

Azumanga DaiZero

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In retrospect, chasing Tomo in a bus Yukari was driving was a more Tomo-worthy idea than any other sane person"s.

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1 - Accidents Happen

Chapter 1 Accidents Happen

"This is all your fault, Tomo."

Well, that wasn't exactly true. Their current predicament was also Yukari's responsibility.

By all accounts the annual field trip to the museum was a resounding success - they arrived at the museum without incident and Yukari left them at the hands of a capable tour guide instead of potentially mucking things up. It was an afternoon well spent in a school-approved educational activity, and it wasn't until they were going home did the brown unpleasant stuff hit the metaphorical fan. Tomo had spotted an ice cream shop on the way in the museum and wanted to play hookie. Fortunately, the guide's sense of responsibility was much more acute than Yukari's, and Tomo was forced to go through the entire tour of dinosaur bones and shiny rocks before she could do anything.

Tomo had cajoled/tricked/threatened some of their classmates to say "here" when her name and those of her gang were called. Yukari not exactly being the most attentive of teachers, it wasn't until the bus had arrived at the school that it was discovered that they were six students short. The bus driver had already left for the day, and Yukari had no choice but to take the bus back to the museum and look for them. (Yukari was quite fine with leaving 6 students behind, but the principal made a ruckus.)

"I didn't hear you complain while you were eating that strawberry banana split cup," Tomo argued.

"It was Dairy Queen! I thought all the Dairy Queens in Japan closed down already!" Yomi flushed guiltily. Another diet was ruined. She was famished and weak willed when Tomo suggested that they go eat ice cream. When Yomi caved in, it was easy for Tomo to convince (bully, really) Chiyo and Osaka into following. With Sakaki's protectiveness of Chiyo, the tall girl felt compelled to go as well. Kagura went along because she thought it would be fun.

And, well, it was. The sweet, sweet taste of churned cow juice and the thrill of doing something naughty (and yet, relatively, completely harmless) blinded them of possible repercussions, the first of which was having to endure a trip back to school in a bus driven by Yukari.

"!#*!" Yukari screamed. "Cut me off will you, you #!\$! I'll show you!"

So there they were: Tomo, Yomi, Sakaki, Chiyo, Kagura, and Osaka, alternatively enjoying the company of friends and hanging on to dear life as Yukari put the bus through maneuvers that would have made a NASCAR driver green with envy (or, more likely, just plain green). Minamo Kurosawa was also there; Yukari insisted that "Nyamo" come along because the hell Yukari would be doing unpaid overtime alone.

"Coach, how did you know where to look for us anyway?" Kagura asked.

"It was definitely not because Yukari and I hid in the same ice cream shop when we were in high school." Nyamo deadpanned. Yukari glared at her, which caused yet another near collision.

"I wonder why they do that," Osaka mused dreamily. She was still holding the remnants of her half-eaten blizzard cup.

"Do what?"

"This-"

"Hey, what was that for!" Kagura spluttered as she wrestled Osaka's cup from her hands.

"Oops, sorry," Osaka apologized sincerely. "When the lady there did it the ice cream didn't fall off."

"I think it's supposed to mean the ice cream is pretty firm." Yomi suggested. "Osaka, it stopped being firm fifteen minutes ago."

"Oh, I see. Can I have it back? I haven't finished with it yet." Kagura rolled her eyes. "Thank you."

Tomo turned around to face the seats where Sakaki and Chiyo were sitting. "Hey, smarty-pants, what do you think? Why do they turn the cup upside down?"

Chiyo had no opinion on the matter. Or on anything. Eyes wide open, knuckles white from gripping the armrests, pigtails quivering, she was insensate. She had offered to pay for a cab home rather than ride a bus Yukari drove, but Yukari would have none of it.

She would never, ever listen to Tomo again.

"You did it now," Kagura teased. "You've managed to piss off Sakaki."

"Ummm..." Sakaki started to demur.

"Don't glare at me like that Sakaki."

"... But I'm not-"

"Knock it off, Tomo," Yomi huffed at girl beside her. "And don't move around so much. You're making me nauseous." More nauseous, but that was something she didn't want Yukari to overhear.

"Maybe you should sit in the back."

"Yeah, maybe I should!" Yomi shot back. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Wait, why?"

Tomo grinned. "Well I read in Initial D, when the back of a car is heavy it makes the car more stable. Since this is a bus, you'd stabilize it just fine!"

"Double Yomi chop!"

In retrospect, chasing Tomo inside a bus that Yukari was driving was a more Tomo-worthy idea than any other sane person's.

Saito Hiraga threw a pebble at the green thing in front of him. It was a two meter tall floating oval with no apparent depth. No one else in busy street took any notice of it.

The pebble vanished.

A hole in space? Cooool.

He was about to poke it with his house key when from out of nowhere a bus careened towards him, horns blaring. Curiosity vanishing in the face self-preservation, he threw himself to the side to avoid being run over.

The bus slammed into the green thing. Rather than crashing, there was a noise that reminded Saito of water being sucked down the drain as the bus folded into itself to fit into the hole.

There was a blinding flash of light, and then the bus and hole were gone.

"Crazy #\$\$%* drivers!"

"Did anyone get the licence plate of that?"

"Where did that bus go?"

Surreal. Saito picked himself up and hurried on home, ignoring the flustered pedestrians. He couldn't wait to log in and brag about his brush with the Twilight Zone.

Louise Francoise Le Blanc de La Valliere stood on the shoulders of giants. She was the youngest daughter of the Captain Karin Desiree of the Manticore Corps and Duke Louise Cesar de La Valliere, third in line for the throne in the kingdom of Tristain. Before that, her grand parents, great grand parents, great-great grandparents down 20 generations were all nobles, mages of varying degrees of skill and power. Only the royal family could boast of a better lineage, and they could trace their origins from the founder Brimir Himself.

Louise Francoise Le Blanc de La Valliere has yet to cast a single spell successfully.

In a society where nobility was measured by the ability to do magic, she was a failure.

A zero.

Louise bitterly watched the students that went before her (and after; she had already attempted three times with no success) in the Springtime Summoning Ritual. Upon reaching their second year at the Academy, students were supposed to cast a spell that would summon their familiar as proof of their understanding of the basics of magic. The summoned creature also reflected upon the student's elemental affinity - birds would mean that the student's affinity was that for wind, a frog would mean their affinity was for water, and so on. Knowing one's elemental affinity was a requirement for second year classes, which were more element-specific than the basic magical theories that they were taught during their first year. Most students figured out their elemental affinity before the day of the summoning ritual. Louise had not. Without a familiar and with no idea what her elemental affinity was, she'd have to be sent home. Expelled. She would be little better than a commoner, and the only way for her to remain a noble would be to be married to one, breeding stock for the next generation. As it was, her mother had spotted her ineptitude early and arranged her to be married into the Tudor family. While Louise liked Wardes Tudor well enough (she liked the dashing viscount very much, to be honest), she wanted her mother and father to be proud of her. She wanted to show them that she was not a failure. Not being able to summon, being expelled was simply unacceptable. It would be a shame that she could not live with.

