...and make Spica the number-one school in Astraea...for her...

But Amane freed her arm from Makoto's grasp...and left.

"Wait up!" Makoto called.

"I was given a difficult challenge...but it isn't to fight you..." Amane muttered to herself as she stared at the undulating surface of the water.

Noon...at the St. Lulim Girls' School...in the nurse's office.

Chikaru was organizing her outfits.

This cute pink nurse's uniform...is for my adorable Kizuna-chan. And this unusual light blue nurse's outfit will be for Kizuna-chan's classmate and best friend, Remon-chan...because her glasses will probably match it nicely...tsk...

And this amazing white jacket...is for the unsuspecting Kagome-chan. She'll make a really tiny but adorable doctor...hmm, she's actually really smart, so she might really become a doctor one day...

As Chikaru let her thoughts wander, she laid out the outfits, fully enjoying her fantasies.

Where was the school nurse? Chikaru had tricked her into vacating the office for a while, so she could use it freely.

Chikaru neatly folded the outfits and checked all the accessories that came with them. A small folder was on the table next to her. On the cover was "Today's Costume Club Plan"... and Chikaru's sketch of a nurse...

Knock knock knock... Someone knocked on the door.

A handsome voice spoke. "Excuse me..."

"Come in...my, you've come quite early. I thought you'd come a little later. I'm sorry for the mess..." Chikaru apologized loudly.

"Eh? I thought I came on time..." Kusanagi Makoto looked at the wall clock. The next moment, the one o'clock chime went off.

The St. Lulim Girls' School buildings consisted of beautiful, colonial-style wooden architecture. The annex-like building in the far corner, closest to Maiden Park—like a summer home—was the nurse's office.

A slowly turning fan with an attached chandelier hung from the high ceiling. Four large beds were placed in the middle. Chikaru arranged outfits on two of the beds as she enjoyed herself.

The wall clock played a beautiful music...

"Handel's oratorio...the *Messiah*," Makoto noted.

Chikaru smiled. "Mako-chan, you're probably the only one in Astraea who would comment like that about a simple Westminster chime."

"Well..." Makoto didn't have her usual sarcasm and seemed to be at ease when she was alone with Chikaru.

"But it's so ironic. The *Messiah*...a perfect song for me." Makoto grinned.

"So you really believe you're Spica's messiah...?" Chikaru asked with a smile.

Makoto hesitated a bit. "Yes...I refuse to accept Otori Amane as Spica's number-one star! Honestly, I probably can't fill those shoes either. But I'm way, way, way better than her! You understand it, right, Chika? The real star of Spica should be like my dearly beloved..."

Makoto looked up at the twirling ceiling fan, which rattled occasionally. She calmed herself.

"You'll root for me, won't you, Chika?" She approached Chikaru.

With a devilish grin Makoto continued, "Oh, you're finally speaking to me, my gentle Chika? You sent me that letter, but when I came back you totally ignored

me, Chika-chan. I was shocked, you know? In the Spica Student Council room...”

Makoto recalled the incident as she hopped onto the other side of the bed, opposite to Chikaru.

“But...I knew you had your reasons...so I acted like I didn’t know you. Hey, Chika...you know my feelings, right?”

She reached over and grabbed Chikaru’s shoulders.

Unfazed, Chikaru smiled tenderly at Makoto. “Oh...what feelings?”

“Well, my feelings for my dearly beloved...and about wanting to become Spica’s star and eventually the *Étoile* for her...and...” Makoto placed her hand on Chikaru’s chin...

“And that I love Chika...just like my oneesan...”

Makoto used her thumb to rub Chikaru’s lip. Without a word, she brought her face closer...and closed her eyes... As if she were a puppy, waiting for its master to pet its head...

Chikaru giggled, and gently caressed Makoto’s small, soft head, over and over...ever so gently...ever so peacefully...

She might have a bigger scar than I expected...

The motherly instincts of St. Lulim’s Madonna poured out...

After some time, Makoto opened her eyes and licked her lips with her red tongue. “Please root for me, okay? You can pretend you don’t know me, but...you’re my oneesan...”

She stopped. “Chika...do you already know...the secret behind me and my dearly beloved...?”

As if to cut off Makoto’s question, Chikaru stood up and gave Makoto a serious look.

She smiled. “I’m so glad you regard me as an oneesan... Hey, Mako-chan, will you do me a little favor?”

Rustle rustle rustle... A gentle wind rolled through, bringing the light, sweet

scent of flowers. The soft sunshine and the pleasant early summer air...

A small leaf hit Shizuma's face, but she blew it off.

In the center of Maiden Park, near the lake in front of the large chapel, Shizuma was alone, lying in the grass, trying to take a nap. She wondered if the afternoon classes had begun already. She didn't feel like going back to class...

With a sigh, she sank back down. She raised her hand to block the bright sunshine and slowly closed her eyes.

It felt good as she drifted off to sleep... Her eyelids seemed white...and she sweetly dreamed...

The early-blooming lavender that covered the area waved in the wind. It had also been blooming when a group of St. Miator Girls' Academy Strawberry Dorms residents went to summer school at one of the many second homes owned by the Hanazono family—at the edge of their Hokkaido ranch.

Shizuma, then a fourth-year student, split off from the group and went for a long horseback ride. As she sat amidst the blooming lavender at the top of the hill, her favorite black horse by her side...she looked at the full expanse of the Hanazono estate.

Under the warm, almost blinding early summer light, small beads of sweat formed on her forehead.

Someone called her. She turned around to see the short-haired Togi Hitomi. She had been Shizuma's classmate since elementary school, and the students considered her to be Shizuma's right-hand girl—and for a Miator student, she was unusually energetic and strong-natured.

Beside Hitomi was a girl with light pink cheeks, dragging her feet, looking down...

It was...Shizuma and Sakuragi Kaori's first fateful encounter.

Hitomi grinned. "So, what do you think, Shizuma-sama...this is the girl."

"Why?"

"Well, she's a big fan of yours, and has been dying to meet you... I told you about her yesterday, didn't I?"

“Yeah...so?”

“So...umm...well, that’s why I brought her here! She was so excited to meet you, like she was going to Heaven or something...”

“Is she really that excited...because she’s awfully *quiet*.”

“Oh, she’s probably really nervous to finally meet her favorite Shizuma-oneesama! But look! She’s absolutely adorable. She’s probably the cutest out of the whole Third Year class. I always thought she’d be a perfect match for you...” Hitomi smiled proudly, taking credit for her accomplishment. “I explained to you earlier, you should look for a partner for the upcoming *Étoile* competition. I think she’ll shine just as much as you, Shizuma-sama...right, Kaori-chan?”

Hitomi peered into Kaori’s face as she asked, but Kaori was even more embarrassed and silently tucked her face down.

“Ahahaha...gee, don’t freeze up like that, Kaori-chan. Shizuma-sama is the big star on campus, but she’s quite an approachable person, you know!”

As Hitomi rambled on, Shizuma decided that she didn’t really like the girl, who just stood there, looking down. For some reason, she seemed to let Hitomi do all the talking, but wasn’t willing to dirty her own hands...a cruel, unfair girl... Shizuma thought.

“Is she really that cute? If she’s not willing to talk to me, I have no time for her!”

Shizuma turned around on purpose, acting as though she was ignoring the quiet girl. “Come, Hitomi! Let’s have some tea in the clubhouse. Mother is here too, so...”

“Eh, ah, but...what about...her...?” Hitomi said, flabbergasted.

Suddenly... *Hug*. Something grabbed Shizuma’s leg.

“P-Please don’t go... Shizuma...oneesama...”

The quiet girl, Sakuragi Kaori, threw herself at Shizuma, hugged her leg, and stopped Shizuma’s movement.

“You...” Shizuma stopped, and something electrical ran from her legs through her whole body.

The girl, still looking at the ground, gathered all her courage, and said in a small voice, “I’ve...looked up to you since elementary school... I’m so honored to meet you, onesama...”

It was a phrase she had practiced over and over in her heart.

Goodness... What a naïve and awkward girl...

She’s begging me not to hate her... I can hear her inner voice, loud and clear.

Shizuma was moved by Kaori’s clumsy, honest feelings. Shizuma’s voice became gentle and sweet. “Please stand...”

The early summer breeze rolled past, carrying the sweet scent of flowers.

The dream skipped ahead...

A large cumulus cloud floated in the big blue sky.

It was summer vacation at the Strawberry Dorms. Students enjoyed the mid-afternoon summer beside the garden pool in the inner garden.

Shizuma had a pareo wrapped around her red and gold patterned bikini as she relaxed at the poolside with Hitomi and Mizuho. Kaori sat quietly at the edge of their table.

Kaori had eventually become part of Shizuma’s group, becoming less nervous around Shizuma, and she relished her happiness.

“Kaori, don’t sit so far away...come here,” Shizuma said.

Kaori shyly changed chairs. Shizuma held up a large glass, which held a light raspberry frozen drink. “This is too much for me. Will you help me out?”

Kaori nodded bashfully.

“Say ‘ahhh...’”

Shizuma fed a spoonful to Kaori, like a baby. The crowd cheered, and the cicadas cried out noisily.

The dream changed again...the day had come.

The fateful news.

In the Maiden Park forest, trees full of leaves in shades of burning red...

