Summary

Gensokyou, many years later. It has been many years since the era of Reimu Hakurei, and now the divide between human and youkai is greater than ever before. Meanwhile, a girl who wanders in the aftermath of a nasty, apocalyptic war that preceded even her parents, is the last hope to seal this gap.
Chapter 1: The Last Outsider

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BGM: Lullaby of a Deserted Hell

A face-battering wind pushed forward the oppressive cold. Beyond it: a sheer curtain of white. Flecks of flesh-stinging snow flew past, all of them accumulating to obscure the white world around, to the point of only seeing one or two yards ahead. The howling wind and the cold chilled to the bone, even being felt through thick layers of patchwork clothing.

Among the vast white blizzard, struggling against the wind, was a heap of dark colors. From brown to pitch black, something pushed through the knee-high fluff. Over the wind that screamed at the top of its lungs, a rhythm of metal and footsteps could be heard- Shunk... Clink... Shunk... Clink... Shunk-unk-unk... Clink.

On the figure’s back was a bag that held itself over the figure’s shoulders. It was large, but not to an absurd degree, and it was clear that the being’s posture was badly affected by the immense weight. The black bag caused a noticeable slouch on the wearer, who moaned from purpled lips on occasion. A small sound, a pitiful sound. It barely reached her ears before fading away into the wind. It was breathy, and with each odd grunt came a billowing cloud from the red-faced maiden’s pale red face.

The girl stopped briefly, cupping her hands over her mouth and taking heavy breaths. The black mittens seamlessly blended in with the long, raven hair that was encrusted with ice, and draped down from the woolen brown hood on her head. While she caught her breath, the pale girl’s weary eyes scanned the world. It was an intense green bouncing around within her squinted eyelids. A dark green that would remind someone of rich pines.

Speaking of pines, it had been a while since she was last around pines. A week or two. Their scent, cool and comforting, was gone from her senses. She missed them, and awaited the next forest with eager anticipation.

Regardless of the pines long-past, her face was freezing. There was a scarf around her neck; a thick and fluffy one. It was very warm, but it made her face uncomfortable and was a hassle to keep up. For this reason, it wasn’t covering her red, dripping nose, but it was as good a time as ever to pull it up. A life without a nose would be a bad one, or an even worse one in her case.

Being all alone had the effect of making life terrible…

She couldn’t bring herself to just take it all off and freeze to death, however. It would be easy, but that isn’t what her late mother and father would have wanted. As well, there could be another person waiting just beyond this blizzard.

The girl continued on her wandering again, shuffling forward through the snow. The thought of her parents made her think of how long it has been since her father lost his life and left her all alone.

How many springs ago was it?

All seasons were nothing but snow here. The only way she could tell the passing of years was to look to the pretty red flowers that bloomed in spring. They were everywhere. In her years of travel, with and without her family, she had always seen them. Her mother said they thrived in the
environments brought on in a large conflict between humans long ago, in the time her grandparents were but children. The conflict turned the world into a snowy wasteland, at least where she wandered, while people spread the seeds of these red flowers far and wide.

The green-eyed girl brushed off the idea of seeing another human. She’d given up a long, long time ago. As far as she knew or cared, she was the very last human; the human with whom humanity would die. The human that humanity was to commit suicide with. Humanity once reigned over the world, and now it was a girl, forsaken to travel the frostbitten plains by herself, on her very lonesome.

The question was: Did humanity deserve its fate?

Yes. Her ancestors brought this end upon themselves with a bloody war. They could not unite, instead they wiped each other out. Nothing else was left to blame.

At least, that’s what this lonesome girl believed. She harbored it as if she harbored a fact. It was easy to be angry at everything, for leaving behind this legacy for her, until she realized they’d already gotten what they deserved. The injustice was made right by the end of all people. It was wrong to be angry for an injustice that was already settled. Humanity could redeem itself by living through and surviving what the world had become, but with only one, it was too late. There were no more chances.

Or so this lonesome woman had believed, because, just beyond the translucent curtain made of pure ice, was a shadow. At first, it seemed like a mirage, a trick of the mind to cope with her loneliness, until both her and the shadow got closer.

It was a figure covered in purple, a weird circle on its chest. One side of the circle was white, the other black, and a spot of each color was on the opposite side. In her hand was a matching… stick? Could it be called that…? It was curved in a hook at one end, and on the other it opened up like a flower, or a shield.

“There’s thin ice ahead. I would turn the other way if I were you.”

Thin ice… she remembered her last incident with that. That’s how her mother died, saving her from a frozen lake. What was she supposed to do to express gratitude again…? it’d been so long since she’d last dealt with… a person.

She nodded, and stared up at the figure.

“You’re lonely, aren’t you? When was the last time you’ve seen another person?”

It was written all over her face, wasn’t it? She just nodded again. Not like words would do any good. She barely spoke anyway, not even to her parents. The most noise heard out of her was just grunts and sighs.

How long ago was it since she’d seen another person, anyway…? Two… no, three springs ago, or so said the wind as she counted backwards in her memories.

“There’s no other people around for many, many miles. Fortunately, I know of a place that’s a bit more populated Would you like me to show you?” She asked.

More… populated…? More people…?

Yes! Yes, a thousand times yes! The girl was shaking in excitement at the prospect of no longer being alone, now that it was right in front of her. She was willing to do whatever it took. She
nodded, vigorously. Her eyes locked onto the woman who offered her such a thing. Perhaps humanity could yet have another chance?

“It comes at a price, though…”

She knew it full well. Nothing was free. The only thing free was death, and that got people nowhere. You had to pay in order to gain.

“You see, our beloved realm is stricken with a similar conflict as yours was. Something happened long ago, and now we live on the brink of collapse. There is still yet hope, though, which is why I came here; to search for a person to try and stop this bloodshed. A human. I know for certain that nobody on either side -Your kind, and my kind, youkai- will want to end this war in any way other than death to the other, so I’ve been scouring this world for a third party. This is rather sudden, though… and there will be many hardships. It may bring more pain than you can imagine. Is that worth it to you? You risk even more pain than you will ever experience being by yourself, just to be in the presence of a person again, Are you sure?” she questioned.

The girl nodded. Anything. Absolutely anything meant anything. She was willing to do anything, and that meant stopping a war, if she had the power. She had many questions, and wished this stranger would go into the details- especially what she meant by “youkai.” These questions could be asked later, however…

“I guess we take social activity for granted where we live…” the taller woman interrupted her thoughts, “considering the years you’ve probably faced all by yourself. But, I want you to think on this. Don’t just go nodding your head yes. Come, let’s walk, just a little bit.”

The wandering girl was disappointed. She wanted to hurry up and escape this hell, no matter how hellish it might be.

She wasn’t the only one who wanted her to go. The wind, too, willed her to go as the tall figure walked grabbed her hand and walked on.

“I like it here, even if there are no people. I sometimes go here to clear my head. Never came across a human, though,” she said, advancing through the thick snow. The wind behind her tugged on the flower-like stick in her hand until she pulled it closed.

On her head was a hood, covering her hair and just leaving her head exposed. However, all the green-eyed girl could see was her pale face.

“You’re quiet… It’s almost… eerie. Can you speak?”

The girl nodded.

“Okay. Will you?”

She shook her head. The girl didn’t like speaking, not one bit. Only when it was absolutely necessary, and even then, only the barest of things were worthy of being voiced. Extra points if she could get it out with some gestures and just one word.

The other woman simply nodded, looking around the landscape. What the hell was so fascinating about this place?

“Anyway, think about it. I would like to wait until around the afternoon before you decide for sure.”
The wanderer nodded. She knew her answer would already be yes. Of course, she would have to endure this. It was fine, was it?

Girls are walking…

The pair wandered for a long time, wearing the one’s patience very thin. She still wanted to go. Nothing could compare to the hell of living here. The deafening wind and the endless sheets of white hurt her eyes, and she even hallucinated sometimes. All because it was pure white, with nothing but muffled noise in her ears.

She still was very certain she wouldn’t miss this snowy hellhole.

It felt like centuries since that strange woman came through, but the wanderer couldn’t enjoy it. She felt like she was being deprived of something, and she wanted out.

Finally, the more socialized lady finished her walk.

“I think I’ve given you enough time,” she said, pointing at the faint ball of light obscured by the clouds. It was the sun. Or, rather, what this world’s view of the sun was.

She stopped, moving in front of the silent girl and looking her in the eye.

“What is your answer?” she asked, leaning on the stick. She’d called it an “umbrella,” something humans invented long ago to stop rain and snow from falling on their heads. It didn’t rain here. She only knew because her father once told her of water coming from the sky. Not just flakes of snow and pellets of ice.

The girl with black hair nodded vigorously, placing one foot in front of the other. She wanted to go. Being cooped up here without other people was a nightmare and a half. She hated it.

“It’s settled, then. You’ll be coming with me,” she responded, “Now, do you have a name?”

Name… Name… That thing she was always called. Her mind was taken back to her family. The mother and father who loved her… They always called her… What did they call her again?

From deep within her memories, the crying wind remembered. It recollected her mother calling out her name, making sure she stayed not too far behind. It reminded her of the single-breath call her father beckoned her with.

Tsu… Tsu… Was that it…? Just “Tsu…?” It felt like there was more… More to her name than just one sound… The wind, however, has never lied to “Tsu.” The young girl was never deceived by the screaming rushes of air.