If anyone had asked her, she'd say that she wanted to summon a dragon, which were exceedingly rare and powerful familiars. A manticore would do as well, like her mother's. Those familiars would not only fulfill her school requirements, but also put her detractors in their place. With a beautiful, powerful familiar, she would no longer be made fun of.

In truth, she would be satisfied with a cat or a bird, or even a frog or a mouse. Anything, really. Just... anything.

"Who hasn't summoned their familiar yet?" Mr. Colbert asked, then spotted the skulking Louise. "Ah, yes, miss Valliere. Come over here and please try again."

Sighing, she prayed silently for success and ignored the ribbing from her classmates, all of whom started shying away from her. Those with smaller familiars were protectively holding them.

"Don't wreck the courtyard Louise!"

"I wonder how many times Mr. Colbert will let her try."

"She'll probably screw up again."

"Of course she will, she's Louise the Zero!"

"Mr. Colbert! Montmorency the Flood just insulted me!" Louise complained.

"Who are you calling 'the Flood'? I'm Montmorency the Fragrance!"

"I heard that you used to wet the bed like a flood, didn't you? 'The Flood' suits you better!"

"I hadn't expected better manners from Louise the Zero."

"That is quite enough. You are not to call your fellow nobles names." Mr. Colbert's rebuke seemed hollow to Louise as she noticed him taking a step backward himself. "Please continue, miss Valliere."

Squaring her shoulders, Louise closed her eyes and held out her wand.

"I beg of you..." she began. "To my servant who lives somewhere in the universe! Oh sacred, beautiful and strong familiar spirit! I desire and here I plead from my heart! Answer to my guidance!"

"Hey Guiche!" someone drawled. "She's a bigger ham than you are!"

"Kal Xen Corp," Louise finished, the final syllable drawing willpower from her body to fuel the summoning spell.

This was it! The spell worked! She could feel it. Success! Respect! At her fingertips! Her previous attempts felt nothing like -

The explosion was far larger than any of her other failed spells, knocking her off her feet and she landed ungracefully on her bottom.

"That was a surprise. Not." Montmorency snorted.

"Truly, Louise, you are a Zero," Kirche (the Cow) called out, coughing at the billowing smoke.

The dust cleared, revealing not a dragon, not manticore, not a cat nor a bird nor a frog...

It was a girl.

The girl reminded Louise of her mother when she was entertaining envoys from the throne - haughty, confident, and not a little intimidating. She was over a head taller than Louise, making her taller than all the girls in her class, and taller than most of the boys. Her skin was clear and smooth, her hair glossy veil of exotic black that hung waist-length. There was no fear or apprehension in the dark almond shaped eyes that took the scene before her. Louise felt a twinge of envy at the size of the girl's chest. Thankfully, unlike her equally gifted classmate Kirche (the Harlot), this girl's clothes were an unrevealing pink suit with a pleated skirt of a darker shade. Her right hand was covered in bandages. She carried no wand nor staff nor any other focus that Louise could see.

Was this her familiar? A human? She hadn't heard of anyone summoning a human before. Or had she simply failed again? From the corner of her eye she could see Mr. Colbert. The expression on his face wasn't that of disappointment like on her other failed attempts at summoning. Instead, he was a bit wide-eyed. When he noticed her looking at him, he schooled his face into a genial smile.

Her classmates were not nearly as supportive.

"Whoa, Louise summoned something."

"Yeah... a girl."

"And a wonderful rose at that."

"Give it a rest, Guiche."

Louise turned to the girl and demanded, "Who are you?"

Sakaki's last memories were of grasping Chiyo-chan's shaking hand when Yukari lost control of the bus. She instinctively had wanted to cover Chiyo's body with her own, but the seatbelts kept them securely in place. Still, she wished she could have done more to protect Chiyo than simply comfort her.

Where was Chiyo now? Were her other friends all right? She was still wearing the same clothes she had worn that morning, and she certainly wasn't in Tokyo. As far as she knew, Tokyo didn't have a huge european-looking castle she was now standing in the courtyard of.

Around her was a group of foreign children of about her age, all of them staring at her. They were wearing black cloaks. Interspersed among the children were various animals. Cats (ooh, cats!), frogs, birds, a large snake, what looked like a giant mole, a few other animals she couldn't identify, and... was that a _dragon_? No, two! No, wait, the other one wasn't, it was a charmander! It looked like a lizard with its tail on fire, what else could it be? And a flying eyeball?

Was this a pokemon convention? Some of the children had what looked like foot-long smooth sticks in their hands. Sticks? Ah, wands! They had wands! Not a pokemon convention, then. Maybe a Harry Potter one? She had borrowed Yomi's Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone some weeks ago. She knew the book was beginning to be popular in Japan, but she hadn't expected for it to be _that_ popular to be cosplayed so widely just yet.

The girl that asked her name was the one that eventually caught her full attention. She was young, maybe 13, 14 at most. Her hair was a wavy red blonde, framing a face that seemed to be made of fine porcelain. Round hazel eyes marked her a gaijin, like the rest of the children. Her delicate eyebrows were scrunched in annoyance, and she was pouting mightily. Sakaki fought the urge to reach out and pinch the girl's cheek. She was so cute like that!

Composing herself, Sakaki answered quietly, "Sakaki."

"Are you a commoner?"

Commoner? Was that the same as a muggle, a non-magical person in the Harry Potter book? Well, she supposed, since she was in her school uniform while everyone else was in a cloak and holding a wand, that would make her a muggle. "Um... Yes?" she replied tentatively.

"Louise, what were you thinking, calling a commoner with 'Summon Servant'?" someone asked.

"I... I just made a little mistake!"

"What mistake are you talking about? Nothing unusual happened." Montmorency again.

"Of course! After all, she's Louise the Zero!" someone else said, and the crowd burst into laughter. Well, some of them. About half were watching her intently instead.

"You felt that?" Kirche whispered to the girl beside her. Her hand idly stroked the head of her newly summoned familiar, a nearly 3 meter long charman... salamander that she had named Flame. Flame had been half-asleep during Louise' summoning ritual, but immediately tensed when the smoke cleared to reveal the tall girl. Through their bond, Kirche got an impression of curiosity and a hint of wariness from Flame.

Tabitha lowered the book she was reading a fraction of an inch. Kirche took that as an affirmative. Tabitha's familiar was a dragon that, like Flame, had not been paying attention to the babbling humans and was hungrily eying some of the smaller familiars. Slyphid had started to fidget at the sight of Sakaki, keeping its head low and trying to look (incongruently, for a creature large enough to swallow a pig whole) as small as possible.