It was that rare occasion on which Kaori had sent an invitation to Shizuma. Thinking that this was probably the first time she'd been called out by Kaori, Shizuma headed toward a particular section of Maiden Park.

Kaori was waiting for her.

"Shizuma-oneesama! I...I..." Her tears prevented further words.

As Shizuma comforted the sobbing Kaori, she asked what was wrong. Kaori told her.

"Is that true?" Shizuma asked.

Kaori could only sob.

"An incurable disease...dear God...no..."

It seemed as if the peaceful happiness she was embracing slowly crumbled. The whole world shook and felt like an ominous nightmare...

It was Shizuma's first shock.

"That's why I...can't stay by Shizuma-oneesama's side anymore..." Kaori madly sobbed.

Shizuma wrapped her arms around Kaori's trembling back...

I must protect my darling girl like a younger sister... she thought.

"I won't allow that to happen to you..." She hugged Kaori strongly. "I can't let you leave me like this..."

The pure white dream tormented Shizuma.

The first snows of winter fell outside one of the Strawberry Dorms rooms.

Inside, the stricken Kaori was lying in bed, with Shizuma sitting by her side. The room was silent.

The final hours approached quietly.

The white dream morphed into a horrible, black darkness...

Shizuma wandered in the darkness. She couldn't see a thing...a suffocating darkness.

How long had she been there...?

She finally saw a thin beam of light shining down.

A peach-colored flower petal...one, two, fell from the sky.

She reached out to catch it. It landed on her palm...softly, tenderly, seemingly almost familiar...

She was on a white cloud now.

"I...finally understand Shizuma-oneesama's true feelings..."

She hadn't realized an angel was sitting next to her. It was...Kaori.

Was this...Heaven?

"But I pretended that I didn't know. You made me so happy, Shizuma-oneesama, so I didn't want to lose it all."

Kaori's smile was so gentle and seemed to enfold her.

"Kaori..."

"Shizuma-oneesama, you were nice to me until the end. And I...am so happy to have met you. So please, Shizuma-oneesama...please find your real happiness..."

Shizuma thought... *Great. Kaori is finally free from the painful illness, free to feel so happy.*

Shizuma felt a wave of relief. Her body relaxed...and her face naturally formed a smile.

But the moment Shizuma tried to peer into Kaori's smiling face, Kaori's smile split in half.

The whole scene froze over...and a high-pitched voice pierced through it.

Shizuma was ripped back to reality.

Over and over... Every day, since that one lovely star—among a countless

number of stars—had lost its luster, never to shine again, for eternity...

At the Astraea Chapel.

The entrance displayed a large white flower wreath.

Next to it was a small sign. It said...Funeral Mass.

The double doors were fully opened, and Miator students, veiled in black, came in and out of the chapel, lined up to offer flowers.

Unable to enter, Shizuma stood on the steps of the entrance and looked at the altar, deep inside.

Surrounded by white chrysanthemums was a picture of Kaori, smiling in June, surrounded by the scent of lavender. It was her most favorite picture.

As the solemn music of Mozart's Requiem played...Shizuma's mouth slightly opened under her black veil.

Suffering in this world

The dark night shall come

The hurt and fallen souls return to Heaven...

Shizuma awakened.

In front of her wasn't Heaven...but early summer on Astraea Hill.

The afternoon sun was still high in the air.

It was a dream...

She was in a cold sweat... *It's been a while since I dreamed of her...not for two months, since I met Nagisa.*

Today was the first time I saw her as an angel and spoke to her in the dream...

She was smiling...and told me she knew my true feelings.

She seemed so blissful...even if it was a dream.

I was so happy, but... Shizuma placed a hand on her heart and recalled the white funeral procession.

That day, deeply buried in tears and painful grief...

The sadness of losing her...I was probably in more sorrow than I imagined.

A gentle wind floated across and slowly rippled the pool's surface...

The light of the stars reflected on the water.

The cool breeze swept toward two girls.

In the inner garden, at nearly midnight...sat Hikari and Yaya.

Yaya had invited Hikari to come outside. *I can't sleep...* she had said.

Compared to the clamor of the day, the poolside at night seemed small, quiet, and somewhat lonely...

Only the night lamps softly illuminated the inner garden...and barely shone upon the two girls, sitting at the edge of the pool.

Squiggle squiggle...

It barely shone on the backs of their heels...waving...as Yaya struggled to find words.

“Hikari...are you sad?”

Hikari weakly smiled at Yaya’s question. “Eh...well...”

Yaya grimaced. *She’s doing that smile...again. I know Hikari is sleepless. I know because, on the other side of the room, while I hold my breath...I can hear Hikari tossing around in her bed...*

Yaya was depressed. *Am I no longer able to suppress my feelings...?*

“You haven’t seemed too happy these days, Hikari... On the surface, I know you’ve been giving it your all at dance practice...but...you don’t seem to be here...as if your mind has left your body...leaving an empty shell behind or something...”

I can’t bear to see you like this...

Yaya couldn’t find the right words... Because she knew why Hikari was sad.

Because she hadn’t seen Amane-sama.

Even during classes at school, and the dance lessons during breaks...and at the lounge during free time in the Strawberry Dorms, and the meal prayers at the large dining hall...Hikari was always looking for someone.

Subconsciously.

With her eyes.

All the time...

Looking for her white prince...

It had been a week since Hikari had last seen Amane. She had been trying so hard to keep her spirits up. She kept telling herself she needed to be a strong, cheerful girl, for Amane-sama.

Hikari-chan, you’re so diligent, and much stronger... her classmates said. Some

made insensitive jokes, that Amane might really turn into one of the Five Great Stars...

But to Yaya...it only caused her pain.

Ever since she's been separated from Amane...Hikari has been forcing her smiles. Somewhere in her body, she must have a small scar, so she forced a smile to hold down that pain...

It shows on her face. I don't want to see that kind of smile.

Something beyond frustration—a pressurized form of anger—welled up inside of Yaya.

In a small voice, her true thoughts spilled out.

“Come on, 'fess up...don't hold it in...”

In the dead silence of the night, even Yaya's soft whispers reached Hikari's ears. “Confess...?” Hikari, sitting next to Yaya, only turned her face. “I...don't have any confessions...”

Even as she denied it, tears welled in her eyes. Large drops rolled down her cheeks.

“I...don't have any confessions...nothing. I'm not sad. I know...you think I'm acting strange, Yaya-chan. But I'm not holding anything back...so don't be mad, Yaya-chan. There are times when I want to see Amane-sama...but...that's...” Hikari choked on her tears. And made that smile again. She scrunched her crying face to force the painful smile.

“Please...Yaya-chan...don't be so mean... If you left me, Yaya-chan...I'd be so sad...and wouldn't know what to do...”

Hikari's words sparked Yaya's jealousy.

Stupid, stupid, stupid...stupid Hikari... Why are you holding back so much...? Why do you force a smile...even though you're so sad and crying...?

Is it all for Amane-oneesama...? Why do you have to endure all this for Amane-oneesama, when she's the one making you this sad...?

Yaya couldn't help it anymore. She hugged Hikari violently.

Hikari's hot, wet tears soaked Yaya's neck.

I...can't stand it. I want Hikari to be...really happy. My cute Hikari, who loves all things pretty and beautiful...You look a lot better with peach-colored tears of joy...not blue tears of sadness... You should have chosen someone who could make you happier...

Yaya heard a devil whisper in her heart.

Oh...here goes nothing...!

She pushed Hikari down onto the poolside deck.

“Ah... Ya-Yaya-chan, what are you...?”

Yaya hovered over Hikari, her searing eyes looking right into Hikari's.

Hikari couldn't say a word.

Tumble...

The two bodies fell into the pool.

Splash... The large splash echoed through the empty inner garden. Water sprayed in all directions.

Regardless of whether it was because Yaya moved, or Hikari moved, the pair, still in their pajamas, fell into the pool.

Hikari didn't understand what just had happened to her, and she struggled.

It's cold...

I can't breathe...

The wet clothes are restricting me...

I'm scared...

She panicked.

Yaya hugged the squirming Hikari.

Hikari almost heard Yaya's soft whispers in her ear...

“Don't worry. I'll always protect you.”

Hikari realized she was standing in the center of the octagonal pool. The

shallow part of the pool.

As if Yaya were a prince, holding the Mermaid Princess...she smiled gently. The pool water must have washed away her anxieties.

Hikari's dewy eyes sparkled as they reflected the dazzling surface of the water.

Yaya released Hikari from her embrace, had her stand there...and without a word began to undress her.



“Yaya-chan, why...?”

Yaya placed a finger on Hikari’s lips and silenced her.

Hikari felt overpowered by Yaya’s intensity...and lost her will to resist.

Yaya’s gentle hands peeled Hikari’s wet clothes off...and the night wind...stole Hikari’s body heat.

It feels...so good...

The clouds eventually cleared...and the moon and a small star appeared.

Hikari’s mind went blank as Yaya fondled her body.

Yaya felt Hikari’s exposed body. Her white, wet skin was illuminated by the moonlight...and sparkled.

She was so alluring. Yaya wanted to have Hikari’s whole body...

Yaya continued her caresses. “You’re so beautiful, Hikari...” she whispered...

Hikari felt her soul jump to the skies as her mind went white...and only felt Yaya’s kindness...

Chapter 6

Romeo and Juliet Always

Broke the Rules

“Hurry...or we’ll be late!”