“Tsu,” she replied to the taller lady who shielded her from the uncaring gale.

“Tsu… Do you have a surname?” The woman in front of her had a confused look, as though it was normal to give a surname.

Tsu tried to remember… The wind wasn’t as kind this time. It did not remind Tsu of the last name she never used. After all, she was the one and only Tsu, the very last human on this side of the earth. Never, ever did she need her surname. It didn’t matter when the only Tsu her family knew was her. She shook her head. If she could not remember it, and never needed it, she didn’t have one.

“I see. Now you do, Miss Tsu,” the creature replied, grabbing the mitten-clad hand, “Welcome, Tsu
Hakurei. My name is Chen Yakumo. You have many hardships ahead of you.”

Suddenly, Tsu was tugged gently. A weird slit had opened in the air, with two ribbons tying the ends shut… what? It pulled open, revealing a black pit of red eyes. They were intense eyes, seeming to stare directly into her soul, while the void surrounding them seemed to be radiating darkness. It was pure, pitch black, the likes of which Tsu had never seen.

Before she could react, the rift billowed a warmth out of its maw.

Suddenly, the girl had second thoughts… Her parents told her of a burning, scary place that was deep under the earth. This weird woman, with brown hair and black… horns? The woman with the two black tails, tipped with snowy white, Was she taking Tsu into the dark pits of hell, where the soul-crushing gaze stared from?

It was too late, though. She decided that anything, and meant that everything, was worth seeing another person, feeling an embrace again. All that mattered to her was company after seven years of being all alone.

One step to the blazing hell, the taller figure looking back with a calm smile that melted her even more than the heat.

Two steps. One more step and she would enter this new hell. Would the hellacious fires be hot? Would she feel them? Would she get burned?

Three steps. Her boot landed on something hard… and she could hear a rumble that echoed in the material in response to her step.

“Welcome to Gensokyou.”

Four. Her face entered hell.

Except it wasn’t hell. The floor… it was made of wood? She was in a room, and it was hot. There were walls, with criss-cross patterns of wood intermingling with some weird sheet on all sides. In the middle was a bit of the floor, elevated and standing on four legs. There was no fire, and a loud buzz screamed from outside. Why was it hot, though…?

The slit closed behind her, it was too late to escape. Tsu’s breath deepened, became louder. She was breathing through her mouth in a panic, eyes flitting around the room.

“Chen” slid a finger into her scarf. It was a weird feeling. A small, round rod being pressed into her soft cheek by the itchy fabric. Suddenly, the pressing went away, and the scarf slid from her neck.

This girl let out a noise of confusion. It was a breathy, high-pitched noise. It sounded like a gasp, but with a voice. “Eh?”

“You should take some things off before you overheat,” the woman said in a gentle voice which carried worry and care, undoing the jacket.

Oh yeah… the thick clothing was meant to keep her warm. It wasn’t needed when it was already warm in this room dyed gold by the sun, right?

The heavy bag slid off her arms, slamming onto the ground with more force than her feet. The whole room shook, and Chen jumped from the loud thud.

“Oh, that gave me a start,” she simply said, the thick coat that stuck to Tsu’s arms coming off and
bringing the mittens with it.

Girls are undressing…

It wasn’t long before Tsu was entirely stripped of her garb. Well, almost. Chen had some semblance of decency, or so she said. There the girl sat, slouching forward and picking at where the underwear was pressed into her skin. Her whole body was covered in red marks, from head to toe. She never noticed how much the thick wares pressed into her pale flesh. It itched slightly, but she was quick to scratch where it itched.

She was given a very brief introduction to what she will be doing- apparently the last person who lived here- a “shrine maiden,” as it was called- had died recently without any children of her own, and since the humans were openly antagonistic to youkai, she needed to find a human who would mediate the conflict, not continue it with more genocide. The obvious choice was the outside world.

Although, as a shrine maiden, her primary job would be to carry out different rituals, and occasionally resolve “incidents,” as they were called. Of course, Chen had to find her a suitable uniform

If she was humanity’s last chance, she would gladly take up that role.

Chen had told her to wait right here, sitting in this spot, until she returned. That’s what she did in her green underwear. Waited for her.

What even was chen? She was a youkai… but she was told there were different kinds. Those pointy things on her head flickered and moved about seemed odd, same with her tails. Otherwise, she seemed like a normal human. She was rather beautiful, though the things on her head creeped her out.

Pip, pip, pip.

Footsteps. Barefoot. Approaching the room.

The near-naked Tsu Hakurei’s guard was up, her feet slamming into the wooden floor and lifting her body off the ground. Her body turned around, in the direction of the door. Her crude weapons were in her bag, across the room and too far away to reach in time. The only weapon she could use were her firsts.

Suddenly, a part of the wall was thrown open,

The creature that threw open the door was another odd human. Two bushy tails that matched her golden hair, red eyes that stared right at her widely.

Youkai.

Oddly, these reminded her of a fox… though they were usually white with one tail, and normally were much more shy around people.

A lively smile was on the white-clad creature, who appeared younger than Tsu, who raised a fist in preparation to defend herself.

“Hey! Are you the new miko Lady Chen talked about?”

How did this girl know Chen?
Tsu raised her other fist, squaring up in an awkward, hunched pose in order to defend herself.

“Hey, we’re all friends here, miss shrine maiden!” the figure said, having noticed the two balled up fists, “Lady Chen told me not to hurt you. If I did I’d be in big trouble! I’m a good shikigami, though~! Why would I hurt a new friend anyway?”

The small girl approached further after the Hakurei girl relaxed. She looked around nine years old… but she felt older. There was something about her that made Tsu feel young in her place.

“You don’t talk much, do you? My name’s Ran. Lady Chen said she named me after her master. What’s your name?” she asked, barely a foot’s length away from Tsu, staring up from chest-height into her eyes.

“Tsu,” she replied, scratching her shoulder and backing away.

Ran smiled, flickering her ears. “That’s a pretty name,” she responded, “It’s so short and easy too~” Her voice was full of childish enthusiasm, though Tsu just looked at her, a hanging frown displaying a bit of discomfort. She wanted to not be alone, but this child was a little too much energy. She wished Chen would hurry up.

And she did.

As if by magic, the more adult youkai showed up, dropping through one of those slits in the air. Tsu was less startled by it, having encountered it twice before now. Chen called it a “gap,” a door she could summon to move from place to place, no matter the distance.

The scary eyes lost their effect after the first time going through them, not that they distracted much from the woman in the red dress and the puffy green thing on her head. The thing that did that was the golden ring that stuck into Chen’s “ear,” which jiggled around as she landed on the floor.

In her hand was a stick with two weird… things hanging off the end, and in the other appeared to be a folded-up set of red clothes.

“I see my shikigami got here before I did. How do you like our new friend, Ran?”

Ran turned around with a jump and a huff, waving her tails. “I like her! She’s pretty. She needs to talk more, though... All she does is make noises and stare!”

Chen laughed and laid a hand on her shikigami as she approached Tsu. Curling her fingers rhythmically, the yellow fox’s hair ruffled up and she briefly scratched her head before placing the items onto the table.

The stick made a clatter and a rustle as it bounced on the table, before being silenced by the clothes and two oddly-shaped pieces of wood. Were those shoes or something? They were basically two slats of wood, with two more stuck underneath it, giving them an elevated look. Meanwhile, some strings were out on the top.

“Alright, Tsu. These are yours. Come with me, first. I had Ran set up a bath for you while I looked for an outfit that would fit,” she said, grabbing the girl’s unkempt hand and pulling her easily to the end of the room, before opening a gap into another room.

With her hand in Chen’s, Tsu could easily see the difference in their fingernails- hers were scraggly and long, with black lines bordering the pink and white sections, while Chen’s were nice and rounded, transitioning smoothly between pink and white. It was clear that she was filthy.
Out of the gap came a cloud of steam, and into it came the human and youkai, shutting behind them. This room had the same style as the other: Wood floors, sheet walls that were criss-crossed with wooden plaid, as she reasoned. However, there was a small lake that was full of steaming water. It was a uniform shape, and elevated from the floor in a white border that surrounded it. On the floor was a mat, and a wooden stool. Under which, was a large… cup? It looked like a cup, if not for the wooden design and the weird handle sticking out of the top end. In the odd cup of wooden slats was the handle to a weird spoon.

Chen kicked the cup from under the stool and picked it up by that odd panel that was longer than the rest, the odd handle. She pulled the spoon out and tapped it onto the stool. “Get out of your things and sit here,” she ordered softly.

The foreign girl crossed her arms and legs, her eyes locking onto the youkai with narrow pupils. Her face was a small scowl and her brow furrowed suspiciously.

“What’s wrong? Don’t worry, it’s just a bath,” Chen inquired, pulling off the poofy hat and placing the two things on the stool. She moved in the direction of the girl, who instinctively raised her fists and got into her odd fighting stance.

She placed a hand on the shoulder of the Hakurei girl. “I’m not gonna do anything to you,” she assured.

Once the girl was properly undressed, she was sat down on the stool. Chen had gotten undressed as well. After all, she was bound to get wet from bathing this girl. Tsu was expecting the water to be freezing cold. After all, that’s all the water there was in the cruel world she lived on. She hunched forward and braced for the chill of icy water down her back. It was not cold, however. In fact, it was hot. Not too hot, but it was not so cold it would freeze her back.