"What do you think?"

"Don't know." Tabitha turned a page. "Odd."

"Huh. Louise might be good for something after all."

"Mr. Colbert!" Louise called.

A middle-aged bald man in black robes presented himself. Rather than a wand, he carried a staff.

"What is it that you want from me, Miss Valliere?" Mr. Colbert's tone was that one of long-suffering. Sakaki could have sworn he sighed under his breath.

"Please! Let me try the summoning one more time!" There was a note of desperation in her voice.

"Miss, Valliere, you know very well that nothing short of the familiar's death will allow you to cast the summoning spell again. You can try, but you will surely fail." Colbert gave a small nod toward the snickering crowd.

Louise's frown deepened, if that were possible.

Colbert continued. "And the Springtime Summoning Ritual is sacred, not something that can be retried because you don't like what you summoned. She may be a commoner, but if indeed you did summon her, then she is your familiar. Please, finish the ceremony."

"With her?" Louise asked, incredulous.

"Yes, with her. And that is another reason to finish the ceremony. If the familiar runes fail to take hold, then that would mean that she isn't your summoned familiar. Maybe some other magic has placed her here. You can try the summoning again if that were the case."

Colbert's words filled Louise with a mix of trepidation and hope. If she completed the ceremony, and the runes took hold, then that would mean she had successfully cast her first two spells. But that would also mean her familiar would be a... commoner. If she completed the ceremony, and the runes didn't appear, then that would mean she failed yet again. And wasted her first kiss.

Not that that was important right now. Besides, it was another girl. That didn't count, did it?

"Hurry. The next class will begin any minute. After mistake upon mistake, you have finally managed to summon her. Hurry and form a contract."

Louise sighed in resignation. She looked around, then spying a reasonably large flat rock, she grabbed Sakaki's hand and dragged her next to it. Louise then stood on the rock. With the boost in height, her eyes were on the same level as Sakaki's.

Sakaki wondered idly what was going to happen. She suspected that she had managed to land in a live action role play session, and that they were working her into their story. Her classmates often invited her to play some sort of questing knight or samurai, but she always declined. It would have been too embarrassing. Besides, she wanted to be the princess that needed rescuing, not the hero (she was never asked to be a damsel in distress, ever; that saddened her more than she would admit even to herself). She'd play along this time, since it seemed harmless enough and they weren't really asking her to say any lines (or do anything, for that matter). If she was here, safe and sound, then maybe her friends were also fine. She'd have to look for them when this was over, though, or at least call them on her cell.

"Pentagon of the Five Elemental Powers; bless this humble being, and make her my familiar. An Xen Ex."

She chanted those words over and over, like a magic spell, and touched Sakaki's forehead with her wand.

Sakaki tried to recall if that was how Harry Potter got his familiar. Didn't he just buy it off a store? She was lost in thought when Louise took her face in her hands, bent over, and kissed her.

Shocked, Sakaki lost her balance fell forward. Louise fell with her with a small cry.

She'll get crushed! Sakaki thought frantically, and hung on to her, turning both of them around in mid-air. Sakaki landed on her back, but was otherwise unhurt. The strawberry blonde crashed on top of her.

"Are you all right?" she asked. The girl was astoundingly light. Through her cloak Sakaki could feel the girl was thin and fragile, like a bird or a kitten.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine." No hint of gratitude, Sakaki noted, but that was fine - Sakaki was the one the fell and

snagged her along, after all.

As the girl brushed herself off, Sakaki's body started to heat up. And not out of embarrassment. It felt like she was on fire. She fought back a whimper as she frantically tore at the bandages on her right hand. On the back her hand were symbols that were being tattooed - no, burned - into her flesh. A whiff of charred skin almost made her gag.

"You have failed 'Summon Servant' many times, but you have managed to succeed with 'Contract Servant' in one try," she heard Colbert say happily.

What was going on here? Did she just get branded? Nearly in tears, she struggled to get up. "What did you do to me?" she asked hoarsely.

"Don't worry," Colbert reassured her. "Its the contract runes being written. It will be over soon."

And Colbert was right. Just like that, the pain disappeared. Sakaki gingerly rubbed the back of her hand, but the marks remained.

This was so not Harry Potter.

"May I?" Colbert asked.

Wordlessly, Sakaki held out her right hand.

"Hmm... It looks... familiar." The crowd groaned collectively.

Pun aside, Colbert didn't recognize the runes on the girl's right hand. It look like gibberish. He might have been able to read it, but the scars on her hand obscured much of it. So that was why the girl had her hand covered in bandages. He wondered what kind of work she did in order for her hand to be injured often like that.

First a human summoning, then unique contract runes? My, Miss Valliere was turning out to be an... unusual... mage.

Mr. Colbert patted Sakaki's hand comfortingly and smiled. "There, that wasn't so bad."

She didn't know what to say to that. True, it didn't hurt anymore, but she didn't like the idea of having a permanent mark on her. What would people say if they saw it? Only the worst of the delinquents had a visible tattoo. She wasn't some sukeban-wanabee thug. Would she even be allowed back to school with this?

"I'd like you to meet me and headmaster tomorrow after breakfast. Could you do that, Sakaki? The headmaster's office is on the 3rd floor in the central tower, right about over there" Colbert used his staff

to point at the general direction of the castle's main building. "You can't miss it."

Sakaki nodded numbly. Mr. Colbert raised an eyebrow to Louise and she also nodded.

"Good." Mr. Colbert turned to the rest of the children and clapped once. "Well, your next class is about to start. Everyone, please head back inside."

The children and their animals filed into the building that Colbert pointed out. Dazed and not a little bit confused, Sakaki just stood there until Louise grabbed her hand and dragged her along in the direction of the main building. Some students snickered at the sight, which Louise promptly ignored.

Enough! Sakaki wriggled out of Louise's grasp, causing Louise to nearly stumble.

"Let go of me!" Sakaki was nearly hysterical. "What did you do to me? Where is this place?"

Louise's eyebrows furrowed in annoyance.

"This is Tristain! And this is the renowned Tristain Academy of Magic!"

"Academy of Magic? Like Hogwarts?"

"I don't know where this Hogwarts is," Louise snorted. "Come with me."

"I'm not going with you."

"I summoned you! I am your master from now on. Obey me!"

This game, cosplay, whatever was going to far, Sakaki thought.

Her phone! She still had her phone! Sakaki fumbled with her pockets until she found her cell. It lit up, but the signal bar was inert.

"What is that?" Louise watched as her familiar brought out a pink gaudy box from her skirt and started fiddling with it. It made tiny chirping sounds, but unlike a music box there seemed to be no tune to it, just random notes. It might have been a ritual of some sort, as for a full ten minutes she was frantically walking in a large circle over the courtyard holding the box up, then down, then sideways, squinting and muttering under her breath.