“Aaahh, wait up! I’m late because today’s dessert was the delicious fruit au gratin, and I went for seconds... I thought it was weird for all that dessert to be untouched...”

“Forget that...let’s hurry!”

After dinner. The news had spread even to the Miator dining hall area.

Nagisa listened to the chatter as she passed along the line of couches in front of the dining hall.

“What’s wrong?” Tamao asked. “Nagisa-chan, you look so scary... Ah, are you getting bored with me, because we’ve been together for so long?”

Tamao pretended to cry, but Nagisa snapped back coldly, “Gosh, enough of that already.”

Oh my, Nagisa-chan is quite irritated... Tamao was surprised. She usually doesn’t take it out on people...

“Ah, Nagisa-chan, you’re sooo scary. I’ll be afraid to be with you if you’re like that,” Tamao pointed out lightly.

“I-I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it... But I’d wanted to go too, so I’m a little frustrated...”

Tamao was even more surprised. “Did you really want to go...to Spica’s violin mini-concert? I heard it was going to be a lovely setup, with a candlelit service inside the dark chapel...but I thought we talked through this already. Two couples have already dropped out of the *Étoile* competition, and though it’s not likely...Kusanagi Makoto might be targeting you as the next victim of the Faceless Devil, so we decided not to go...”

“I know...but at this rate, the Miator dorm might empty out...and leave us behind...”

Sighing, Nagisa tried to shrug it off...and ended with a kicker. "I wonder if Shizuma-oneesama went too..."

Ohhh...so that's it, Tamao thought.

It had been ten days since Nagisa and Shizuma had separated. Nagisa acted like nothing was wrong, but her cheerfulness had been fading slowly, like a photo losing its color...

Ahahaha... Nagisa-chan acted like she wanted to go there, but all she really wanted was to see Shizuma-oneesama...

Tamao tried to blurt it out, but something stopped her from doing so.

The tears that welled up in Nagisa's eyes.

Tamao tried to cheer her up. "You're almost there, Nagisa-chan. It's only four more days...! The next time you see Shizuma-oneesama will be at the dance contest. If you don't dance well, you'll be picked on for life! Do you still want to see her, despite that?"

Nagisa shyly smiled and regained some of her cheerfulness. "Ahh...well, that wouldn't be good..." She blushed at the thought of reuniting with Shizuma...

Tamao felt something trying to come out of her throat, but held it back with a smile.

"Here, I brought back some leftover fruit au gratin. Let's eat this...and talk about the dance choreography in the small hall."

Nagisa grinned bashfully as if to say...*Okay, thank you!*...and nodded.

7:00 p.m. at the chapel.

Underneath the towering stained-glass windows, in front of the altar, a small stage had been set up.

It was extremely rare to hold an event in that holy place.

There were over a hundred Strawberry Dorms residents gathered there. The main lights had been turned off, but countless candles glowed along the wall.

It began quietly...with a violin rendition of a Tchaikovsky concerto. In the soft, warm glow of silence, at center stage, wearing an unadorned white tuxedo, Kusanagi Makoto played the violin.

In the soft glow of the candles...she was the center of attention.

A single red rose protruded from her white jacket's lapel, and as her violin's music swelled to a crescendo...Makoto became more passionate.

Beautiful and lustrous, the violin vibrated violently yet sweetly...and it was utterly breathtaking... There was no accompanying orchestra or piano, but Makoto's presence filled the large room...

Everyone felt her incredible talent. Sighs poured out of the audience at the awe-inspiring performance.

Oh gee...there'll be another wave of Makoto-sama craziness stirring up tomorrow, thought Yaya, who sat at the back of the chapel.

She thought of Hikari, and it depressed her.

Hikari practiced hard with Kaname every day and tried so hard to keep her spirits up... "I'm going to do my best for Amane-sama..."

Hikari constantly repeated those words. And the smile that came with them was really forced...and worried Yaya to no end.

Hikari always does that...she says everything's okay, but the next moment she bursts into tears...

Yaya's heart ached at the thought. She didn't want to admit it, but Hikari had changed since she'd met Amane.

Hikari had used to let it all out...she'd cried when she was sad, she'd trembled and run away when she was scared, but...she had learned to endure some pain and to confront the things that she once had run away from.

Yaya didn't know whether the change was good or bad. Generally it was probably a good thing, but Yaya didn't want Hikari to feel so much pain, so...she recalled that night...

It was nice that Hikari was growing stronger, but Yaya just wanted Hikari to be happy.

She wanted Hikari to be the shy, bubbly angel who stayed innocent and pure.

Yaya didn't know where to keep her feelings, though. She couldn't hold it in anymore, and she reached over to hold Hikari's hand.

"Hikari, it's all right...just because she came back from Russia, it doesn't mean she's good at dancing. And honestly...it doesn't matter if you and Amane-sama become the *Étoile*...in fact, I'd rather you guys didn't..."

She finally noticed.

"Hikari? Where did you go...?"

Hikari was no longer sitting beside her.

Ten minutes earlier.

Hikari moved to the darkest corner of the hall.

She had come with Yaya discreetly, avoiding all the Makoto fans that might pick on her. They had arrived right before the concert started and had slipped into the center back row, which was only partially filled.

The performance began, and as the romantic feeling spread...Hikari was able to forget her worries for a while...and as a lover of beautiful things, she took in the soothing music and the beauty of the atmosphere created by Makoto.

Yaya was also absorbed in the performance.

Suddenly someone poked Hikari.

Who...?

Surprised, Hikari tried to turn around.

"Shh...quiet. Keep your face forward..."

She heard a familiar voice. Tears welled up.

“Please come to the back without being noticed...” the voice said, and that person slipped away.

Hikari checked on Yaya. She was completely focused on the concert. She had been pulled into Tchaikovsky’s world...

Quietly Hikari left her seat.

Standing with her back to the dark wall was...Amane.

But Hikari couldn’t make out her face. Hikari wanted to confirm it was really her, and she reached out.

Amane gently deflected her hand. “We shouldn’t be seen together, so I’ll keep it short. I just wanted to see your face...” Amane said in a low tone.

Hikari shuddered; Amane’s tone was almost angry. Hikari wanted to see her so much...and was so happy to see her...but she couldn’t move her legs.

From the darkness, Amane burned the image of Hikari’s whole body, illuminated softly by the candles, into her mind.

But Hikari couldn’t see Amane’s face in the dark...

“Just four more days...hang in there.”

Amane’s words seemed so lonely. It almost sounded like she was bidding farewell for good...

Hikari...cried...

*Trickle trickle trickle...*the tears flowed uncontrollably. No matter how hard Hikari tried, she couldn’t hold them back.

“Hikari...” Amane panicked.

She came out of the darkness and tried to hold Hikari.

“Hikari...Hikari...where are you...?”

Yaya’s voice approached.

Amane stopped in her tracks. “Tonight at midnight...I’ll be here.”

Amane slipped away, her tight Spica uniform squeaking...and disappeared.

“Hey, why are you here, Hikari? Don’t go off like that...Makoto’s fans might

ambush you, you know?”

It had been a close call.

Hikari wiped her tears as she listened to Yaya’s lecture and smiled. “I’m sorry...I was so moved by the violin performance, it made me cry...so I thought I’d wash up in the bathroom...”

Yaya wryly smiled. “You sure love beautiful things, huh? But how could you be moved by Makoto, that little thing...? Stupid girl...”

Yaya loved Hikari’s purity.

A set of eyes watched them...

The person on stage—the Emperor in the white tuxedo—had seen the whole thing.

Hikari wore a simple nightgown as she slipped away to Maiden Park.

She ran and ran, losing her breath...through the midnight forest.

The chapel’s midnight bell was about to toll. A low, subdued midnight bell.

There was a legend that said misfortune would strike those who heard the midnight bell of the chapel...so most of the Strawberry Dorms residents stayed away from the chapel at night.

It was exactly why Amane had chosen that place, instead of a place in the Strawberry Dorms. There were too many eyes at the dorms.

Though she didn’t care much for the *Étoile* competition, Amane still wanted to avoid the dishonor of getting caught for breaking the two-week separation rule. It would be a dishonor not only for Amane, but for Spica also.

Hikari was scared of the ominous jinx of the chapel bell, but...if she could see Amane-sama...she didn’t care. She kept running. Into the dark night forest, toward the chapel...

She hadn't even told Yaya that she was going, and she had slipped out unnoticed...just to go and see Amane...

That's why Hikari didn't notice a figure, following her cautiously from behind...

B-tam...

Hikari had meant to close the chapel door quietly, but it slammed back and echoed through the hall, surprising her.

Inside, the chapel was a dark and empty void. It felt slightly moist and chilly. In the darkness, only a small, glowing red lamp was visible. It indicated the location of the holy water.

Hikari squinted toward the lamp. *That must be the altar.*

The next moment...*flick*...a match was struck.

A small candle, beside the red lamp, was lit.

The glow softly illuminated Amane's thin, white face.

Amane-sama... Hikari's heart filled with joy, rendering her speechless.

They had been separated for only ten days, but she felt such yearning. Her eyes filled, with tears of joy this time, which rolled down her cheeks without clouding her sight as she ran toward...

"Amane-sama!"

"Hikari!"

Hikari jumped straight into Amane's arms.

Amane clutched Hikari tightly.