She leaned back, the warm water a pleasant surprise as it flowed down her body. Her hair was already damp from all the snow that had been trapped in it, but now it was warmed up and soaked. The water made her waist-length hair heavy, but she was perfectly fine with that.

Chen smeared a glob of something cool on her head, stroking her hair softly as she worked it in. She tensed up, disgusted by the weird slime that invaded her head. Until the motherly figure began to scratch it into her head. It foamed up and dripped down her face. It stung her eyes, but she clenched her teeth and closed them, resisting the pain. She’d been through worse than a little froth in her eyes. Ice cold water, freezing to the bone, was far worse.

The girl’s head rocked back and forth in sync with Chen’s gently movement, her whole body relaxing as she felt the other person’s fingers on her hair. It was good, finally feeling another person touching her after so many years.

“Hey, Tsu…” Chen said suddenly, “The funeral for the last shrine maiden is tomorrow. This is sudden, but you have to go. In my stead, at least. Ran isn’t welcome at the human village, so I have to stay with her at home.”

“Why…?” the soft, hoarse, breathy voice sounded out in reply.

Chen’s fingers seized, just a little bit. To any other person, it would be clear that Chen was taken aback by her sudden talking. After all, this was the second word ever the young girl had ever said to her. Tsu seemed oblivious, though, instead ducking her head and tensing up again.

“Why what? Why can’t Ran come, or why do you have to go?”
“Ran.”

Chen cleared her throat. “Ran is a youkai. Youkai and humans are in a kind of war right now. Remember?”

She nodded.

Chen let out a shaky sigh, continuing to wash the girl’s hair. “Not that I’d want her to go. That last girl had it coming… how she treated Ran like a punching bag… She had it coming. She was nasty to us youkai, even nastier than the last one. I was so happy when they found that girl washed up in the river.”

She sounded feverish as she ratted on and murmured curses to the last shrine maiden. The last girl was seemingly a very bad person, hurting these people, who seemed only slightly different from normal humans.

“How… she die?” Tsu inquired.

Chen took a deep breath, breathing out slowly. “Ah, sorry… The girls before you treated my kind very poorly, so I broke for a second. Don’t mind that. Anyway, we think she drowned. No sign of a fight or anything. She was just found by the humans at the riverbank a few hours after she went missing. She might have killed herself. She often said her mother treated her like she was a youkai herself. I wonder if that’s why she never had kids. Looks like it helped us in the long run. Ran was very excited when I told her you’d be nicer.”

Tsu nodded. She noticed that Ran had acted differently than she would in her position. However, she shrugged it off as the fox youkai being gullible.

“Oh- I meant to describe what your duties will be while we’re doing this, in a little more detail,” she continued, “You will maintain the shrine and perform different rituals I will teach you. You will also go out and exterminate youkai that cause incidents- don’t kill them, by the way. You will also help to perform blessings and cleanse places of evil energies. As well, you will have the secret task of keeping the peace. I want you to help me stop human-youkai incursions if they happen, and try to mend the balance that these two kinds once had.”

Chen let out a wistful sigh. “Oh, if Yukari were alive to see what her beloved land had become, or if Reimu were alive to see her descendants destroy the bond humans and youkai had… something she worked so hard to forge… They both died for it, you know…” she choked.

But what if? Tsu was confused. What if…? Why did Chen start a new thought halfway through? Didn’t want to think about it? She seemed distressed enough. Whatever the reason, Tsu leaned back and smiled at Chen. It was over now, and she was going to do exactly what she needed to do. It would be wrong not to repay this debt. Yukari and Reimu… whoever those two were, Tsu was going to turn it back to the way they left it.

Chen smiled in return, dumping a spoonful of warm water on Tsu’s face. Her pretty emerald eyes opened, now not covered in foam, and locked to the youkai’s, before she leaned forward to her normal, hunched-over position.

Tsu felt a knee in her back and a hand on her shoulder as her posture was forcibly changed. “Don’t slouch, it’ll ruin your back.”

Chapter End Notes
Gah, it's been forever since I've even thought of making a fanfiction. After that horrible abomination that was that pokemon fanfiction I made when I was 14, I was discouraged. Not so much anymore. Now I can actually make a believable character who isn't a pussy!

Speaking of pussy... Chen's looking a bit older. Probably because it's 650+ years after the events of the main touhou games. Erryone's dead and the youkai and humans are at war. Meanwhile, the outside world is a snowball thanks to a nuclear war that happened before the protagonist was even born.

Anent that, we have Tsu. She was designed expressly to have autism. Not for the sake of tokenism, though. I'm not that much of an asshole. I just wanted to do it. I have autism myself, so this comes a little easier to me. I partially based it off my own impulses and aversion, especially that aversion to verbal communication she has. I wanted this to have a few pictures, like an illustrated novel, but I cannot draw. This will have to do.

Also, I'm leaving an explanation as to why Chen isn't hated so much for the next chapter. Don't mind it.

Sadly I don't know how one would actually react to finally seeing someone after at least 3 years of loneliness and giving up hope.
A Golden silence.

Chapter Summary

Tsu, after being bathed for the first time in this new world called "gensokyo," is prepared to go to the funeral of the last Hakurei miko. She is dressed up in some new clothes, and meets some new friends. If she can make it through the pressure of being watched by many eyes, she will be golden. Afterwards, she and her friends are struck with a problem: stolen koden.

Chapter Notes

I hope this aint too long. It feels bloated to me. I tried to add a lot of things into it and couldn't cull very much, since I need that rich detail. Next chapter will be less awkward, I promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

BGM: Eternal Shrine Maiden

Warm water flowed down Tsu’s back, a tall woman with odd ears looming over and bathing her. Steam rose from the stone floors surrounding her as she sat stark naked on a wooden stool. There was a new silky feeling to her hair, which had been cleaned and groomed, cut so it hung just to her back. Her body had been scrubbed thoroughly, all of the dirt coming off in a gray foam that revealed skin that, next to Chen’s, was nearly snow-white.

It had barely been a few hours since Tsu had been taken from her old world, a wasteland of snow and dark, into this world of hot weather and wooden walls, and her head was brimming with questions. So many, in fact, it became a question of what to act first.

One question burned the most, though; a question that grabbed her by the hair and pulled hard. It was a question that would give some kind of context to what was going on.

“What is… you… kai…?” she asked. Tsu was told there were different kinds, during that long walk in the outside world… but that was it. Not what they were, or how they were different.

“Youkai… youkai are spirits born of mankind’s legends and fantasy. I am one that is called a ‘bakeneko,’ or a monster cat. We youkai live for a long, long time. Hundreds, thousands of years, even- Do you know what magic is?”

Tsu nodded. Her mother made reference to such things; an imaginary energy that was capable of doing anything, used by imaginary people to do incomprehensible things that Tsu could only dream of. If only magic were real.

“Yes, youkai can use many types of magic, depending on what they are. They all use magic in one way or another. We’re different than humans. In fact, we’re not at all humans, and much more dangerous… but we have the same desires and goals. We love and want and cry, just like humans.
do. We even take their form. We were forgotten in the outside world, though. Humans advanced enough to see through the darkness that spawned us from their imagination, and we no longer had a place. That was when Gensokyo was made, a place where we could ‘restart,’ and live like it used to be. We even began to live among humans here. Everything changed, though, and now we’re here. I… I’d love to sit and tell you more, but the next few days will be busy for you, and we can’t sit in the bath all day when you’re already done. I’ll fill you in on this conflict some other time…”

Done… Tsu didn’t want to be done. Chen’s gentle stroking, the warm water. She didn’t want to stop. She wanted to listen to the woman’s stories. She wanted to know more about this world.

“Stand up,” Chen calmly commanded, as if uncomfortable about talking about it anymore. She grabbed Tsu’s hand and helped her off the stool. She was met with resistance, though. After all, the warm water was the best feeling in the world, the way it washed down her back after being scrubbed with a rough, squishy sponge. Eventually, though, she gave in.

A pair of large rags were pulled from a gap. They were white and had an odd texture. A rough pattern followed the outline of each rag, almost shiny. One of the rags was slung over her head with a giggle. Immediately, her hands reached up to grab the thing, not pulling it off. Instead, they explored the large piece of cloth. They felt weird, like a bunch of short, thick hairs brushing along her fingers. It was fluffy and coarse, clearly meant for drying stuff off. She let out a small “Mnuhh” as she felt her body get wrapped in the other one, stroked up and down to get all of the water off.

Girls are drying…

Chen’s hands made short work of the soaked figure, using the towel she had gotten to dry her off. When she was done, the towel went under her arms and wrapped around her body. The top was tucked in to hold it in place. It was strange how it managed to do that with no hands.

After she was wrapped up, the other towel was pulled off her head, and rubbed into her hair. Soon enough, the wetness was gone from that, and Chen covered herself with that towel.

Another gap opened with the normal tooth-grating *bweep* noise, Chen beckoning Tsu to enter.

And so she did, into the eye-filled pit that would lead her back to the room she was in before the pleasant bath.

Everything was in place. The raised floor had the spare set of clothes on it, and her bag was sitting there in the corner with her old clothes, right where Chen put it.

“Ran, do you think you can dress Tsu for me?” Chen asked the fox, who was sitting on a cushion by the clothes.

Ran sprung up, tapping over to the bewildered girl while saying, “Yes I can~” The energetic fox was all over the place, full of energy. Tsu gritted her teeth. This girl was energetic. Too much, almost. Tsu couldn’t keep up with her.