Sakaki flipped the phone off, her eyes shut tight. Nononononono. This can't be happening. Why wasn't there any reception? Had Yukari's driving damaged her phone? Was she in some far-off boondocks that didn't even have a cell tower? Looking around, she saw that the courtyard she was in was vaguely triangular in shape, three walls with three towers, the biggest one which that Mr. Colbert pointed out.. The wall between the two smaller towers was sheer, with no exits. The wall between the smaller and the main building had entrances, but it looked like they led to other courtyards exactly like the one she was on. If the castle had a cell tower, it would be in the main building, so she doubted that moving to another courtyard would improve the reception.

Where could she go?

Louise briefly considered using magic to levitate her hardheaded familiar inside, but thought better of it. She recognized the signs: eyes shimmering, cheeks flushed a bright red, shoulder shaking. Her familiar was fighting the urge to cry, and given the rather... volatile... results her magic had, it might push her familiar over the brink. In addition to being the Zero, she didn't want to be known as the mage that broke her familiar, on the first day at that. There were still a few stragglers watching her and Sakaki, enough for a new rumor to fester. Besides, it bothered Louise that someone who reminded her of her mother be reduced to tears. It was... it was not the order of things.

"Look," Louise said, in a tone a touch more gentle than she would have used on a servant, "I'm almost late. I don't have time to explain your duties right now. We can talk later after classes. Just come with me inside for now."

Sakaki just stood there for long moments, clutching the pink box. It was as if she hadn't heard Louise. Louise's patience was at its end when Sakaki whispered, "... all right."

Sakaki didn't want to go with this girl. She had hurt her! But she could look for a landline inside. And if she couldn't find one, she was supposed to meet headmaster (that meant principal, didn't it? Like Dumble-no, she had to stop comparing her current predicament with a fantasy novel whose details she couldn't even remember) and likely he would be able to make sense of all of this. That is, if he wasn't as insane as these kids. Maybe they had a nurse's station. She'd have to have her hand looked at.

Louise "hmped" and strode into the main tower without looking back.

Head hung, Sakaki followed her.

2 - Not in Kansas Anymore

Chapter 2 Not in Kansas Anymore

"Damn."

For the fifteenth time in the past hour, Kagura checked her phone for reception. It was a useless gesture, but it helped fight off the creeping feeling of helplessness. Maddeningly, the signal bar was still flat. She flipped it off, then, making a resolution not to touch it for at least another hour, stuffed it into her skirt pocket. She was lost. Definitely, one hundred percent lost. She had been screaming from her seat behind Yukari when that madwoman ran headlong into a green neon sign. And then she woke up. Somewhere. It was mid-afternoon. To her left, Kagura could spot snow-peaked mountains and thatches of trees in the distance. To her right were seemingly endless gently rolling land, clear sky, and knee-high grass. When she had come to, started to head away from the trees on the idea that help wouldn't be found in a forest, but, really, any direction was the same to her. She utterly sucked at camping. She swore she'd learn how to use a compass or read a GPS when she got home. Maybe learn how to build a fire from rubbing sticks. And definitely first aid. If she ran across a bear, was she supposed to try to puff up and look intimidating or pretend she was dead? It was an hour of aimless wandering before she came upon a road. It was little more than a bare patch of ground with trampled grass but a definite improvement from her re-enactment of the opening of the Sound of Music. Elated, she chose a random fork to jog down..... and was completely taken by surprise by a man who jumped out from behind a large outcropping of rock. "Good afternoon, missy," the man drawled, revealing yellow stained teeth (and lack thereof). "Uh... Yeah?" Was this man supposed to be a beggar? He was grimy enough, but the sword he had in his hand was at odds with him being some ordinary vagrant. That, plus they were in the middle of nowhere. He wore a thick shirt belted at the waist over knee-length trousers. Boots, too. The ensemble was very rough and frayed, like some kid's first knitting project. "I'd like you to kindly stand and deliver your purse, if you please." "Stand and what? You're robbing me?" "That I am, miss." "You're kidding. What is this? Candid Camera?" The man shrugged and aimed his sword lazily at Kagura. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean." "I don't have time for this," Kagura muttered, and tried to push her way past him. He smelled of liquor and urine. That should have tipped her off that he was no actor in gag show, but the cold hard blade pointed at her neck was far more convincing. Instinctively, she tried to bat the sword away, but the man used his free hand to grab her wrist and pressed the blade until it stung, likely drawing blood. "And where are you going? Our business hasn't

been finished yet. "Oh, crap, she was being mugged by a renaissance fair reject. "What do you want?" she hissed. "Ah, what does anyone want? A roof to call home, food to eat, wealth, love." *What a windbag*, Kagura thought. "But right now I'd appreciate it if you'd hand over the contents of your purse." "I don't have a purse." "So I see. Surely you must have some gold on you, fine clothes like yours." Kagura pulled out her wallet. "Here, take it." Not wanting to offend the dangerous man, she handed him her wallet carefully. In the movies, the heroine would drop the wallet to the ground, then when the bad guy went to pick it up she'd kick his @\$\$. What a load of crap. The situation was too scary to try something like that. "What's this?" the man exclaimed and began to dump the contents. Yen, her ID, a couple of credit cards fluttered to the ground. "'Tis nothing but paper!" *Paper?* "Its money! Just take it and leave me alone!" "Its not money! I'm not stupid!" Gone was the veneer of flowery words. "You dumb dog, where's your gold?" "I don't have any gold!" "No gold, huh?" The man leered at her, turning her around so he could inspect her (from) behind. "Well, not a total loss. We could still have some fun." Theft was one thing. Rape was quite another, and it strengthened Kagura's resolve, sword be damned. She knew how to fight. Or at least, she hoped she knew how to fight. Karate was one of the many sports she had immersed herself in, and while she was no black belt, she knew how to throw a punch and how to put her hip behind a kick. Which was what she did, flailing backward at the man's knee. He crashed to the ground with a satisfying thud and a curse, dropping his sword when he tried to catch himself. Not waiting to admire her handiwork, Kagura snatched the sword and ran full-tilt down the road. The wallet she left behind; money and IDs could easily be replaced. If the man gave chase the road would have been obvious direction to follow, but she dismissed the idea of going off-road in favor of the flat ground where she could put her speed and stamina to best use. Track and field, now *that's* what she was good at. Hopefully, she had dislocated the man's knee, but she didn't want to count on it. Roads also meant civilization, and with luck she would reach a town soon. The sword she kept just in case, even if it made running difficult. Hmm, a real-life sword. She had never seen one in real life outside museums, not these straight, double-edged european kinds. It was much, much heavier than she expected for something that was wielded one-handed with a flourish in movies. A lot duller, too, although it didn't feel that way when it nicked her. She'd be barely able to swing it, but the next dweeb that tried to accost her will be getting the pointy end. She ran as hard as she could for as long as she could. Green grass was soon replaced with golden wheat heads and an occasional cow, but she didn't stop. By the time she spotted what looked like a settlement with wood-and-stone huts it was nearly sundown. She was nauseous from exhaustion and her sides felt like they would explode. Her feet, she was sure, were blistered and bleeding in her leather school shoes. "Help!" Kagura slammed her fist repeatedly on the first door she came across, then dropped the sword to bend over and retch. The door flew open to reveal a dusky red haired man. "Now, who-" "Please," Kagura gasped, "there's a man down the road that tried to rob me!" The