Tightly...tightly...they hugged each other in silence. No words were needed. Words couldn't describe their feelings. They just hugged.

There were no words that could accurately capture how they felt.

After some time, Amane relaxed her arms and spoke to Hikari, who flinched.

“Please...show me your face. These ten days of separation have been so painful... I know we shouldn’t be breaking the rules, but...I couldn’t bear it anymore...” Amane confessed in a strained voice, and she placed a finger under Hikari’s chin.

Amane-sama... As Hikari looked up, her heart throbbed painfully.

“Me too... I tried so hard to do my best for you, Amane-oneesama, so I practiced dancing with Kaname-sama...but I wanted to see you so much...”

“Yes...I know. I heard about you doing dance practice with Kaname, and I was so worried... I thought Kaname might have been torturing you...no, I couldn’t bear it...if Kaname tried to touch you...”

“Oh no, Amane-sama...” Hikari was astonished. “That never happened...”

Amane lightly touched Hikari’s lips with her forefinger.

“No, don’t deny it...and...” Amane choked.

“And...?” *Is there something wrong with Amane-sama...?* Hikari suddenly felt anxious.

“And...” Amane deliberately played coy...as if she knew Hikari’s anxious feelings...and turned away.

“Amane-sama? Amane—”

Hikari’s lips...were suddenly sealed. With a warm...moist sensation.

Ah...

It was so...sudden and powerful. Like a storm.

Amane devoured Hikari’s lips.

I can’t...breathe... Hikari’s heart tightened, and her whole body went stiff...

But Amane hugged Hikari really hard and wouldn’t let go.

Something large and burning invaded Hikari’s body. Hikari closed her eyes and felt a shivering ecstasy run through her head...

Oh golly... I can’t...think...

Hikari's knees buckled...and she crumpled to the floor.

"Hikari..." Amane tried to hold her up.

"Ah, there they are, Sister Fujii!"

A flashlight beam slid across the walls.

Ah...

Amane and Hikari raised their hands to block the brightness as that large voice boomed.

Several light switches were clicked on. The darkness, guarded by the small candle's light, was gone in a flash, and the chapel turned into a blinding, unmerciful room of judgment.

Makoto's triumphant shouts echoed. "Feast your eyes on this, Student Council Presidents! Just as I reported. They're definitely here!" Makoto waved her arms dramatically.

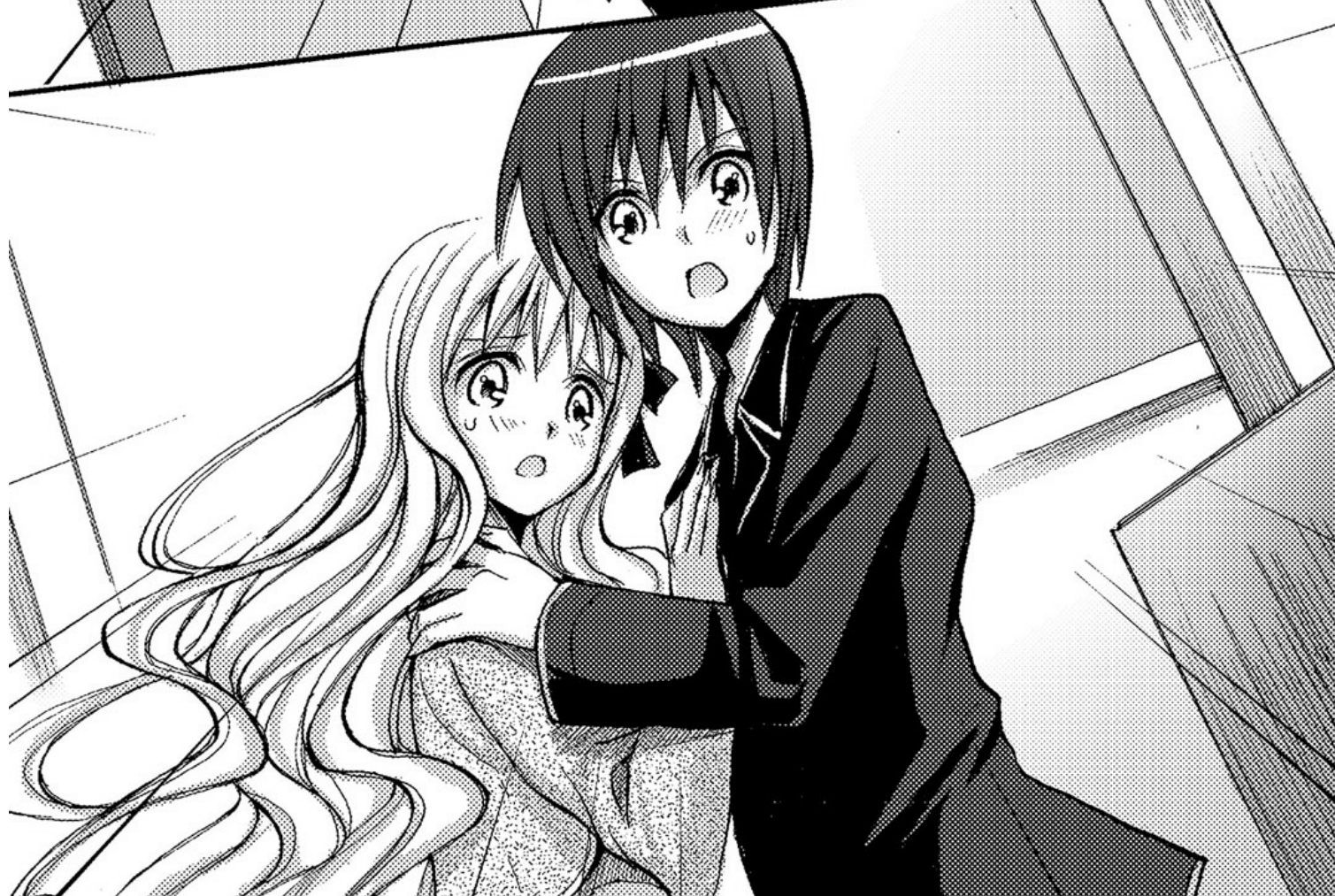
"I'm really disappointed in you, Otori Amane! I can't believe you lost in such a pathetic way. You're a bigger fool than I imagined. You're no longer worthy of being called a prince... Are you seeing this, everyone? St. Spica Student Council President, Tomori Shion? Now you know Amane is not worthy to be an *Étoile*. She broke so many school and dorm regulations, just to have a midnight rendezvous at the chapel! Hey, Shion-kun, aren't you lucky I came back? Especially now?"

Inside the main entrance, next to the light switches, were the three schools' Student Council Presidents—Shion, Chikaru, and Miyuki—called out as witnesses.

Chikaru looked on with pity, while Miyuki bitterly smiled...

Shion...was horror-struck. *How could this happen...?*

But Amane protected Hikari.



Hikari trembled like a flightless little bird, still in the nest.

So Amane continued to protect Hikari with all her might.

The next morning, news of the incident spread through the Strawberry Dorms dining halls like wildfire.

In the brilliant white Spica dining hall...

“Hey, did you hear?”

“Eh...what?”

“Last night, at the chapel...”

Whispers throughout the hall.

“Eeeeh!? No, really?!”

“Yeah, it’s...true.”

“No way...mild-mannered Amane-sama...no...I can’t believe it...”

The rumors wouldn’t stop.

Tomori Shion watched the painful scene unfold. She couldn’t even finish her breakfast muffin. After eating only two small slices of grapefruit, she left the room.

This rumor will surely saturate Spica by the end of the day. I need to figure out...a counter-plan...

She hurried down the hallway.

Amane and Hikari weren’t in the dining hall. Last night, Sister Fujii had thrown them into the Repentance Room. In separate spaces, of course.

“Hey, did you hear? Amane-sama fell ill with a serious disease...”

“Eeehh, really?! I heard the new transfer student was disqualified, so Amane-sama and Kaname-sama were going to pair up...”

“Eeeeeehh, I heard that last night at midnight, Amane-sama and Makoto-sama had a duel at the chapel...”

The rumors raced.

An emergency meeting was held in the Spica Student Council room.

Because of its urgent nature, only a few members who were aware of the situation—the Strawberry Dorms residents—attended.

The room was heavy with silence.

“And so, last night it was confirmed that the Otori Amane—Konohana Hikari couple broke the rules of the Faceless Devil event by seeing each other before the two-week separation period was over. The two students are currently being detained in the Strawberry Dorms Repentance Room. They are under strict surveillance, which restricts them from school and outside contact, and only visitors authorized by the sisters will be allowed. We will announce this fact at a later date, but I believe the sisters will focus not on the situation surrounding the couple, but rather on the school and dorm rules that they’ve broken. They may receive severe punishment, including the possibility of being suspended from school.” Shion made her announcement in a business-like tone.

“Thus...?”

“Thus what?!” Kaname exploded. She was always the first to interject at these meetings.

Shion sighed—*Here she goes again*—but felt relieved at the same time. She was glad Kaname had interjected, because she didn’t want to finish what she had to say. She had known exactly when Kaname would explode...