“Good, I have to get into a change of clothes too,” the older youkai said before disappearing into another gap. Now, Tsu was left with a hyperactive child to dress her up.

Before she could react, Ran threw off the towel suddenly and swiftly, with an elated “Hyaa!” Suddenly, Tsu was very, very exposed. A hot redness rose in her face before she was handed underwear, which she immediately pulled on. Oddly, there didn’t appear to be a bra or anything in the pile. Was she to go without one?

“Sit down,” Ran ordered.
Tsu let out her usual voiceless, breathy “ehh?” in response.

“Sit down!” she repeated with a giggle, tugging on her arm.

In response, Tsu teetered back, only for a brief moment, before flopping down onto her rear end with all her weight. The whole floor shook, and her body ached from the sudden jolt.

“Let go of your chest.” Ran said, holding out a roll of… cloth? It was clear that was going onto her, but where and why? She wasn’t injured or anything. Why was she told to let go of her chest? It hurt from the fall, and it was just indecent to display it, whatever that meant. She just stared at the roll of cloth.

“You’ve never seen a sarashi before?,” Ran asked, waving her tails around and beginning to unroll the strip, “This goes on your chest. Do you want your boobies to flop around like just now?”

Tsu shook her head.

“Then raise your arms, and let me put it on,” she continued, pulling her arms away and raising them up into the air.

Ran circled around behind Tsu before starting to put on the “sarashi.” Getting onto her knees, she placed the end into her hand and had her hold it onto her back. Ran wrapped it around her once or twice before having her let go and raise her arms again. It took many more passes before the fabric was wrapped around her. The tightness was a wonderful feeling as it compressed her chest. She felt it press her back like a warm embrace. It was better than a bra.

Tucking the last length of the tape under itself and ordering Tsu to stand up, Ran got onto her feet and grabbed a skirt from the pile. It was a long skirt, a pretty red color and frilled with white. It was at this point, though, that Ran’s smile stopped. She stood entirely still with the skirt in hand. Her eyes narrowed, and her arms began to shake.

Tsu looked to the girl, standing up and leaning on the raised wooden floor.

“I’m… I’m not letting you wear this,” she huffed, a large swallow being heard from her throat after she spoke.

“Mmuh?”

“I’m not gonna let you look exactly like that drowned bitch. I don’t care what Lady Chen says,” Ran said, slapping the skirt back down with both her hands.

Was this to do with how she was treated?

Ran sat down cross-legged and crossed her arms. Her face was in a scowl, her ears folded back. Her stern face was wavering, her eyes glistening slightly.

Tsu reached for the clothes anyway, grabbing onto the skirt. It upset Ran, but she had to wear it… As soon as she did, Ran sprung up and grabbed the other end, crying “No!” as she tugged it away.

She dug her ankles into the floor and tugged back, much to the dismay of Ran, whose eyes were beginning to water as she put up more resistance than such a young girl looked like she could make.

*Bweep.*
“I saw this coming,” a voice said from behind Tsu. It was a very familiar voice, a soft sound, a voice that oozed gentleness and care. Chen was back.

Letting go of the fabric, the black-haired girl turned around to face her. Meanwhile, the resistance the crying Ran put up sent her falling backwards, crumpling to the floor.

Chen, who had gotten dressed in a red dress that was highlighted with gold, had a frown on her face. She approached her shikigami, kneeling down by the fox’s side. The piece of cloth, torn and stretched, laid between her and Tsu, Ran having dropped it.

Chen scooped the other youkai into her lap, stroking her head gently as she sat there.

“L-lady Chen,” Ran choked out, “Those clothes are evil…”

“I know, I know,” Chen replied, placing a kiss on Ran’s forehead, “The girls who wore that hurt you so bad. I’m sorry. Tsu will be different, I promise.”

“I know…”

“I’m sorry. If you don’t want her wearing those clothes, I won’t make her.”

“R… really?”

“Yes.”

Meanwhile, Tsu just stared confusedly at them. So, they were to get rid of that, and Chen didn’t want her back in her old clothes. What was she going to wear, then?

She approached and kneeled down, leaning forward until she was almost face-to-face with Ran. She wondered if she could fit into her white dress, or if it was too small.

Ran’s tears were distracting, though. The girl didn’t need to be crying. After all, that last miko was dead, and wasn’t going to hurt her anymore. She raised her hand and placed it on Ran’s head, stroking it gently like Chen had previously done. An awkward smile grew on her face as the fox opened her teary eyes to look at her. She hoped her smile would find its way onto Ran’s innocent face. It worked with Chen, and it worked with her father.

Tsu gestured toward herself, her mind drawing a blank on what to say. Something, anything at all. Ran wasn’t going to be hurt anymore. Not by any miko, and Tsu was to make sure of that. The previous shrine maiden of Hakurei would be the last one to hurt Ran, if she had any say in the matter.

Tsu, who could not find what to say to reassure the sad shikigami, was relieved when it was Chen who piped up.

“Hey, Ran” she said, turning the fox’s attention to her.

“Yes, Lady Chen?”

“Remember when the tailor made us a miko outfit in the wrong colors?”

“Oh yeah!”

“Wasn’t Yumi so furious when she got it?”

“Yes! Yes!” she said, her frown disappearing as she wiped a tear from her eye.
“Think that might be better for you?”

“Yes!” Ran said.

“Perfect~ Go get it! It’s right where she last put it, so it should be easy to find!”

Ran shot up, spouting “Yes, Lady Chen!” as she dashed off and slammed open the wall that opened into a hall.

Chen sighed, looking to Tsu with raised eyebrows and a frown. She wondered what the bakeneko was thinking. Was she worried? It was the same with when she was with her old family. Her father, her mother, her grandfather. Their feelings were always hard to grasp. She could barely tell if they were happy or sad, or if they were feeling something more complex. All she could really understand is when they smiled in happiness, furrowed their brows in anger, or frowned in sadness.

They loved her anyway, though, and she loved them. She could never get them back. However, Chen was already acting like her new mother. A new mother, one who wouldn’t die so fast.

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It wasn’t long before Ran had returned, her hands full of folded-up clothes that were sheer white.

“Hey, miss Tsu! Let’s put this on you~” she called as she scurried into the room.

In response, Tsu stood up, her feet stamping into the floor and making the room shake again as she got out of her cross-legged position. She prepared to get into the new outfit, but first she inspected that old red skirt. There was a nasty tear, starting at the bottom edge, which had a pattern of white on it. This skirt would never be worn by her. The black-haired girl had a new outfit that was the opposite of this. This Yumi, presumably the girl whose funeral she was to go to tomorrow, this cruel girl who wore the red and white… Tsu was not going to do what she did. She would be friend to youkai and human alike- just like how Chen described Reimu.

It didn’t take her long to realize this outfit was exactly the same as the one they were discarding, except the white was red and the red was white. Was this really enough to make Ran feel better? She didn’t fuss, though. It was easy to put on. Just a skirt and a shirt, with a red ribbon around her waist that Ran happily tied into place.

There were other parts that were harder to arrange, though. There were weird detached sleeves that tied to her arms. Why not just have a long-sleeve shirt? It would be good for summer, though, right? Next was the hair decoration. Two small white tubes of cloth, with red frills were tied onto two sections of hair, separating them from the rest. Another ribbon with a similar pattern was tied to the back of her hair, too. The added weight was at least comfortable, however. It probably looked pretty, too, given that they worked so hard on it.

That pair of wooden bricks- those were “geta,” a clumsy footwear that tied to her feet with ribbons. How long would it take to get used to walking on these stilts? They wobbled on the two little boards holding them up, each of these shoes having one at the center and one at the back.

After Tsu lost her balance for the third time, Chen caught her. “You’ll have practice during that funeral practice we’re doing,” she explained, “You can take them off for now.”

And so Tsu did, flinging them off her feet and stomping back onto the wood with bare socks. Ran had flinched, but her smile didn’t waver as she marveled at the fully-dressed Tsu.

“You look really great,” Chen spoke, her hand reaching into a gap with that grating noise that hurt Tsu’s ears. Out came a rectangular shape, a large panel of something shiny that was bordered with
wood. It was so shiny and clear, it reflected everything in front of it. It was just like a lake of freezing water contained in a frame. After pulling it out, Chen turned it to Tsu, showing her body in the outfit she was to wear from now on.

A look of awe was on her face as she looked over her figure, turning around and waving her hands. Noises of wonder came from her mouth as the silent girl approached the glimmering sheet, grabbing it with one hand and the other touching the surface.

It wasn’t water. It felt impossibly smooth, and did not even ripple in the slightest when Tsu touched it. Her dark green eyes reflected so beautifully against it. She could see the sea of weird threads in the color of her eye, a sea of beautiful pine around an island of black. She’d never seen her reflection so clearly, on such a pretty and smooth surface. It was unreal, dream-like.

“Tsu, how do you look?” Chen asked, pulling the girl out of her trance. She was reminded of what she was doing with this reflective sheet.

Tsu made a grunt as she looked back to the mirror, looking over the outfit once more. It was pretty. Her silky hair stood out against the shining white. She made a small “oooh” noise as she nodded, her thumb raised up. She liked it. It was much better than her old outfit, except for how light it was. Much more clean and smooth.

The rest of the day was spent preparing for the funeral- practicing and searching for the appropriate outfit. Chen sent Ran to rummage through storage, in order to find what she was to wear. Meanwhile, Chen showed her what to do, any what happened. After a long day of that in the heat of the room, Tsu was taken to a bedroom by Chen, where all three rested their heads for the night.