man's eyes narrowed and he went back into the house. When he came back out he was wielding a wicked-looking sickle. In the meantime, a portly woman took Kagura by the hand and led her inside. "Damn footpad," the man muttered as he eyed the road. "I thought the guard had taken care of him." "Are you hurt?" the woman asked as she gave Kagura a quick inspection once she was seated at their dining table. "No," Kagura gasped, "just... just tired." "Is she all right, Elmae?" the man asked from the door. "She isn't wounded." The woman, Elmae, handed Kagura a wooden cup. "Can you drink?" It slipped from Kagura's nerveless fingers, spilling its contents. "I-I'm sorry," she sobbed. "No, don't worry about it." Elmae refilled the cup, then helped Kagura bring it to her lips. "Here." The liquid was dark, bitter, and alcoholic, and it burned a path down her throat. Kagura didn't care as she gulped it down and the next two cups greedily. When she finished she slumped back and closed her eyes. Her teeth were chattering. Adrenaline crash, right. More frightened than she had ever been, adrenaline kept her going past her normal limits, but now she suffered the after-effects. The fire helped. She would have dozed off, but another man burst at the door just then, putting her back on alert. "Father, what's wrong?" "Get inside Jason. The footpad is abroad." Jason, likely Joric's son if the age, build and facial features were indicative, cursed and picked up a sickle of his own from a rack beside the door. "Who's our guest?" "A poor girl that the footpad tried to rob," Elmae supplied. "Won't he be coming after her?" Jason, Kagura decided, was a dick. Elmae clicked her tongue. "Even if he did _we_ would still have taken her in." Jason took the hint and grunted. "Can you stand?" On the arrival of his son, Joric had come to a decision. "We'll have to see the mayor about this." "Authorities. Oh, ok. Kagura probably had to make a report or something. She wanted nothing more than just sleep and rest her feet, but meeting the police was probably for the best while the image of the man's face was still fresh in her memory. "Can't this wait tomorrow, Joric?" Elmae asked. "Its fine." Kagura grimaced as she got back up. Her knees threatened to buckle. "I'd better get this over with." Joric tossed the sword on the table. "Do you have a scabbard for that?" "No. I took it from the mugger." "Bring it with you," the older man said, frowning. "Can't I leave it here?" The sword was cumbersome and now that she had found help she had no more use for it. "I don't want his weapons in my house. He might try to get it back." In all likelihood, facial features weren't the only thing Jason inherited from Joric. "Joric!" Elmae chided. "Why don't you carry it for her?" "My hands are full with this-" Joric waved the sickle. "- and a lamp when it gets too dark out on the way back." "Fine," Elmae conceded, then went to find a length of rope which she handed to Kagura. "Use this, dear." Kagura wrapped the rope around her waist, making a loop for the sword. When she couldn't tie a knot Elmae gave her a hand. The naked blade slapped against her thigh and she would have to hold if she had to run again; it would turn her left leg into hamburger otherwise. Maybe she should just throw it away. She nodded to Joric. "Bar the door, Elmae, until I get back. Jason-" "Yes, father." "Are you ready to go?" Kagura took a deep breath. "No, but let's." The first thing Kagura noticed in the dwindling sunlight was that the unpaved road had no street lamps. Likely that was why Joric wanted to meet the police as soon as possible, so that they wouldn't have to travel in complete darkness. Kagura hadn't seen any power lines nor telephone poles, either. The other houses they passed, wood, stone, and thatch single-room affairs like Joric's, were sparsely spaced. The air

had an organic tang, no doubt from what looked like droppings from the horses and cows left roaming unattended. Crap. She'd tear Tomo a new one when she got back home. Talk about being in the hicks. A few of Joric's neighbors greeted him and asked him what he was doing with a sickle so late in the day. He'd reply along the lines of "the footpad has struck again, I'm going to see the mayor" and all their jovial nature disappeared. They had walked about a kilometer when Joric announced that they had reached their destination, the mayor's office. Kagura groaned. The "mayor's office" was a gazebo - a handful of thin logs keeping a rickety roof up, furnished with a couple of simple wooden benches and a desk. A man, dressed similarly to Joric, likely the supposed mayor (given how backwoods the entire town was, she wouldn't be surprised), was sitting at the desk and shuffling paper under candle light. "Sir Mayor," Joric called, bowing slightly. "Isn't it a bit late to be out, Joric?" Joric went to the point quickly. "The footpad has struck again." "Can't this wait until tomorrow? I'm already headed home." "It could. But you promised to take care of for the footpad. Two weeks ago." Joric's tone was flat, but Kagura could see the mayor flinch at the words. "All right. Did he try to get into your house? I know yours is nearest the northern road." "No, he didn't. This girl -" Joric held the lamp over Kagura. "- was robbed. She knocked on our door for help." The mayor faced Kagura. "Have a seat." "I'll be heading home then," Joric excused himself. "Give my respects to Elmae." "I will." "Thank you, Mr. Joric!" Kagura called after the man. He waved without looking back. "I'm sorry I was such a bother!" The mayor was a bespectacled, middle-aged man of slight build. Compared to Joric and his son, both of whom were broad shouldered and sun-worn, this man's day job was obviously "bureaucrat". He spoke like one, too, back straight and looking at her straight in the eye, all business and formality. He reminded her of Kimura, minus the creepy open-mouthed expression. "All right, what's your name?" "Kagura." "And where are you from, Kagura?" "I'm from Tokyo." "Tokyo, where is that?" "You're speaking Japanese!" Kagura exclaimed, perplexed. "How can you not know where..." "... Wait. The mayor *wasn't* speaking Japanese. Reflecting back, neither did the family that helped her. The mugger didn't speak Japanese either, yet she understood them perfectly. Very strange, given that English was the only other language she was familiar with. All of them, including herself, spoke a heavily nasal tongue with many smooth consonants that she should have been murdering. What was going on here? "Omelette du fromage?" she answered on a hunch. "So, you're Tristainian then? There are rumors of civil war in Albion that have the potential to spread to Tristain, but I didn't expect refugees so soon. Odd place, naming it after a cheese omelet. And no, I don't know where every forsaken hamlet is. Especially not in Tristain." "Civil war? Tristain? Was that somewhere in France? World geography and current events weren't her strong points. Even if she was somewhere in France, that still wouldn't explain why the mayor didn't know about Tokyo. No one was *that* ignorant. And how did she get to Europe from Japan? Two new ones, Kagura swore. Tomo will get two torn *two* new ones." "What brings you to this town?" "I got lost." "Lost? Where were you headed? The capital?" "Home. We were on a field trip." "So you were heading *back* to Omelette du Fromage? Not a refugee then?" "Yes,