“So...what’s gonna happen? Don’t talk like it’s not personal! Isn’t Amane-sama Spica’s number-one star? How did we lose her...and fall into Makoto’s

trap! What are you gonna do about it, Student Council President!! Did you just stand there and watch Amane-sama being treated like a criminal as she was being taken away? There must have been something you could've done! Amane-sama didn't really want to enter the *Étoile* competition, but she made a painful decision to represent us at Spica...but look at this mess... It's no wonder the Student Council gets accused of being totally arrogant! And now Amane-sama is suffering stiff penalties...and that little Hikari, who endured my torturous dance lessons...oh man...they probably feared for their lives when Sister Fujii caught them..." Kaname's voice trembled slightly.

Tsubomi was utterly astonished at the whole turn of events...and felt the pressure of grief welling up inside her as she heard Kaname's unexpected comments about Hikari.

Ahh...even Kaname-sama is worried about Hikari-oneesama...yes, Hikari-oneesama practiced so hard...but...we at the Student Council couldn't protect her...

Shion wasn't fazed.

"Trap...? Criminal...? That had nothing to do with it. While it's true that Kusanagi Makoto has acted quite suspiciously on certain occasions...this incident was probably the result of Amane-sama's spontaneous actions, and took place of her own free will. Even if there were people trying to take her down, it's highly unlikely that Amane-sama would be lured out of the Strawberry Dorms and to the chapel at midnight. And as proof..."

Shion looked off in the distance. "Last night...when Amane-sama saw my face...she seemed so remorseful...like she was apologizing to me..."

Kaname screamed silently and clenched her fist.

"Yeah, Kaname-chan...don't blame everything on poor little Shion-chan," Momomi, who sat next to Kaname, said quietly. "Kaname-chan, you must have sensed it, too? Amane-sama hates to be showy...but she seriously intended to break the rules this time..."

Another heavy silence fell upon the room.

Tsubomi tried to say something, but seeing the tense reactions of the usually

gentle upperclassmen made it difficult for her to find the right words.

Pheeew... Shion sighed. "It's highly regrettable, but there's nothing we can do at this point..."

In a strained voice she went on, "On behalf of the *Étoile* Executive Committee, we hereby disqualify the couple, Otori Amane and Konohana Hikari, from the *Étoile* competition..."

Knock knock knock...

A series of small, suppressed, but sharp raps echoed across the room.

Is someone late for this meeting...? Tsubomi, sitting at the last seat, jumped up to open the door.

"Good morning, St. Spica Student Council members...oh, and Shion-chan, sorry to bother you so early in the morning. I thought that maybe I could catch you here. Um, would you be interested in an idea I have?"

There stood the St. Lulim Student Council President, Minamoto Chikaru. She smiled pleasantly. As if she had predicted this strange turn of events...the gentle girl had a paper box full of freshly baked blueberry scones for everyone.

Meanwhile, Nagisa...plodded.

She walked around Maiden Park, on her way to school.

That path from the Strawberry Dorms to Miator ran along the outer perimeter of Maiden Park—it was the long way to school, so most of the students never used it. Even Nagisa rarely used this path, but...this morning was special.

It had been a week and three days since she'd last seen Shizuma.

Up until that day, Tamao had pretty much occupied each and every minute of her life, including showers and meals, but...maybe she had felt comfortable

enough to leave Nagisa alone...or had just relaxed her grip on Nagisa...or she'd really had an urgent errand...

Either way, Tamao had had to stay back and do something at the Strawberry Dorms, so she had asked Nagisa to go to school by herself.

And walking alone...Nagisa started to accept a normal life without Shizuma.

Shizuma-oneesama no longer barged into her classroom, and she hadn't bumped into Shizuma-oneesama in the hallways for all these days...

Her body no longer wondered if Shizuma would appear at the next corner...

And of course, she no longer experienced a rush of excitement flinging her up to Heaven, because she didn't have any more chance encounters.

And no more shocking news that dropped her down to Hell...

Nagisa was unaware of the mayhem at Spica. She noticed a yellow rose bush, ready to bloom, in Maiden Park.

It's so pretty...

Somehow she had walked past Maiden Park and ended up on the back side of Miator. She saw the steeples of Miator's auditorium down at the far end.

Oops...did I make a wrong turn? Oh well...I did make it to Miator...

The yellow roses were much too cute, so she reached out to pluck one.

I like red, white, and pink roses because they're so cool...and they might match Shizuma-sama or Tamao-chan...but they're too mature for Nagisa...

That's why I like cute yellow roses the most...

Right when she touched the rose... "O-Oww!"

"Hey, stop...who's trying to disturb the garden grave...?" a voice called out the moment she nicked her finger on a thorn.

It was a sharp voice.

Who...?

Nagisa spun around, and standing there, a look of total shock on her face was...Togi Hitomi.

Ah, I've seen this person before... Nagisa thought. I recognize her short hair and handsome eyebrows...she's in the same class as Shizuma-oneesama...and usually sits with her in the cafeteria... Great...

Nagisa smiled in relief. "U-Umm, excuse me. I just transferred here so I'm not sure...this rose...is called the garden grave? I didn't know I wasn't supposed to pick these flowers. It was so pretty, so I tried to take one... I'm sorry."

Nagisa bowed to apologize.

Hitomi was speechless.

Nagisa hastily filled the awkward silence. "Ah, but I haven't plucked it. When I touched the rose, I nicked my finger on the thorn... Ahaha...I guess I got punished for doing something wrong...ah...ahahaha..."

Nagisa's laughter echoed eerily.

Hitomi said, with a grim expression, "No excuses."

"Ah, I-I'm so sorry..."

Hitomi's face was so scary, it made Nagisa nervous.

"I'm very sorry. I promise not to touch these roses. I really didn't know..."

She bowed at the waist in a ninety-degree angle. As nervous beads of sweat formed on her forehead, Nagisa looked at her feet.

But Hitomi didn't respond.

Nagisa held her bow for the longest time. *Huh? Did she go away or something...? Oh no...blood is rushing to my head...I'm getting dizzy...*

She didn't know what to do, so she lifted her head just a little to peek at the girl in front of her...

Hitomi covered her mouth with her hand and...sobbed.

Eh...eeeeehhh?! Wh-Why is she crying...?!

Nagisa was confused even more. "U-Umm, I'm sorry for doing such a horrible thing..." Her voice shook.

Hitomi replied in a surprisingly tender voice, "N-No...that's not it..." Her tears

streamed down her face...and she couldn't finish her sentence.

Nagisa, worried about Hitomi, approached her.

"Umm...are you okay?"

Hitomi wiped her tears. Nagisa...stuck her hands in her dress pockets to fish for something. She handed Hitomi a freshly laundered polka-dot handkerchief.

"Thank you...you're so kind."

Hitomi hesitated a little before she took the handkerchief. She closed her eyes and looked up to Heaven...in a moment of silence.

"For some reason...the memories came back...you're so straightforward, simple, and cheerful...and totally the opposite of her. But maybe Shizuma-sama yearned for a girl like you, and never..."

She opened her eyes. She had no more tears.

"Maybe I was the one who was so hung up on...my idealized version of Shizuma-oneesama...only her beauty on the outside... I completely ignored her true desires and..."

And she looked at a small, cross-shaped stone monument...a grave-like structure planted with flowers that bloomed through the four seasons...

"I...want you to hear the story...since probably nobody else will tell you. But I think you've been curious about it. I want you to listen, for Shizuma-sama's sake. About the girl who passed away..."

The Spica Student Council room was stunned into silence...

Chikaru smiled. "Well then, everyone...may I take that as a yes?"

"But...what good will *that* do for Spica?" Kaname snapped.

Tsubomi nodded at Kaname's objection.

"Good? Oh, there will be a lot of benefits, Kaname-chan. Because...even if you

forced Amane-chan and her partner to stay in the competition...well, that's probably impossible. I think Amane-chan will definitely receive some flack this time, and it will cut down on her chances to win the *Étoile* crown. But...if she gracefully withdraws now...Amane-chan will still be able to participate in next year's competition..."

Words flowed smoothly out of Chikaru's mouth, like a song.

"But Amane-sama will be a sixth-year student then..." Tsubomi pointed out.

"The second-place contestant, Shizuma-sama, is a sixth-year student. And... that's the main problem. Spica students, you don't want Miator to take the *Étoile* crown again this year, do you? To have Miator take the *Étoile* crown two years in a row, the year that Amane-sama was an eligible fifth-year student... and especially to have it taken by Shizuma-sama, who decided to participate on a *whim*..."

"Well..." Kaname choked on Chikaru's words.

"Besides, Miator has been able to maintain their advantage during the *Étoile* tournaments all these years. The excitement stirring at Spica was based on breaking this cycle, right? And...the same goes for St. Lulim Girls' School."

"But Chikaru-sama, you've never indicated such a desire..." Even Momomi was taken aback by this comment.

"Well...I find it embarrassing to share it openly. 'I want the *Étoile* crown!' —I can't say that openly without sounding *rebellious*...so I didn't have the heart to say it. It's like a bride longing to wear her wedding gown without caring for the actual marriage itself..."

Kyaaah... Chikaru squirmed in embarrassment, much to the dismay of the students in the room.

"Umm...Chikaru-sama, are you insulting us...?" Shion's temple twitched in anger as she asked on behalf of the other students.

Chikaru apologized with a smile. "Ah, I apologize...I didn't mean it that way. It's a bad habit..."

"Well, it's understandable..." Shion grumbled.