(Girls are sleeping…)

Tsu had woken up before everyone else and, following the habit she had gotten into, wandered. She left the room to wander the halls, absentmindedly meandering in this new wilderness.

Funny, she hadn’t seen the outside yet. Outside the shrine, nothing. Not that she could get there anyway. She couldn’t locate any doors that led outside, only the one to the bedroom and the restroom, the first place she’d stopped by. It really was too dark to see where the walls ended and a door began, with how dark it was. No lights were on.

It was a little scary, being unable to leave the hallway. She didn’t want to disturb Chen, but she couldn’t find escape from this unfamiliar place. Come to think of it, this was the first time since coming here that Chen hadn’t guided her by the hand. Why did she do that? Was she used to guiding around the spontaneous Ran? Even that didn’t seem right… Ran followed Chen very closely without being guided by the hand… Tsu could do the same, she was sure. All the guiding did was disrupt her normal walk: a heavy gait with her slouched posture that shook the floor, teetering left to right with her hands drooping and swinging in a pronounced fashion. One difference, though, was now she walked around with that stick in her hands- a “gohei,” as it was called. It held her hands together as she tucked them behind her back and advanced.

Tsu continued wandering, finding herself in that room again. The first room she’d entered in Gensokyo. Its lattice wood-and-paper walls, the wood ceiling, the table surrounded by puffs of cloth, and her old things piled into a corner. It was an overstuffed backpack.

Seeing the backpack lying on the floor reminded her of how uncomfortable it was without something heavy on her shoulders. She walked up to it, continuing her odd walk, and sat down with a thut. It was a good time to sort her things, get rid of what she didn’t need.
She opened the flap on the top and spilled the contents out in front of her. She had quite a few things - the heaviest being something to cook on. A burner? Whatever, Chen had made food out of something she already had, and it was much tastier than a slab of bland meat. Not needing it, she tossed the burner aside with a clatter and picked up the wooden hand-axe with a dull metal blade. Something her father had found and gave her, it needed to be sharpened, but she still might need it - where was the whetstone, anyway? Right in front of her, of course, a hand-sized gray rock. This is what she’d always sharpened it with. It felt nice, a soft roughness not seen in many other rocks.

“There you are…” Chen yawned as she entered the doorway.

Tsu turned around with a start, placing down the axe and whetstone. “Aah, Chen.”

Chen was still in her nightgown, a simple white outfit with little detail. Her poofy cap was also on her head, covering one ear as she rubbed her eye. It looked like she had just woke up.

“Nnh… I guess it’s about time to wake up. The service starts soon. Had you not been stomping around I don’t think I would’ve woken up on time,” she continued.

Tsu looked down, feeling rather ashamed for waking her up.

“Aw, don’t look like that~ It’s good that you woke me up. Now let’s go eat something before we dress you up and head off.”

The mention of food got the attention of Tsu. She stomped both feet on the ground and stood up, the corners of her lips upturning as she picked up her axe and gohei. Her eyes locked onto the bakeneko as she grabbed her hand and led her to the table.

“I’ll be right back with your formal attire and some food, okay?” she said, sitting her down and walking back into the room.

After an unexpected while, Chen had returned. It only became clear what took her so long when she came back in her normal clothes - that gold-trimmed red dress and her tidied-up, shoulder-length hair. Under her arm was a thick set of folded-up clothes, in her hands were three paper-wrapped things. Presumably food. Beside her was Ran, who took a seat beside the quiet miko. Chen placed the cloth down and put one paper-wrapped thing in front of both of them.

Tsu picked it up nonchalantly and bit into the paper, tearing it off the piece of food before placing it back down.

Right, they always did something before eating. She closed her eyes and put her hands together.

“Itadakimaaws,” she slurred out quietly before opening her eyes. Chen and Ran had did the same, and the eating continued. This food, whatever it was, was a gift. After subsisting on berries, leaves, and plain slabs of meat for so long, it was a surprise to have her tongue covered in such flavors. It was a huge shock at first, but after every bite her mouth became more used to the sensation of eating. Pure bliss, it was.

After eating, she was forced into the formal funeral outfit. It was a pretty black piece of heavy cloth that wrapped around her body, like a dress. It felt good on her, nice and heavy. A thick ribbon was wrapped around her waist over it. It was tight. It felt comfortable and still allowed movement. Meanwhile, the silky smooth texture attracted her fingers. Chen called it a “kimono,” a traditional outfit for festivals and celebrations, or darker things. In this case, it was pure black, since black was the color of funerals. After the kimono was put on, her hair was done up in a pretty “bun,” and her scraggly nails were clipped to something more orderly.
Tsu already felt the heat in this thing. These heavy clothes trapped her heat extremely well, embracing her in fire. It wasn’t too bad, though. For now, at least. After taking a look at the mirror again, the silvery sheet of glass showing what she looked like all dolled up, it was time to go. Gap was the fastest means of transportation, and it took barely any time on Chen’s part. More time to babysit her shikigami and do whatever other tasks that needed doing. It was disorienting to travel this way, but there was no better way.

The obnoxious bweep sounded off as the pit of vigilant eyes opened up. Tsu held her gohei and sheathed axe in her sleeve in a sleeve, the other hand fixated on the texture of the ribbon on her waist. The pair walked through together. From the other side she could hear the chatter of other people, and a chill ran up the human girl’s spine as the chat livened up.

One foot into the gap, then the next. Soon, she and Chen were into another space—another indoor space, full of people.

Any other thought retreated to the back of her mind as more urgent matters came to her attention; namely, the wall of conversing people in black who crowded her and Chen. She retreated between the bakeneko and the gap, making a face of terror at the huge crowd. This was already more people than she’d ever been exposed to before. More than just her father, mother, and grandfather. More than just Chen and Ran. More than those groups combined. It would take more than her ten preoccupied fingers to count the number of people who were there.

“Calm down, everyone!” Chen firmly ordered after clearing her throat and closing the gap, “Seeing so many people after being alone for three years has got to be jarring, no? You’ll have enough time to get a good look at her later.

Chen had her arms stretched out, not one person daring to overstep. They retreated, dispersing slightly in the large room full of chairs. With the people more spread out, Tsu was able to relax, just a bit more. Her breath was still heavy, her head lowered in anxiety and her hands non-stop fumbling around, but this was indeed more manageable. Her pine-green eyes darted around, locking on everything that moved.

A gap opened up in front of Chen, and she disappeared into it before Tsu could react.

“Ch-chen!” Tsu cried out fearfully before feeling two hands on her shoulders. She reacted with a yelp as she was greeted with the cat from behind.

“Don’t worry, Tsu. I didn’t go anywhere yet! I won’t leave so suddenly, especially around people you don’t know~” she laughed, turning her around to face the crowd that sat to face her, “There’s no need to hide behind me, alright? These are very good people, show them your pretty face! Now, how about we get introductions out of the way first?”

Tsu responded with a grunt as she wiped away a tear that built up in her eye, and the sweat that had built up on her brow. She nodded. Getting to know these people would be nice.

Chen cleared her throat again as Tsu’s hands went back to stroking the soft fabric of her kimono.

“Yes, yes, I’m sure you’ve heard about how I’ve delayed the funeral until I’ve found a suitable replacement for our lost dear Yumi. Poor girl, imagine the pain she had to have been going through to do that to herself without a word to anyone else. I regret having only played a small role in her upbringing. To think a mother would do such things to a child… Nothing we can do about it now, however. What’s done is done. She is probably ascending as we speak, on her journey to heaven. She left us not even an heir. We can, hopefully, fill the void she left behind with this sweet young girl I’d picked from the outside world. You see, the foolish people out there have destroyed
themselves, leaving this girl’s ancestors in a world of ice and ash, and now she is the last of them. Three years she wandered after the last person she’d ever been with perished to the harsh snow. All alone, she was. Just yesterday I snatched miss Hakurei Tsu from the outside world. She doesn’t speak, but she doesn’t need to say a word to show her heart. She will continue the legacy of the shrine maiden of paradise. Now please, be gentle to this kind girl. I have other matters to attend to, so unfortunately, I cannot stay. Please take care of her in my stead. She will be doing the same from now on.”

Chen’s voice was choking as she spoke. Was she good at acting, or did she actually feel for Yumi? Also, was she not a youkai, which humans grew to hate? Why were they seeming to honor her, instead of killing her on the spot? It made no sense… The questions rattled in her head as she was walked to an empty seat to sit in. It was something that looked like a mix of the table and the cushion she sat on. Her body didn’t have to plop to the ground, though, and she liked that.

She was too distracted by that question, however, to enjoy the cushy seat. She squinted, her right hand coming up and covering her mouth as she tried to formulate an answer.

“Miss Daimu, I will leave Tsu in your care for the time being,” Chen stated, “We have practiced for this funeral last night, so she should understand what to do.”

“Thank you, Lady Chen,” the woman beside her said, placing her hand on Tsu’s shoulder. An honorific? Why was a human addressing a youkai with an honorific.

Daimu was wearing the same outfit as Tsu was, a black kimono, which contrasted against her short violet hair. It went to her neck and stopped below her chin. Meanwhile, her brown eyes looked into Tsu’s, a smile across her smooth face.