we were heading home to (cough) Omelette du Fromage. Teacher lost control of the bus she was driving and then I woke up here." "You were with others." "Yeah, I was." "Where are your companions now?" "... I don't know. I tried calling them but there's no cell reception." "How big was your party?" "We were eight in the bus. Yukari-sensei, coach Kurosawa, Tomo, Yomi, Sakaki, Osaka, Chiyo and myself." "I see." Not entirely, he didn't. Some of the girl's words were peculiar, but "bus" likely meant some sort of carriage if her teacher was driving it. The names were also very unusual to his ears. "Oh no! They might run into the mugger!" "The footpad avoids groups, and yours was a large one. Unless your friends have been separated from each other like you have been, they should be safe." "You think so?" she asked worriedly. Nyamo wouldn't let anything bad happen to her classmates, but Tomo and Yukari couldn't be trusted not to make things worse. "Hopefully, yes," he reassured her. "Will you be staying here for long?" "Not if she could help it, but with no signal and no idea where she was, she likely would be here for some time. That could be a problem. She didn't have any money (and given that the *mayor* didn't know where Tokyo was she had a feeling they wouldn't accept yen, anyway). She didn't have a place to sleep, nothing to eat, and her uniform was sticky with sweat and ice cream." "Is there a bus out of town?" "Carriages, the mayor reminded himself. "No. The farmers make trips to market, but you'd have to ask them about that." "At least a day, then, I think. Is there anywhere I could sleep?" Kagura dithered. "Er, for free?" "Do you know how to use that?" The mayor motioned to Kagura's sword. "No," she admitted then added quickly, "but I know how to fight barehanded!" "I'm sure," the mayor said dryly. "There are currently two of Lord Zerbst's soldiers in town because of the footpad. We also organized a town militia." Kagura shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "Town Militia" sounded like a neighborhood watch. Boasting she knew karate was habitual bravado, but playing cops and robbers with real robbers was a bit much. "No, you won't be expected to patrol with the soldiers. What you will do is their laundry." "Laundry?" "The town militia's task is to provide support for them. In this case, washing their clothes. Right now the soldiers are doing their own laundry, and they're complaining." "Strange for a militia, but sure, she could do laundry. Not tonight, though." "You will not be paid. The town militia is voluntary. However, I will allow you to stay in the soldier's barracks for as long as they don't object, and you can share with the food provided for them." "Wait, you mean sleep in their quarters?" "Is there a problem with that? Are you married?" "No! I'm only 16!" The mayor raised an eyebrow. "Most peasant girls of age wouldn't mind the attention of a career soldier." Mobilized wherever they were needed, they tended to lead exciting, romantic lives. And if a girl played her cards right, having an affair, or better, being married to a soldier was a way out of working in a farm. All the girls currently taking turns cooking for the soldiers had that in mind when they volunteered. "Well, I'm not a peasant girl," she huffed. The mayor's other eyebrow shot up. The possibility now brought to his attention, he noted that Kagura's

teeth were unusually perfect and her hands were distressingly free of callouses. Her clothes, while simple, were of a finer weave than the woolen attire that commoners like himself wore. "You're not some runaway noble, are you?" "Noble? No, I'm not. But I'm not a peasant, either." The mayor relaxed. She probably was a noble's personal servant of some sort rather than a farmer's daughter. Or she was the apprentice of a tradesman since she did mention having a teacher. "You are a stranger in town. Tristainian, as well. I doubt you will find lodging anywhere here. You could try going to another town. It is a days walk to the north, a few hours by horse." "Night in a road with muggers on the loose? Not a good idea. Besides, if this was the nearest town, her friends could be showing up soon." With a sigh of resignation, she agreed. "For tonight, you can stay here. Just sleep on the bench. It doesn't look like its going to rain tonight. You'll be fine. And if it does rain, well..." "Aren't you going to ask me about the mugger? I mean, like, describe him? Or look at mugshots?" "Old, probably in his forties or fifties, thin, lacks teeth, likely drunk, short temper?" "Yeah, that's him." The mayor made a dismissive gesture. "He's been a problem for quite some time now, and enough people have seen him. You might want to talk to the soldiers when you meet them, though, in case there's some other detail you might remember that they'd find useful. Is there anything else?" "... not really, no." She was hungry, but the mayor already said that she'd share with the soldiers' food. She could wait. "Good. If you don't find the work to your liking, tell me so that I can find someone else. Don't just go up and leave town." He took out a parchment from his desk then wrote something (wow, a real-life *quill!*) that Kagura couldn't make out. Huh and double huh. They were conversing in a different language, but she couldn't read the local writing. Yet another dose of weird. "I need you to swear fealty to Lord John Augustos von Anhalt Zerst," he said after stamping candle wax on the parchment. "Swear what?" "This town and the farmland around it belong to Lord Zerst. If you're going to work here, you're going to have to swear to abide by his rules and pay his taxes and so on." "Pay?" The mayor sighed. "You." He pointed a finger at her. "Make promise." He held up his palm. "I..." Kagura should have been insulted being talked to pedantically, but she was too tired to argue and her brain was rapidly approaching shutdown for the day. "I..." Kagura. "... Kagura..." "Won't steal won't steal chickens, spit on the street, or get drunk while the sun is still out." "Uh, sure. I, Kagura, won't steal chickens, spit, or (cough) drink." Elmae's beer didn't count because it was already dark out, no siree! "That'll do. At dawn, follow the road to the right to a house with a flag with Lord Zerst's crest." He tapped his fingers at what Kagura assumed to be the crest nailed to the front of his desk - three flaming lions on a red shield. "Any other questions?" Kagura shook her head. "No." "Welcome to Germania then, Kagura of Omellette du Fromage." The quarrel began as soon as Sakaki entered Louise' room. "Where have you been?" Louise growled, brandishing a riding crop at her. After escorting the girl (Miss Valliere was it?) to her afternoon classes, Sakaki had explored the rest of this Tristain Academy of Magic. It was *huge*