Chikaru was known as the Holy Mother of St. Lulim Girls' School, but she was also the eccentric girl who had planned and established the Costume Club, nicknamed "the Madonna's Dress-up Club."

Everyone in the room agreed. Every girl dreamed of wearing a wedding dress someday...so being embarrassed at the thought of wearing one...was indeed a strange concept.

Shion struggled to continue. "But even if we do create a Spica-Lulim couple to go against Miator, do you have a strong candidate in Lulim, President Chikaru? At Spica, we have..."

She glanced at Kaname, but Kaname looked disgruntled. She had no interest in entering the *Étoile* competition with anyone other than her beloved Amane-sama.

Chuckling at the silent interaction, Chikaru answered.

"Oh, I sure do! I wouldn't come all the way out here empty-handed. Consider this to be my greatest form of generosity. Take a look..."

Chikaru pulled out a photo, folded into four sections, and slowly opened it.

"Th-This..." Kaname raised her voice.

In the picture was Kagome, looking like a French doll. She sat on a chair and had a childish smile, so cute and refined. Behind her stood Kizuna and Remon, wearing similar dresses...

At Kagome's feet, a teddy bear was dressed up in a tuxedo.

"This is a just a picture of your hobby!" Kaname bellowed.

Chikaru grinned. "Tsk... Don't they look like the Kusanagi sisters? This is one of my recent projects. I chose dresses in honor of the second round of the *Étoile* competition. And...the girl sitting in the middle is Byakudan Kagome-chan. Kagome-chan is a first-year student who is a rare, enchanting girl from a very affluent family. She lived in England for a long time, so...she's a very good dancer."

The room stirred.

"If we paired this girl with...Spica's very popular violinist...won't we have a

perfect victory in the second-round dance contest? I heard she defeated two other couples, also. They'll make a great pair. Please take a closer look at her picture."

Chikaru brought the other students in.

"And...Kagome-chan is very small...which makes her absolutely adorable, but look...she'll fit perfectly with Spica's little Emperor. And the new concept of a Spica-Lulim alliance will surely win the support of both schools..."

Chikaru placed Makoto's picture next to Kagome's. The two doll-like beauties...seemed to fit so well.

But Kaname retorted, "President Chikaru! We shouldn't be talking about fantasies! Excuse us, but we have a crisis at hand in Spica. If it was a plan to save Amane-sama, we'd listen, but we don't have time for your lighthearted daydreams! If that's all you've got for us, please leave..."

Had Kaname's jealousy over Amane-sama...caught fire?

Chikaru responded to Kaname's outrage calmly. She chuckled, "My, so short-tempered..."

But she stopped. Out of the corner of her eye, she had caught sight of a serious face.

Shion pressed her lips together tightly, silently ordering Kaname—who was about to continue—to shut up.

Momomi opened her folding fan with its panda logo and waved it at the sweat on her cheeks. Tsubomi swallowed hard, wondering what would happen next...

"I understand," Chikaru said. "You're not willing to cooperate without getting something else...so I'm prepared to share some information...only with this group."

Folding her arms across her stomach, she added with a wide smile, "But this hasn't been announced at Lulim yet. Please keep this between us..."

Turning around, she looked at the Spica Student Council members, and spoke in a hard, serious manner...

“Currently at Lulim, there’s a movement to create a new department, which will collect unique, talented students...or specialists. Until now, Lulim has stood in the shadow of the two other schools, the historical and traditional Miator and the independent and athletic Spica. Lulim has been at a disadvantage...and hasn’t been able to draw out its full potential yet. Its relaxed and broad-minded educational policy, which aims to create great housewives and mothers of the future, has been followed faithfully, but many former graduates have raised concerns about our many years of misfortune and an unclear future. At the same time, in recent years Lulim’s free-spirited environment has attracted many unique individuals. The three girls here are prime examples of the success that we’ve had so far. And...”

Chikaru’s smile returned.

“This year, these three girls came to our school in hopes of transferring into our new department...our first candidates.”

New department...unique, talented student candidates...

The Spica students were rendered speechless, listening to Chikaru’s mind-boggling new concept.

“Lulim hopes this new department will create bright young hopefuls that will contribute greatly to society. At the same time...Lulim will emerge from beneath the overbearing shadows of long-standing Miator and Spica to gain glory for a successful future...”

Facing the large glass wall, Chikaru looked out into the distance.

“And the name of the new department is...”

Everyone in the room gulped.

“St. Lulim Girls’ School Z Class. It will commonly be known as...the Public Entertainment Department.”

A shock of silence filled the room.

Chikaru waited, with a gorgeous smile, for that name to sink in.

“To tell you the truth, I wanted to make Lulim my little harem, full of cute girls. I wanted to gather adorable girls that could become TV idols... So I need

Lulim to win the *Étoile* soon. If a student in the Public Entertainment Department becomes an *Étoile*, more students will want to attend Lulim...and in turn, they'll bring in *more* cute girls..."

Chikaru's cheeks turned pink. "So...I want to take advantage of the *Étoile* entry privilege that Makoto-chan, your little Emperor, has acquired. And for Spica, you'll gain the Lulim votes, so it'll be a big plus for your school, too. If we don't create an alliance now...the number-one candidate, Prince Amane, will be disqualified...and the new transfer student, Makoto-chan, will become a star but won't be on good terms with the Student Council...and she won't be able to find a good partner, and Miator's Shizuma-sama will monopolize the competition..."

The room went cold with silence.

Huff huff huff...

Nagisa raced to school as she ran out of breath.

She just ran...she didn't know how to feel. She hadn't heard Hitomi trying to stop her, as she ran off in the middle of the story.

Her heart and head were so full she was about to explode.

Shizuma-oneesama and...Sakuragi Kaori...

Hitomi had explained how Kaori had been beautiful, pure, and withdrawn... but she had secured a place next to Shizuma-sama and had been very happy.

Shizuma might not have loved her as much as she'd loved Shizuma, but nonetheless Shizuma had enjoyed taking care of her beautiful young girl.

Hitomi had probably explained it to Nagisa in such a careful way, but Nagisa didn't care about that anymore. Hearing about Kaori's incurable illness—and the way Shizuma had battled the illness with Kaori—was shocking to Nagisa, as if she had been struck by lightning.

Hitomi's recollection of the two girls' past was too beautiful...and too tender...

And much too fragile and sad.

Nagisa didn't know how to feel.

"After Kaori passed away, Shizuma-sama...was empty, like a shell. That bright, powerful person, who was like a sun, couldn't smile or laugh. Whenever she looked to the sky or looked at a flower...she would only sigh. I honestly didn't think Shizuma-sama had loved Kaori that much...it surprised me, but really..."

Hitomi had looked at Nagisa.

"It was so painful to see Shizuma-sama back then. If she saw a cute girl, she didn't even respond...she stopped her playful teasing. I didn't recognize Shizuma-sama anymore. I almost became jealous of Kaori...and I prayed that Kaori wouldn't take Shizuma-sama away from me. But Shizuma-sama slowly recovered...regaining her usual cheerfulness...and when she decided to enter the *Étoile* competition, she became so joyful and energetic. There were rumors that Shizuma-sama wouldn't compete. But we—me, Mizuho, and Shizuma-sama's close friends—convinced her that she had to mark her time in history as an *Étoile*.

"Kaori had looked forward to Shizuma-sama becoming the *Étoile*...so Shizuma-sama needed to show it to her up in Heaven. Shizuma-sama agreed reluctantly, with dark eyes, but from the next day on...she was the powerful Shizuma-sama again. We were happy she was back to normal, but...during the coronation ceremony, when we heard Shizuma-sama cry out, 'All my love to you'...we finally understood Shizuma-sama's true feelings..."

That had been Nagisa's limit.

She'd just had to... She had felt that she had to ask Shizuma something...

And before she'd realized it, she had run off. Maybe she'd just wanted to run away from that place...

"Ah, wait..." Hitomi had yelled to Nagisa to stop, but it was no use. Hitomi's last words never reached Nagisa's ears.

"Shizuma-sama...was probably crushed by guilt. Shizuma-sama's feelings

toward Kaori were...not love..."

Nagisa ran.

She just ran.

Toward the Sixth Year Snow Class classroom.

She's not here.

Nagisa went to the teachers' office.

She's not here either.

Nagisa ran all over the school to find Shizuma. She couldn't find Shizuma anywhere.



She ran along the path to Maiden Park again. The path where she had first met Shizuma...

But Shizuma wasn't there. *Not here, either...*

As memories of being with Shizuma flashed through her mind...Nagisa ran all around Astraea.

The Mouth of Truth event of the *Étoile* competition...the chapel where they had retrieved holy water...and...

She looked up at the large stone castle.

She remembered Shizuma's sweet voice. *The Secret Garden...*

It was the library.

She was drawn to the entrance...and opened the door.

Tmp tmp tmp tmp...

Nagisa's feet tapped the stone floor of the library as she trotted through it.

She walked around...and finally reached the vacant second-floor hallway.

Nagisa saw her.

"Ohh...here you are..." Nagisa said out loud, relieved.

Shizuma looked at her, puzzled...and really surprised.

"Nagisa..."

Shizuma looked around. Nagisa was panting and almost dropped to her knees. Shizuma wrapped her arms around Nagisa's waist, picked her whole body up, and carried her to a hidden area behind the bookshelves.