A gap opened, which Chen disappeared into with a farewell to Tsu. She was now all alone in a room full of strangers now, but it was fine. That woman whose hand was on her, that named woman was to be her starting point.

“Dai… mu…” Tsu murmured under her breath. That was this woman’s name. The person who will be acting in Chen’s stead for the time being. Tsu grabbed onto her hand, eyes exploring everything in front of her. Up in the front of the room, elevated off the floor, was a box. It was black and, behind it, was a framed image surrounded by greens and reds, with sculptures and other pretty things. Was the framed image that of the girl before her?

She had straight brown hair that was almost black. In it was a red-and-white ribbon, just like what Tsu had been put into, except it was red instead of white. Her face was an angelic pale, with a blush peppered on and beautiful smile that belied whatever it was that shone in her reddish-brown eyes. She had a notably round face, with distinctly different features from what Tsu or her family looked like. However, she matched everyone around the room, and was still recognizable as a human being. This girl in the picture… the light cast onto her so elegantly. She was an angel, almost.

Lazily, she raised a finger to point at the picture, aiming with one eye closed. She tugged on Daimu’s hand to get her attention.

“What is it?” she asked, turning towards her.

“Yumi…?”

“The picture?”
Tsu nodded, her eyes looking into the brown eyes of the girl whose hand she held. She brushed a bit of her silky violet hair behind her ear, and nodded in return. “Yes, that’s Yumi. Such a lovely woman, she was. Quite a kind soul. To humans, at least. She would have liked you,” she stated.

Or not. Tsu was against what this girl wanted for Gensokyo. She wanted to care for youkai as she did human, Yumi did not. They would fight for different things. Tsu would impede Yumi, and the other way around.

“Hey, how about she chants the sutra?,” a voice from behind stated. Tsu’s hair just about stood on end on hearing the voice, and her bewildered eyes snapped to the person who said it.

It was a man with short black hair that matched what he was wearing. He had a bright smile on his face as he leaned over.

“Yes! We have a miko now, we can do it like normal,” Daimu responded. The crowd around lit up, the words spreading like a wave of ice on a lake.

“She doesn’t look the type to memorize one in a night, though.”

“You can always make one up- wait, I thought we already had a priest coming.”

The black-haired man sighed, tapping his wrist and looking between the pair with his icy-blue eyes. “Wouldn’t Chen have interrupted if he wasn’t late? Three days’ delay is long enough. Yumi’s body’s already started to smell; we simply can’t wait any longer for this wake. Also, we hired a priest in the first place since Yumi didn’t have any kin, but Chen found a replacement and got here before it started. We should follow tradition and have the next in line do it.”

“Oh-that’s right- Tsu, come on,” Daimu said, standing up, “We need to start this already.”

Tsu stood up as well, making a noise of surprise as she was walked to the coffin. Her heavy gait shook the room as she made it between that table with all of those pictures and other pretties, and the table that propped up the coffin of the girl.

The incense was disgustingly sweet. It was nose-curlingly bad. It made a pit grow in her stomach as she winced when hit by it.

“I’ll be right here. Just say what comes to mind, and you’ll be golden,” Daimu explained as she patted Tsu’s back.

She took a deep breath. She knew she had to speak. She didn’t like it, but she had to. They were counting on her. Her mind raced to make something up, anything at all. She hesitated to speak, every bit of her person not wanting to utter a peep. Her hands crawled around her belly, feverishly fumbling the fabric that surrounded her as she tried to calm down.

(Girls are grieving…)

Tsu eventually got herself to do it. It was hard. She said many good things about the girl in the coffin. She wished her a fast trip to heaven. She promised that her legacy would not end here. She repeated herself, and said many other things, based on her limited knowledge of the girl. The sutra Chen did the day before was a nice example to follow. Her throat and jaw hurt from the chanting, and her mind swam in panic as the many eyes stared at her. She was in the spotlight as people came up and dropped incense into the burner. Her eyes displayed her fear, narrow and starting to water as she tried to keep herself together. The attention of too many people was on her. Too many watched her as she did it.
An icy chill surrounded her body and briefly relieved her from the heat. It was startling at first, but it provided a brief moment of comfort during the sutra, before the feeling disappeared back into the heat.

Her words slurred into gibberish as she struggled to keep in shape, and the consolation wasn’t working anymore. Tsu’s breath deepened into a pant as she held herself and closed her eyes, whole body shaking. It all became way, way too much.

A pair of arms wrapped around Tsu as her mind fell to its last legs. It was a warm, soft embrace that bound her arms to her body. It took her back to when she was young, in her mother’s grasp as she weathered the blizzards that ravaged the outside world. This time, it was warm, and abuzz with the sound of many people.

“You don’t have to do it anymore. We’re almost done,” the slightly taller Daimu said, stroking the girl and walking her gently from the cask.

Tsu whimpered as she was pulled away. Everyone was murmuring amongst each other while she was placed ever so gently back into her seat. All eyes were on her, shooting all sorts of disappointment and dissatisfaction into her.

Tears finally spilled over as she tried to stop herself. It was like falling down a snowdrift after losing her footing. No matter how much she struggled, it wouldn’t stop. Her struggles to stop the fall were futile in preventing a whine from forming in the back of her throat, and to stop terror from falling out of her eyes.

Her arms wrapped tighter around herself and her body curled up on the seat before she let it go. She couldn’t fight it any longer as hot rain fell from her reddened face. Unable to stop, she let go of the pointless struggle of getting her footing, all of these eyes watching her. There was no greater wish for her in this moment than to disappear.

(Girls are tumbling…)

Tsu’s echoing cries eventually calmed down. It was a great time later, as her throat began to hurt and she regained control of herself. Her eyes opened to the world surrounding her. The first thing to catch her gaze was the eyes of Chen staring into her. She was leaning onto her umbrella, that pretty folding flower. Her brown slitted eyes looked down onto Tsu, eyebrows upturned with a frown on her face.

“Are you okay, Tsu?” she asked in a calm voice.

In response, she uttered a mmuh and nodded, arms unfolding and feet falling to the floor. She leaned forward, head downturned.

“I hear you did a good job,” she said, patting her shoulder gently and backing away. One look around would show that the ceremony was over, the first half anyway, and there were three people left, all looking in the girl’s direction.

This number of people was, for certain, more palatable. She could handle this many people looking at her…

“Daimu…?” Tsu uttered, eyes snapping between the few people left. Her distinctive violet hair was not among those present. Where did she go?

“She has siblings to look after. She’ll be here tomorrow for the second half of the funeral,” Chen replied. Tsu responded with another small noise and a nod. That was fine. That was certainly fine.
It took the bite off of her feelings of fear, at least a little bit.

“You may have messed up now, but you’re going to be better than the last girl was,” another person interjected, leaning down slightly and looking at her with red eyes.

“There is a lotta potential in this girl,” another man said, “she did a great job, despite her stagefright. She talked all monotone and slow, but it was a simple and good sutra.” He placed a hand on her head and looked down to her with his striking blue eyes.

She reeled back a bit upon recognizing the face. This was the man who talked her into going up there.

“She may have potential, but so does everyone else. Only time will tell if we only see that potential because we don’t know her yet. For our sake, she’d better have that potential for real. Chen here made a big gamble, and all we can do is hope it pays off,” the red-eyed girl responded in her calm voice.

“Easy for you to say, with your infinite time,” he said under his breath in a slightly resentful and impatient tone.

Chen sighed, tapping the umbrella on the ground impatiently. “I’ll do everything in my power to make sure this gamble pays off, don’t worry,” she said, turning to the black-haired boy. “It’s at least reassuring to see you, of all people, being supportive. You’re the one who started it, Engun.”

“I take responsibility. I didn’t expect much at all from a girl who just came here yesterday, but she still did a good job. After all, the professional was running late and she had to bullshit a sutra for an hour or two,” the black-haired man said while patting Tsu’s head some more. Somehow, he got Tsu right where she liked it, and continued to stroke it.

“Late? Ah, that’s a shame. At least we got to follow tradition a little bit, and have the successor do it.”

“I don’t think following tradition would be a good idea for tomorrow, though,” the red-eyed lady said, slumping into the seat beside Tsu in a mess of white hair that stood dazzlingly out against her black cloth.

“Why not ask her?” Engun suggested, looking back down at Tsu. Her attention snapped from the white-haired woman’s eyes, burning with gentleness and something else, to the man who was patting her head.

“Would you like it if we didn’t ask ya to chant a sutra tomorrow?” he asked her.

Her eyes traveled up to his, nodding sharply. She didn’t want to have to go through that again. It was a huge pain, both to her mouth and to her mind.

“We won’t make you, then.”

There was a rejoiceful pause, a small length of silence where nobody spoke. Tsu’s dead, glazed look brightened into a smile in response to the man’s words as she slumped in her seat and marinated in the relief. At the same time, though, the silence hurt. Nobody talked, and it was evident nobody wanted to leave just yet.

“Did you notice Tsu’s kimono frosting over?” Engun inquired, brushing his shoulder with his hand, as if that was the choking awkwardness the silence gave. His eyes looked towards the white-haired woman, the question directed towards her.
“During the sutra? Yeah, I saw it. Daimu said something about it, too,” she replied.

“Really?” Chen responded.

“Yes, really. For a second, she was covered in patches of white. Daimu said it even crunched a little.”

Tsu bit her lip. She wasn’t the only one who felt it? She thought it was just the sweat evaporating in her heavy garb… She didn’t see any ice crusting her clothing.