castle, easily well over three baseball fields in size. Shaped like a pentagon, five six-story towers served as dormitories for both students and faculty. The larger middle tower housed various lecture halls, a dining hall, laboratories, and what she learned was a vault in the upper floors. She had found what was supposed to be the infirmary to get her burned hand examined, but the nurse/doctor/wizard cosplayer on duty was scandalized when she explained how she got injured and refused to treat her. She had found the headmaster's office, although the secretary told her that he wasn't in at the moment. What she *didn't* find was a landline. No one she ran across in the school who was willing to talk to her even knew what a telephone was. And, judging from the earnest expression on their faces when she had tried to explain, they weren't feigning their ignorance. Faced with the prospect of no communication from the castle, she asked for directions. The nearest town (which supplied the school) could be reached by following the road from the castle gates, but the distance was too great to reach before nightfall on foot. Sakaki was quite willing to walk the distance even at night rather than deal with Valliere, but the road had no streetlights. Resigned that she would have to stay the night at least, Sakaki went back to the girl's classroom only to find that classes had been dismissed for the day. A few questions later, Sakaki was pointed out a room on the third floor of what was the "Tower of Fire". Valliere was not pleased on seeing her. She was out of her uniform and in a thin nightgown, ready for bed but waiting impatiently for Sakaki's arrival. "Wh-What are you planning to do with that?" *This -* Louise slapped the crop on her palm with an audible crack *- is to discipline you.* "Sakaki cringed and began to back out of the room." "Now, answer the question. Where have you been?" "I was trying to find a... telephone." Maybe Valliere knew what a phone was (not that Sakaki was willing to endure a whipping even if Valliere did). Most of the people Sakaki had spoken to that day had been what was likely just maintenance staff. Valliere, however, was well-off if her room an indication. It was very large and everything was made of highly polished and ornately carved wood - a four poster bed, a dresser, a round coffee table with chairs. "A what?" "Ok, so she didn't know about phones more than anyone else had so far. Looking around the room again, Sakaki couldn't see a computer, nor a mini-fridge or even a TV, which she would have expected from a dorm room that size. The single lamp on the table had a wicker and tiny flame rather than a light bulb. Beside the bed on the floor was a laid-out blanket with hay underneath that she had a sneaking suspicion was supposed to be where she would sleep for the night. A covered metal cairn was tucked away in a corner that, if it went with the overall antique theme so far, she distressingly surmised to be a chamber pot. Ugh. "Never mind. It must be a commoner thing." *It was a civilized thing,* Sakaki wanted to say, *unlike whipping people.* Louise sighed and put away the riding crop underneath her bed, much to Sakaki's relief. "I suppose its my fault for not informing you of your

duties. You are, after all, only a commoner. Know this: unless given an order otherwise, you're to stay by my side at all times. Is that clear? I almost missed dinner waiting for you." Sakaki nodded, not in agreement, but in an effort to stem any further argument. "Wash these." Louise threw at Sakaki what looked like the clothes she had worn that afternoon - a blouse, a lacy camisole, a pleated skirt, panties and stockings. Sakaki fought the impulse to catch the items and let them fall to the ground at her feet. Louise snarled. "Pick those up." "But..." Sakaki swallowed, gathering courage. "Why should I?" "You're my familiar. Do as I say." "Um, but what, exactly, does a familiar do?" "A familiar is supposed to be able to grant its master enhanced vision and hearing." Louise said mechanically, as if reciting from memory. One fist on her hip and a finger extended, she took an unbearably cute "lecture" pose that would have sent Sakaki squealing to herself were she in the mood. "What do you mean?" "What you can see and hear, I can also see and hear." "Was that even possible? If it was, Sakaki didn't like it. At all. It was an invasion of privacy the likes of which she couldn't deal with. Louise's brows furrowed in concentration. "No, it doesn't work. I can't see anything through your eyes." Sakaki breathed a silent thanks. "Also, a familiar is supposed to be able to do small errands. Like retrieving reagents." "Reagents?" "Catalysts to be used when casting certain spells. Something like sulfur, or moss... At least that's something you can do. Even if you're just a commoner. I'll just describe what I want and you go get it." "You want me to buy these reagents in a store for you?" "No, no, no. Not buy. You're supposed to find them on your own. There's a forest near here and you can find many reagents there. If I wanted to buy reagents, any ordinary servant would do. *You will forage* so that I wouldn't have to spend gold." If she was being sent to a forest to gather these reagent things, wealthy she might be, this Valliere girl was still cheap, Sakaki thought. "And this is most important of all... A familiar exists to protect its master! The task of protecting them from any and all enemies is a duty of the highest priority! But that might be a little bit problematic for you. A powerful magical beast would almost always defeat its enemies. And while you're certainly taller than any girl in the school -" Sakaki blushed and slouched her shoulders, a habit that she thought she had long outgrown from the time she realized how tall she was compared to her peers. "- you're still a commoner. You won't stand long against a mage, or against something like that Zerst strumpet's salamander. You can't breath fire or fly, can you?" "... No." "That's why I'm only making you do things I'm fairly sure you can do: laundry, cleaning, and other miscellaneous tasks." "I'm not your slave." "Yes, you are," Louise insisted. "You're my *familiar*. See those runes? They bind you in contract to serve me." "I - I refuse." "You *refuse*? Who do you think you are?" "Please, find another familiar." "You think I want a commoner for a familiar? Didn't I just tell you that you can't do all the duties a familiar should? You're almost useless and I am stuck with you." "Send me home then!" "I can't." "Cast that spell again that brought me here. It might send me back!" Despite having seen numerous inexplicable tricks throughout the day and the unusual animals that served as familiars, Sakaki didn't quite accept