"You shouldn't be here...people will see you. You know about this morning's commotion, right? But...I'm glad you couldn't hold back and came to see me..."

Still holding Nagisa, Shizuma tried to kiss her forehead, but...

Nagisa deflected it instinctively. “No...”

“Nagisa...?” Shizuma was surprised...then looked sad.

Nagisa thought—*oh no*—as she slowly turned to face Shizuma.

“I...have a question I’ve wanted to ask you for a long, long time. That’s why I came here...”

Nagisa’s hands trembled.

Shizuma, seeing Nagisa’s troubled state, stood up straight. She spoke in a low tone.

“I see...so what’s your question, Nagisa?”

It felt like a large lump was stuck in Nagisa’s throat...because her voice wouldn’t come out...

She swallowed the lump, and tried hard to keep her voice from cracking, but it only made her voice loud.

“Wh-what did you think of Sakuragi Kaori-san...Shizuma-oneesama?”

She almost yelled it. She regretted asking the question almost instantly. But...she couldn’t take back it now.

Shizuma...remained still, as if she had expected this question. But...to Nagisa’s eyes, Shizuma’s face tightened...and seemed a bit sad.

“Nagisa...you don’t believe in me...?”

“N-No, that’s not what I mean...I just...” Nagisa was serious.

Shizuma continued as if she hadn’t heard Nagisa. “Well...I can’t hide it from you anymore.”

Shizuma looked as if she were laughing softly. Yet she seemed so sad...as if she had some very deep sorrow...

Nagisa became fearful. *Maybe I shouldn’t have asked... But it’s too late.*

As Shizuma began to speak, she grabbed Nagisa’s hand and led her to a bench in a secluded area.

“She was very cute...a girl you’d have loved to have as your younger sister.”

Shizuma's words were so sweet and gentle. They pricked Nagisa's heart. She wanted to run away, but Shizuma held Nagisa's hands, wrapping them tenderly in her own.

Nagisa was able to hold back her urge to bolt and listened.

"Hitomi introduced her to me... Back then, I was really tough...tsk...and truthfully, I didn't think she was cute. No, she looked cute, but... Hitomi complimented her looks so much... I thought...she was a quiet girl who was spoiled by everyone. She seemed so boring. She was so introverted that someone had to bring her to me... I hated girls like that. But when I tried to walk away...she threw herself at my feet to stop me. I was really surprised by her clumsy, honest feelings..."

*Tsk tsk...*Shizuma occasionally chuckled or smiled sadly as she told the story. She looked through Nagisa, as if she were looking at something beyond the horizon...

Kaori had been a very beautiful girl, and had looked perfect with Shizuma. But she had been physically weak, so she'd sat under the parasols while everyone frolicked at the pool.

She had always been by Shizuma's side, a reigning presence amidst her friends, and had always smiled happily. She hadn't been flashy by any means, but she had always been mild and peaceful and seemingly so fragile...a serene beauty that Shizuma had loved.

Shizuma...had loved...her...

Shizuma explained softly, to keep Nagisa calm.

Nagisa understood her intent. But Nagisa wanted Shizuma to tell her...straight to her face...*I love you now.*

Once...just once...

Nagisa knew Shizuma had cared about Kaori so much that she'd claimed the *Étoile* crown for her. But she wanted Shizuma to tell her...*I love you more...*

Even if it was a lie.

Nagisa's eyes glazed as she stood. She was so scared...she couldn't hear the

whole explanation.

Shizuma usually would have sensed Nagisa's hidden emotions and held her back...but she was probably distracted by the memories of Kaori.

"I'm sorry...I need to go...since it's almost homeroom time..."

"Okay... Nagisa, are you okay? You don't seem too well..."

"I-I'm fine! Thank you...very much. Shizuma-oneesama... I'm sorry for asking you so suddenly... I'm okay... I'll leave before someone finds us here..."

Shizuma is such a nice person. She probably wouldn't compare people, or rank who she loved the most and stuff...

Nagisa tried to convince herself.

But...knowing Shizuma-oneesama...if she really loved me, she'd surely say it straight to my face...

"I love you more than Kaori, so don't worry...I really love you..."

I...can't do it. I can't win against...a deceased person.

No matter how much I try...I'm surprised I want to "win" someone's love...but it's much harder to give up at this stage.

Oh gosh... I...I really love Shizuma-oneesama...and want to be her number one...

But that's an impossible dream...

Tsubomi, with sweat on her forehead, reached as high as she could to post the new announcement on the bulletin board.

As soon as the paper was secured to the board, she scampered away before the crowds could gather.

The announcement was written simply...

ANNOUNCEMENT

The candidates listed below have been disqualified from the second round of the *Étoile* Competition due to violations of specified competition rules.

NAMES

St. Spica Girls' Institute

Fifth Year, Class Trois: Otori Amane Third Year, Class Un: Konohana Hikari

—Étoile Competition Executive Committee

Screams and cheers and angry yells swirled at Spica.

Meanwhile, in the Miator Fourth Year Moon Class classroom...

Nagisa was gloomy as she entered the room, so Tamao raised her voice on purpose to welcome her.

“Ohh, Nagisa-chan, where were you? I looked all over for you...”

Tamao sensed the severity of Nagisa's depression and peered into her face, concerned.

“What...happened? Did the library culprit appear? Ah, was it Spica's Emperor Makoto...?”

“No...it was nothing... I'm fine! Really...”

Tamao watched Nagisa slump in her chair. She bit her finger, looked at Nagisa suspiciously...and was dying to ask...

“Heeeeey, did you hear about it already? About Prince Amane...?”

“What...? Prince Amane...as in the *Étoile* candidate...?”

Nagisa recalled Prince Amane on a white horse, gallantly saving Hikari in the first round of the *Étoile* competition, during the Maiden Horse Race.

Nagisa's heart ached. *Ahhh...those two must really love each other... I feel a little wistful and envious... Oh gosh...I hate this feeling...*

Tamao, oblivious to Nagisa's feelings, said enthusiastically, “Yes, that mild-mannered Prince Amane and her partner, Konohana Hikari, were caught last

night during a rendezvous at the chapel. They were disqualified from the competition and sent to separate Repentance Rooms, on restriction...”

“Eeeeeehhh?!”

Gadunk... Nagisa knocked her chair down as she stood in astonishment. *What in the world...?*

She remembered Amane, cradling the sobbing Princess Hikari in her arms, comforting Hikari with gentle whispers. It was so obvious and almost blinding how much Amane cared for Hikari.

And at the same time, Hikari had believed and depended on Amane...with all her heart.

In contrast, Shizuma-oneesama and I are...

She recalled Shizuma’s distant gaze, going right through her, smiling at past memories...

We aren’t worthy of competing in the Étoile competition.

The moment she thought of it.

Ah...

It dawned on Nagisa.

I...broke the rules, too...

Nagisa hadn’t recalled until then that seeing Shizuma was a major no-no...

“Well...then I’m disqualified, too! I just met Shizuma-oneesama...” she cried out in a daze.

Her classmates wondered what had just happened. But in the next moment, Tamao, although taken by surprise at Nagisa’s volatile confession, immediately covered Nagisa’s mouth.

“O-Oh goodness...what are you saying? Nagisa-chan, don’t say such nonsense just because you’re stressed out from the competition... You were with me all morning! You shouldn’t lie like that, and because you’ve gotten this far, you can’t quit. Miator’s honor is on the line...!”

Tamao’s laughing face had gone white...she fervently looked around the

classroom as she covered Nagisa's mouth.

Oh, Nagisa's just whining again... A few classmates who understood Nagisa and Tamao's relationship wryly smiled or sympathized...and returned to their conversations.

Ding dong...

The starting bell rang.

Tamao whispered to Nagisa, who sat limply in her chair, "Don't worry—from the looks of it, nobody saw you, right? No one will know. Let's go report it to Miyuki-oneesama... okay?"

Chapter 7

On the Morning of the Escape, a Promise is Broken, Then Fulfilled

Four days later...

Nagisa and Shizuma managed to stay apart for four more days.

Nagisa was dragged off by Tamao to talk to Miyuki, and was told that, in order to avoid embarrassing Shizuma, Nagisa shouldn't tell anyone what had happened, so the only thing she could do was keep it quiet.

At Spica, the rumors about Amane and Hikari were scandalous...

Couldn't they wait for just two short weeks, those impatient fools...?

Angry rumors might have come from the hard-core fans whose hopes had been betrayed, but it was disenchanting to know that these fans, who used to cherish their stars, could turn around so easily and spread such insidious rumors...

Miyuki explained to Nagisa the recklessness of her mindless actions, and the only thought that crossed Nagisa's mind was...*I have to protect Shizuma-oneesama's reputation...*

But in keeping this incident under wraps, Nagisa couldn't overlook her own dishonesty and unfairness...and she wanted to run away from it all.

Spica's Amane and Hikari stayed in the Repentance Room for only two days, but they were sent to their rooms, under restriction, after that.

Thinking about that couple drove Nagisa insane.

As Nagisa practiced dancing with Tamao...one question stuck in her mind.

What should I do...? When I'm not even worthy of being in the Étoile competition?

And then...it was the day of the main event.

Shion came to school very early in the morning and sat in the Student Council room.

She liked this privilege—to come to school first, alone, as the Student Council President.