“Interesting… It is because she’s an outsider…?” Chen said, looking towards Tsu and marking the beginning of another long pause.

“Tsu, time to come home. I’m already late for my next meeting.”

The miko shifted in her seat as she prepared to stand up, and her feet planted onto the ground firmly. Her arms pushed her body off the seat, and she stumbled forward a bit, before stamping one foot into the ground and raising her arms.

Her body shook as she stretched, letting out a grunt and turning towards Chen.

“You ready?”

She nodded.

“Well, let’s go get those koden and we’ll be off.”

“I’ll get them for you,” the white-haired lady said, standing up and sauntering off into a door to another room.

“Ko… den?”

“Yes, koden,” Chen explained with a smile, “They’re something the mourners bring to funerals—little envelopes full of money that are offered to the dead’s family. In this case, Yumi had no children or family, so you’ll be getting them.”

Tsu didn’t understand what an envelope was, or what money was, but if she was going to be receiving something, she would accept it with open arms. A bright smile lit up on her face in anticipation.

In the meantime, while that woman was off retrieving them, Tsu needed to introduce herself properly. She turned on her heel to face Engun, and leaned forward in a bow.

“Tsu,” she murmured.

“Kaido Engun,” the man responded, bowing in kind to the quiet girl with a gentle chuckle, “Call me Engun. I look forward to you taking care of us.”

Tsu’s face dusted lightly with red in response to that sentiment. Did he really mean that?

The door to the side opened again, the girl coming out with her hands in her sleeves. Her red eyes were pointed directly at Chen, a frown on her face.

“Oofh, the phoenix’s face heralds bad news. I wonder what it could be,” Engun commented, stroking his face with a scowl, “Hey, Fuji. What’s with that look?”
The woman stopped in front of them and looked between the three. “Bad news indeed, Engun. The koden are missing,” she replied, “Someone stole them.”

Tsu had moved forward to formally greet the woman, but her body froze in place once the words left her mouth.

The koden, the things meant for her, missing, taken by someone they were not meant for. Was nobody looking? Why would someone do this? Why was nobody looking? The slightest bit of icy anger gripped and pierced her heart, washing over her and making her curl her lips.

“Lovely,” Chen groaned, “I can’t entirely be surprised, though. There are some particularly sneaky youkai who would certainly try to play this game. How do we know it’s theft?”

“Do you have a better reason for them all to be missing?”

“The only one I know who could pull that off is that satori with the closed eye,” Engun pondered, “How much are you willin’ to bet it was her?”

“It’s not something we can rule out, but would she have a motive?” she questioned, stroking her chin in a brief halt, “I have to meet with her sister today anyway. I’ll bring it up. Mokou, there were seventy-eight people who attended today, correct?”

“Yes, there were.

“Engun, please alert the authorities and ensure everyone’s appearance tomorrow. I want all aware of the situation by tomorrow, and people investigating this issue. Come back when you’re done and people are on the case. Mokou, you mind seeking out any evidence you can find here, footprints and things? Ah- alright. Report to the shrine as soon as you find something. the gap will remain open until you’re both there. I’ll be taking Tsu home and heading off to finish some business.”

Tsu’s brow furrowed between her eyes as she looked to Chen, lips curling in defiant anger. She was not going to sit idly while someone made off with something that was hers, regardless of whether she knew what it was or not. Her teeth bit on the inside of her cheek and she stepped away from Chen.

Chen seemed almost taken aback by this defiance. Whatever she was instructed to do, she would do. This time was different, however. Nothing was stolen in those previous engagements. She was never wronged, and she saw no reason not to do as Chen said.

“Tsu, I know you’re mad, but you’re unprepared. The perpetrator may be still around, and you’re in no position to encounter them. Do you even know what to look for?” Chen explained, a gap opening beside her.

It would seem Chen underestimated Tsu. A cushy life like that of the bakeneko would know nothing of the skills she’d learned to survive. In order to eat, in order to live, Tsu had to learn to track her prey. This was no different. It was as simple as finding and following footprints, the set that was different from the others.

As for being prepared for meeting the one behind this… her hand advanced into the other sleeve, and pulled out two items. Her axe, the tool she’d used all the time for everything, and the gohei she was given. The axe was dull, but it would still hurt. The gohei was just a stick, but she trusted it could be used for much more than what was let on.

Chen stayed firm, tapping her umbrella on the floor again. “I don’t care if you’re armed. Humans
and youkai aren’t your typical wolves and deer. They think, and don’t run on predictable instinct. You have the tools, but not the skill,” she explained, almost raising her voice, “We cannot run the risk of you meeting a youkai, not now. You wouldn’t even be able to land a hit. We are incredibly dangerous creatures, like I’ve already explained to you.”

“I’d watch what I’d say better if I were you, Chen. The wrong person overhearing that would spell disaster,” Engun commented with a small huff of a laugh before stalking off to complete his task, “I’m the last person who should care about that truth, though.”

“That you are,” Chen grinned in reply.

“Oh- you’re still here,” a voice called out, followed by approaching footsteps. It was a gentle voice, not one of the people Tsu knew. Chen’s smile froze in place and her eyes almost popped out upon hearing the voice. Her ears perked up and she looked over suspiciously, without moving her head. Her narrowed brown eyes locked onto the source of the noise.

The person who advertised their presence was a young man, looking the same age as Engun, with short and tidy red hair. He was in something similar to the funeral garb, except different, somehow… more colorful, maybe? A pretty yellow trimmed with white. The lower half was pure white, matching the box in his hands. As he approached, his yellow eyes, full of glee, were brought out by what he was wearing.

“Hello, Lady Chen!” he said, bowing to her, “I bring cake for our new miko!”

Cake? What was cake? Tsu cocked her head to the side, looking to the man.

He turned to her and bowed towards her, holding out the box with both of his red-tinged hands. The girl in black bowed in return, taking the object from his hands curiously, a raised eyebrow. On the top of the sweet-smelling, pure white box, was a small window showing its contents. It was a pretty white, like snow, and it had red bulbs scattered along the top. There was a pink mixed into the snowy fields on top of this “cake.” The smell coming from the box made her mouth water.

“Thank you,” Tsu said, bowing again to the man with a joyful smile on her face.

“You’re very welcome, miss Tsu. Have a good day now. Take care of us, okay?”

Tsu huffed and nodded, and the man retreated out of the room.

“Nice man,” Chen commented, “How about we eat some at the shrine?”

Tsu looked back to the door that led to the room where the koden were supposed to be, her face returning to a blank expression, then back to the box in her arms. She could investigate, or relax and eat whatever a cake was…

“It’s a very delicious cake too,” Chen cooed, tapping the window, “and I bet you could go for some food and a nap after that long sutra, hmm?”

She puffed out her cheeks, the allure of relaxation winning over as she waddled into the gap. After all, she knew what food and a nap was, but not money. She could live without money, having done so rather well for the past… sixteen, seventeen years? Food, however, was something she needed daily. Even more would be great to have.

“Let’s get out of that formal wear now that everything’s over. The cake will be waiting,” she
continued, following her into the pit.

*(Girls are changing...)*

Tsu took a seat at the table, having gotten into her white miko attire. Chen reached into a gap and grabbed a long knife from it before opening the box and revealing the decorated white treat.

She sighed. “Do you think that man overheard me? If word gets out, there will be a lot of problems. For you, me, and everyone in on this.”

Tsu shook her head. She imagined the man would react much differently if he’d heard what Chen had implied. After all, it didn’t seem like he even cared. He was across the room and had to call over for their attention, right? Or was that not right? Maybe he did, just barely. Why was Chen asking her, of all people, anyway?

Tsu’s face rested against her hand, propped up on the table, as she pondered. How far away was he? How loud did the youkai speak?

Her thoughts were somewhat distracted by the triangular piece of the cake the bakeneko presented on a pretty piece of opaque glass. A clinking metal tool was placed next to it, shining silvery in the lighting. It was a flat, bent-up rod, which bulged and split off into four smaller blades at the end. She picked it up, observing the little ornate tool. What was she supposed to do with this?

“Well, I must go now. I’m already really late for my visit to Chireiden,” she said, walking into a gap, “The other piece on the table is for Ran.”

Tsu haphazardly dropped the object on the table after the gap closed, chuckling as it clattered around before settling down. She grabbed the sweet-smelling triangle, a layered stack of crumbly yellow and a smooth, viscous white. Between the two stacks of yellow was a pretty pink, like the red bulb on top, and the swirled pink field on top. The back of it felt interesting, sticking to her hand loosely while still not feeling wet.

The first bite was extraordinary, her mouth filling with the taste of something sweet. It was an odd sweetness that wasn’t just straight sweet. It tickled her tongue with a sharp twinge in it. It wasn’t a bad feeling on her tongue, but it was unique. Next was the red bulb on top. It was almost teardrop-shaped, and covered in yellowish divots. Some kind of fruit, it was. It wasn’t like any fruit she’d eaten before, in texture and taste, but it was amazing. Its taste was strong, and made it feel bigger than it was as her tongue crushed it against the roof of her mouth. Cake was good...

Around the time Ran had showed up, Tsu had finished with hers, and was gently licking every inch of her hand to get all of that viscous white cake residue off, careful not to smear it on her face. She indicated the other piece was for her, much to the cheer and excitement of Ran. The fox was covered in dirt, her white dress covered in blue ribbons caked with brown. Did she like playing in mud?