the idea that magic brought her to this castle nor that she was this girl's slave, but talking down to her level might work. "I'd like be able to send you back from where you came. If I could, I'd be able to summon a new familiar. But the spell is one-way." "Try it anyway!" "The summoning spell doesn't work while the previous summon is still alive." There was another, much more compelling reason to not attempt the spell. While what she had just explained was true from what Mr. Colbert said that afternoon and from what she learned from her first year lessons on magical theory, Louise didn't see it necessary to inform her familiar of her spell casting failure rate. She narrowed her eyes. "You don't want to die, do you?" All right, that was fudging facts. She didn't know for certain that the familiar would die, just that a new summons wouldn't work if the previous one was around. Defeated, at least for the time being, Sakaki replied, "no." "I'm glad that is settled." "I want to go home," Sakaki pleaded. "I want to be with my mother and father and my friends." Louise softened at that, somewhat. While the girl was only a commoner, she could understand the sentiment. Being in school, she hadn't met her parents in months. She also missed her sisters, even that bully Eleanore. She had not considered that her familiar would have similar ties. How troublesome. Why couldn't she have summoned something even as simple as a mouse? Animal familiars couldn't make her feel guilty with talk of longing for family. Not that it mattered. Personally serving a noble was a fine job that many peasant girls aspired to, so she didn't see the problem that this Sakaki girl was going on about. "Where is your family from, anyway?" "I'm from Tokyo, Japan." "Well, Sakaki of Tokyo Japan (wherever that is), who do you think will take care of you? Obey me, and you will find me to be a generous master. You will be fed and housed. You will be given *purpose*. It is a lot in life better than most commoners." "I was going to go to veterinary school after I graduated. I don't want to be a slave." "A what school? You went to school?" "Yes, I did. *Do*." "Commoners don't go to school. They apprentice." "Well, I went - *go* - to school. This is my school uniform." Sakaki tugged at her skirt. "See? Its like yours." Louise humphed. "Well, that isn't important anymore. You're my familiar now." "Please, send me home." "For the last time, I *can't*." And with that, the conversation was over. Louise snapped her fingers and the lamp extinguished itself, leaving the room in purplish moonlight. She then went to lie on the bed, punctuating the finality of her decision by turning her back to Sakaki. Frustrated, Sakaki gathered the discarded clothing. For tonight, she needed a place to sleep. She would put up with Valliere and the straw bed, but tomorrow she'd find a way to town. At the washroom nearest Louise's bedroom, Sakaki puzzled over the lack of faucets. It couldn't be any other kind of room - the tiles were marble rather than simple stone, a drain was on the damp floor, and small tubs were upended against a wall. But how did you turn on the water? She waved her hand over a lion's head set on the wall, like one would do in public restrooms with infrared faucets. When that didn't work, Sakaki tried pushing at the lion's eyes, nose, and ears, looking for a button.

Still no water. Remembering how Valliere turned the lamp off, Sakaki snapped her fingers. Warm water gushed forth from the lion's mouth. Sakaki snapped her fingers again, then again. The water stopped and started on command. Belatedly, she realized she could have accidentally turned the lamps in the washroom off. As an experiment, she snapped her fingers again, this time with the intent of controlling the lamps. The lamps died. With another snap, they flickered on again. The water continued to flow uninterrupted. *Magic.* Sakaki rolled her eyes. *Of course.* As she bent to her task, Sakaki was tempted to shred Valliere's panties, or at least wear out the garter, but being petty would gain her nothing but a potential whipping. The only bit of revenge that she allowed herself was the fact that there was no soap in sight, so Valliere would have to be satisfied with a quick scrub and rinse. She rubbed furiously at the strange writing on her hand. Not that she expected them to come off, but still. "Oh, milady, you shouldn't be doing that here." Sakaki turned and faced an appalled maid. A real, honest to goodness maid about her age in a black, knee-length dress and frilly white apron. She had dark bob hair neatly held in place by a lacy headband, an unusual sight given that everyone Sakaki had seen so far in the school had red, brown, or blonde hair, one kid with a ridiculous blue dye job and the headmaster's secretary outlandish moss-colored tresses (Mr. Colbert was balding and so didn't count). "I'm sorry," Sakaki apologized, standing and bowing, "but I didn't know where to do these." "These are the bathing rooms, milady. If you use up all the hot water, the other nobles will complain in the morning." The maid carefully wrung out the wet clothes and placed them in a tub. "Here, let me do these for you. We have running water on the ground floor. The water isn't warmed like it is here." "I... t-thank you." Sakaki was torn from letting the maid do what was likely her job and stopping her. Valliere *did* tell her to do the laundry herself rather than order a maid to do so. She was as much a servant as this maid was. "But, please, I really should do it myself." The maid smiled genuinely. "I will bring these up to your room later, milady. Pardon me for asking, but which room is yours? I'm afraid I don't recognize you. Have you just transferred here at the Academy?" "I don't go to this... school." "Eh?" The maid was still smiling, but her bewilderment was unmistakable. "I'm Miss Valliere's..." Sakaki fumbled with the word "...familiar." The maid's eyes widened. "I haven't seen a human familiar before! Are you a noble?" Sakaki shook her head. "You're a *commoner*?" Sakaki nodded, letting her hair hide the flush creeping to her cheeks. "That's what Miss Valliere said. I really should be doing that." The maid gave a chuckle. "I'll still help you. You shouldn't be washing clothes here. I mean it. These are the nobles' baths. If they run out of hot water in the morning they'll get angry at someone, likely me since I'm on duty tonight. Come on." Sharing the load, Sakaki and the maid left the bathroom. "If you don't mind me asking, what should I call you? Miss familiar?" "Sakaki." "I'm Siesta." Sakaki and the maid made small talk as they went down the tower. When the topic of their jobs came up (Siesta being intensely curious at what a familiar's tasks were; only a handful of familiars could talk, and those that could didn't pay attention to her), it naturally progressed

to Siesta's own assignments, including the kitchen. Sakaki used the opportunity to ask where she could get something to eat. It was unusually forward of her, but she'd only had ice cream that afternoon. Valliere had *claimed* that she'd feed her, but Sakaki didn't quite take her word for it. Siesta told her that the staff had their meals at the kitchen after the nobles have had theirs. Familiars usually ate at the kennels at the same time their masters did, but their food wasn't fit for people. It would be better for Sakaki to just wait for the staff meal. Siesta assured her that it was no problem when Sakaki demurred (weakly) and offered to pay. The leftover food was free and plentiful, she explained, part of the benefits of working for the scions of the wealthiest families in Helkegenia. The uniforms were, too, so she could get Sakaki something tomorrow from the quartermaster, even if it was just a maid's outfit. "Finding something in your size is going to be a challenge, though," Siesta teased. Sakaki ducked her head in shame, not only because of the jab at her height, but also the fact that someone noticed that she needed something fresh to wear. "The moons must be full tonight," Siesta commented when they neared the tower lobby on the ground floor. "Moons?" "What do you mean?" "Well, we've already passed two couples. Sir Gramont's the blond boy with the first year brunette, and Sir Dietrich was with Lady Zerbst, the Germanian girl." "Honestly, Sakaki didn't notice. Her mind was too preoccupied with the day's events and an empty stomach. "Dating?" "Yes. We're so far away from town that when the students want a date they'd just use one of the courtyards, and the full moons are a popular time to dine under candlelight." Siesta leaned towards Sakaki conspiratorially. "Be careful of Sir Gramont. He was trying not to be too obvious, but I think he likes your looks. I think Sir Dietrich does too, but Sir Gramont is a bit of a skirt chaser. He's just a student so he won't try anything (much) with commoners, but, well, you know." "For what it seemed like the tenth time that day, Sakaki turned beet-red." "I was right!" Siesta crowed as they stepped out of the tower. "Look! Jhuki and Bilwiss are both full. I'm so glad I'm not on kitchen duty tonight, ha! Nobles on dates can be very picky with their food. Miss Sakaki, what's wrong? Miss Sakaki? Miss Sakaki!"