The empty school building seemed cold and quiet. She rode the elevator up to the eighth floor, where the Student Council room was, and by the time she reached it, the sun was up. Now the glass-walled room would slowly become warm and humid.

As she checked the agenda one last time, Shion went back over the events that had led up to this day.

The day she had entered the Repentance Room to tell Amane she had been disqualified from the *Étoile* competition...

Amane had been in a cheap, cramped room with only a small, simple white bed and an old Bible on the desk. Amane had sprung up at the sight of Shion... and when Shion had explained the official decision in a serious tone... "*I'm so sorry...*" Amane had apologized, and had bowed her head to Shion.

Amane had understood Shion's strong desire for Amane to claim the *Étoile* crown for Spica that year, no matter what...

Considering Amane's bashful nature, there were many things Amane had had to compromise and endure to take part in the *Étoile* competition. But one thing was certain...Amane was a Spica student who truly loved her school.

The thought pained Shion's heart.

Shion ultimately felt responsible for putting Amane into this position...and she had inadvertently blurted, "*Oh no, it's not your fault, Prince Amane,*" which had made both of them burst out in laughter.

It might have been Shion's mistake—based on Makoto and Miyuki's requests—to choose the Faceless Devil event. But—two weeks—it had been Amane and Hikari's fault for not being able to wait for only two weeks.

Shion and Amane had felt a little better after they'd laughed about it. Shion

was finally able to give up her long-standing dream, and Amane didn't care about being locked up. She had worried more about Hikari, who had just transferred, and had gotten mixed up into this whole mess. She was probably scared to death.

Shion had nodded in agreement, and Amane had asked her to please check on Hikari. Shion felt partially responsible for pulling Hikari into this mess too, so she had pounded on her chest and said, "*Sure thing!*" and then had gone to Hikari's room.

Hikari had been trembling with overbearing guilt.

Shion understood her feelings. That's why she had tried to explain everything to Hikari in the most logical fashion.

She had said she'd just met with Amane, who didn't care much about this incident. Sure, a lot of rumors would spread, but those would eventually go away, so she had said not to worry about it. In fact, they were lucky to have Makoto back, because she had eliminated three couples...which meant she could officially enter the *Étoile* competition, starting with the dance contest... and she would protect Spica's reputation, so Hikari had nothing to worry about.

Shion had also told her that Amane was really worried about her. Amane had asked Shion to please pass on to Hikari how much she wanted to see her.

According to Shion, it was the first time she had seen Amane agonizing over something so much.

Hikari had said, in a thin voice and with tears streaming down her face, that she wanted to see Amane-sama, too.

Ohh, just thinking about those two really pains me. Unable to take the pain, Shion changed the subject of her thoughts.

Then there had been the tense scene in the Student Council room with Chikaru.

Oh yes, Chikaru... I wondered what that strange proposal was about.

Now that Amane had been eliminated, Chikaru had suggested that Makoto

and Kagome—a Spica-Lulim alliance—should pair up and enter the *Étoile* competition...an idea Shion had never expected.

After the meeting...Shion had grabbed Chikaru and asked her what she was up to.

Chikaru had just smiled.

“Oh, I just...want to gather a lot of cute girls in my little harem at Lulim, that’s all... If Lulim has an Étoile, it’ll attract a lot of students here, and more cute girls will come...”

Lulim’s Public Entertainment Department, Class Z...what a far-fetched idea. But after checking with everyone, they had agreed to the Makoto-Kagome coupling and entry, just as Chikaru had planned. Even Miyuki hadn’t objected.

For some reason the *Étoile* competition had turned into an effort to avenge Amane’s defeat. Chikaru’s bold plan to create a couple from students of different schools—an unprecedented coupling in Astraea’s *Étoile* competition history—had riled up a festival-like excitement at Spica and Lulim. The alliance was creating a friendly atmosphere, for sure.

But will this ultimately be a good move for Spica...?

Shion wasn’t sure. Amane and Hikari stuck in her mind.

Hikari’s painful, teary smile tore at her heart.

*Tap tap...*she tapped the pile of papers on the table.

Today was the main event...

Hikari felt the heaviness of the situation sink in.

When she had first transferred here, she had been impressed with her beautiful dorm room, the chic art décor style.

Hikari was still restricted to her room. Her roommate, Yaya, had left for school already.

Hikari sat on her bed and turned to her thoughts. About the rule she had broken...and the trouble she had caused Spica, and how she had ruined

Amane's reputation...

She tried to hold back her tears, but couldn't.

I did such a horrible thing...

Knock knock knock... Small knocks at the door.

The door opened.

It was Amane. She wore her nicest smile.

Hikari was so surprised she couldn't speak or cry...

Amane carried a small bag. She opened her arms and hugged Hikari.

"Hey, let's go...we don't belong here anymore..."

The Koubu Hall was filled with excitement...and people.

The students had been jittery during morning classes, anxious about the main event in the afternoon.

They finally gathered after lunch.

The main event received a lot of attention, especially this year because it followed a number of disturbing incidents. As the students tried to guess who would win...the enthusiasm grew.

Miator's dark green uniforms, Spica's pure-white uniforms, and Lulim's pink uniforms...

The Koubu Hall, inside the Miator School grounds, was the location of the *Étoile* competition's second-round dance contest.

This was Astraea's only dance hall, owned by Miator, and was only used for that purpose. Dance class was a required course for all three Astraea schools, so all the students had set foot into this hall at least once during their academic career.

Most of the gathered students were in their uniforms, but a few were dressed as noble ladies and gentlemen. They were the *Étoile* candidates.

Eight judges presided over this point-based dance contest. Nine *Étoile*

candidate couples would dance at the same time...and be scored. The judges would find the average of all the scores, and those who were below the average would be disqualified.

The highest scoring couple would be the second-round winner, and receive the second *Petite couronne*.

“Hey...which couple do you think will win?”

“Hmmm...I think the Kusanagi Makoto pair will. Since she just returned from Russia...and her partner is Kagome-chan...”

“D-Do you know anything about her? I heard she’s a first-year student. She just came out of nowhere...but this is her first year here, so can she really dance?”

“Oh...Kagome-chan, following her family’s traditions, was home-schooled. And her house is in England, so she’s rumored to be a super-talented dancer.”

“Woow, really? Lulim is so lucky to get a talented girl like her...”

“Yeah, she’s Lulim’s super heavyweight star!”

“Uh-huh.”

Meanwhile...

In Maiden Park, under the shade of the trees, was a tall girl carrying a small bag...and a small girl, beside her.

In the clear summer morning, they cut across the green Maiden Park.

The tall girl unlocked the small gate, which was right next to the larger gate, with a hidden key...and slowly opened it.

The two girls slipped away, unnoticed.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes...”

B-tam—only the sound of the closing gate was left behind.

Nagisa stood alone in front of the Miator Student Council room.

She couldn't look the Student Council President in the face.

But she was able to open her mouth. At first, it trembled, but she pulled it off better than she imagined...

"I...wish to withdraw from the Étoile competition."

Nagisa chose...to leave Shizuma.

Shizuma-oneesama...Shizuma-oneesama will surely be mad at my decision.

That's all Nagisa knew.

I can't do this anymore. I want to stay by your side. But I didn't know how painful it was to be with you...

I...finally realized.

Nagisa turned around and walked away.

The Student Council President, Rokujo Miyuki, was speechless...and just watched her leave.

For one month...the girls' fates had intertwined...

Countless intersecting feelings at Astraea Hill had turned into infinite raindrops that fell to chill and soak the earth.

What would come at the end of the rainy season...? A violent, black, raging storm? Or perhaps a brilliant mid-summer sky, blue as can be?

At this point, no one knows...

Translation Notes ¹ *Financier*: A French almond cake.

² *Dokudami cha*: A tea made with *Houttuynia cordata* herbs and other tea leaves. It is also known as “heartleaf” and “lizardtail” in English, and *dokudami*, *gyoseisou*, or *juuyaku* in Japanese. Used for medicinal purposes and as a health beverage.

³ *Teki ni katsu*: “Defeat the opponent”—a pun derived from *steeki katsuretsu* (steak cutlets). Japanese people tend to use puns involving food items as lucky charms for certain events, such as college entrance exams, sports competitions, and work projects. In this case, Nagisa’s old elementary school served lucky steak cutlets so each class would have a good chance to win on Field Day.

⁴ *Oshiruko*: *azuki*, or sweet red bean, soup. Normally served in a bowl as hot *azuki* soup with *mochi* (rice cake) for dessert, but in this case Chikaru hands Miyuki the canned beverage version.

⁵ *Taisho* Era: The reign of Emperor Yoshihito (1912–1926). The Japanese often use years of the Emperor as eras for official documents. (For example, the year AD 2007 is *Heisei* 19.) The era is named not after the Emperor himself, but to describe or predict the era.

⁶ “Kitten Waltz”: Chopin’s Waltz No. 4 in F Major, Opus 34, No. 3. In Japanese, it is known as “The Kitten Waltz” or “*koneko no warutsu*.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sakurako Kimino *Place of Origin: Tokyo Blood type: O*

Familiar to many as the creator of *Sister Princess*, a sister moe title that became a sensation in the bishoujo realm. In this series, she writes a pure, traditional yuri story freely drawn from her own experiences in an all-girls school.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Takuminamuchi *Illustrator of the comic version of Strawberry Panic! (published in Dengeki G's Magazine).*



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