“Hey, where’s Lady Chen?”

“Aa… Chi… chirei…”

“Chireiden? Oh… she had some business to do over there she told me about.”

Tsu nodded and laid down, using the cushion she sat on as a pillow. She was exhausted from what had happened. It wasn’t even night time, but she still wanted some sleep. Closing her eyes, she drifted off with a moan of comfort in a fetal position.
“Sweet dreams,” the fox said, barely audible before the fading of consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

hooo boy.
I tried to have this done with pictures, kind of like one of those illustrated fiction pieces, but if I waited on the artists to get back to me, I'd be here a year.
It was a long and awkward process making this chapter, and, it would have turned out to be a huge cringe-fest if not for a friend of mine helping out with smoothing details and researching japanese traditions. Oh well, I hope this chapter is somewhat redeemed by the cute scene of our precious autism miko eating lemon-strawberry cake.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQgka3IyCUw
Yumi was originally a placeholder name made of two random syllables I mashed together, until my friend mentioned that it meant "bow" (the shooty thing, not the ribbon) in Japanese, and said that it would make for excellent symbolism and imagery. (Real shit. Here's the kanji: 弓)
Rip precious autism child.
There wasn't as much worldbuilding as I wanted there to be, but rest assured there will be plenty in the next one as it's explained briefly why the fuck Mokou is an associate of Chen and not still just being a recluse in the woods.
Also the time frame between the normal touhou story and this fiction will be explained, and how many of our beloved 2hus have been lost by this conflict between human and youkai. For now, enjoy this vapid mess of shoehorned character introduction.
Fleeting silence

Chapter Summary

Tsu wakes up from her haunting dreams to three worried people talking about the day's events, before they all head off to a dinner out, where she is outside for the first time since arriving, and is given the chance to explore. It doesn't last long before an altercation takes place, and her body is suddenly hit with a nasty reaction to the energies in Gensokyo that the outside lacks.

Chapter Notes

Just a warning: this chapter might read slow and might be a bit boring. A lotta shit happens that I felt the need to get through Next will hopefully be more interesting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(BGM: Memory of a Forgathering Dream)

Whistling, roaring wind howled across the plains, washing everything white with snow. The radiant sun was muted by the thick white, barely visible and casting light as if it were a candle in a small room.

Tsu’s mind was wrapped in a gentle haze, weighing her limbs and eyelids down as she sat on something soft and warm. There was a hand making rounds and stroking her head, rocking it back and forth. Another was wrapped around her body. Looking down, she was wearing the white-and-red outfit, the gohei in hand. Oddly enough, she didn’t feel cold, not in the embrace of the man in brown whose lap she felt herself in.

It was a pale man, wearing matted and tattered furs that covered his head, but did not hide his thick black hair that was peppered with gray. His blue-green eyes looked down to the girl between his legs, upturned lips behind a scraggly, unkempt beard.

“Hey, do you know what we’re waiting for?” he asked, squeezing the comfortable Tsu gently. The feeling of being embraced tighter filled Tsu with warmth as she reveled in the protective hug of her father. It was a warmth she missed, her father holding her tightly and laying together, weathering the storm.

She shook her head.

“Someone’s here to see you,” he hinted, the hand that was playing on Tsu’s head stretching out and pointing into the white.

Immediately, Tsu knew what it was.

A figure melted out of the white background, drawing into view. At first, all she could see were silhouetted figures with hair that whipped in the wind. It soon got closer, though, and she could see
the color of the skin and the clothes. A little closer, and two piercingly dark green eyes shot right into her, brought out by the jet black hair against the background of white.

She couldn’t believe it, what she was seeing.

“Pa-pa!” she panted excitedly, both arms stretching out and grabbing at the figure that was yet to be within reach.

“Yes! Your sister is here!” he said, the figure in front of the two dropping to her knees, just out of reach.

“Big sis!” she said, stretching out to make some sort of contact with the girl.

“Calm down now, you’re gonna scare her! She’s just like you, and she’s been alone for much longer,” the man said in his gentle voice.

She nodded, and her arms snapped to her body tightly, quivering slightly

Her big sister- someone who was lost before she could remember her. -She was no longer lost. She was sure she remembered Tsu, though.

“Do you know her name?”

Tsu shook her head. She dug deep down and searched, but she couldn’t find this girl’s name.

“She does, she knows yours, too!”

Her sister piped up, her mouth moving incomprehensibly as the world suddenly went mute. Everything was deafeningly silent, save for only the blood roaring in her ears as the already-dim light began to slowly fade.

“Papa!” she cried out as the feeling of her father faded away from her body, and the girl dissolved into the snow..

It suddenly hit her as black began to invade her vision- it was a dream. She was asleep, but she didn’t want to wake up, not with this dream.

She tried to force herself back into the dream, her desperation to stay growing as each second passed. Her vision flickered as the view came in and out of her eyes.

“Papa… Sis…” She whimpered, finding herself unable to do anything more. She tried her hardest to scream, to scream out loud at the straining top of her lungs, but her voice refused to let out anything but the faintest of whines. She tried to move, but her whole body was limp, and she could do little more than twitch.

Yes… They were gone, and now she was all alone. Not even a goodbye from the sister she never had.

Her eyes fluttered open and Tsu was brought back to reality, all emotions draining her mind and leaving it blank.

It wasn’t cold, or windy. It was hot, and her body was wrapped tightly in a blanket.

She was curled up awkwardly on her side. Looking up, she was met with a sideways face with eyes as blue as water. In her sleepy haze… she could barely recognize this man, though she felt like she should.
Engun.

Yes, this was Engun. The fog had lifted just a little bit.

“Good morning, sleepy,” he said with a bright smile, “Or, rather, good afternoon!”

A delayed sense of shock filled her body. She sat up almost immediately, her arms lifting and eyes bouncing around wildly. Her heart pounding, the shock and tension was gone as fast as it came.

Everything came back to her. This was Gensokyo. It was summer, and she was in the shrine, dressed in her miko outfit.

“Ah, don’t worry,” Engun laughed, “I didn’t do anything while you were sleeping. I just put that blanket on and nothing more.”

What did he mean by that? What could he possibly have done that would be bad? Her mind explored her body, which actions he could have taken. Was there something that would be so deplorable? Not anything that he seemed like he would do… he would never do something like that, it seemed, so why would he worry about that? That man was responsible for what happened at the funeral, but he was so nice and gentle. He wouldn’t do something so indecent, would he? But, what if he did, and was just trying to hide it?

Her attention turned to the figure that faced her, kneeling in front of her and Engun. It was a very brief escape from the confusion that swam in her head from his comment.

The red-eyed woman was in a plain shirt that matched her snow-white hair, and a pair of large red pants that were held up with straps. The lack of things to note on the shirt were made up for with how odd those pants were… Red like blood, like fire, and incredibly baggy. There were white patches covering them, with what looked like red writing on them. Her feet were invisible in her position, sitting on her knees.

This was… this was… Tsu could barely recognize her, only vaguely knowing she saw this girl at the funeral. Her hair was entirely different, however. It was down and adorned with a red-and-white ribbon much different from her own.

Oh, yeah. This was “Mokou,” that girl who had stayed at the end of the funeral, the one who found that the koden were missing. She was sitting just like her sister was. It was just like her sister… Would this woman protect her if Engun did anything?

Engun was sitting on the other side of Tsu, a little taller than her. His body was slouched over, one arm propping itself against the knee of his crossed legs. He had a warm smile on his face- what was he thinking? Did he mean well?

“Hey, Tsu,” he piped up again, “What was your family like?”

Her brow turned downwards, and she shifted to face him slightly. She felt cold grab her heart as confusion toyed with her mind.

“Ah, Touchy subject? Sorry…”

“Yah…” she lied with a growl. It would be too much talking to explain the cold anger grasping her heart, and ask what he meant. She’d talked enough for the day.

“Oh, sorry,” he replied, “If y’ever wanna talk about it, just tell me, alright?”
Tsu’s eyes tracked down to her lap, crossing her legs and leaning her arms on them.

“I guess ya aren’t the kind for talkin’, though. Don’t worry- you’ll get used to it,” he said, placing a hand on her head and stroking her hair. The anger melted away from her heart as the hand pressed into her head, her scowl softening into a frown. This man, who gently relaxed her mind with the simple comfort, just like her father had done, wouldn’t do something like that.

The familiar bleep sounded off as a gap appeared again across the room. She turned to face the doorway in which it had appeared, spilling out a scowling Chen, who would never associate with someone who would do such deplorable things to her.

“To think Satori still has no sense of privacy after all these years…” she thought out loud, tossing her umbrella to the side and sitting at the opposite end of the table.

“How’d it go?” Engun asked with a small chuckle.

“We did the normal routine- shared news over tea and discussed opening borders again. She was quite surprised by what happened to our last miko.”

“And Koishi?”

“Home all day, playing.”

The woman in white and red shifted to face Chen and cleared her throat. “I found a trail of footprints by the window that led into the woods. They were barefoot.”

“Whoever did it,” Engun interjected, “they don’t care about the blisters they could get in this heat!”

“Alright, anything else?”

“Nothing else, just the footprints,” the other woman stated.

“Whoever did this is certainly good at hiding their tracks. It’s almost uncanny…”

“Or usin’ magic,” the man added.

“Definitely.”

Chen took the cap off and scratched her head before placing it back on, her black ears folding and flickering softly. “I don’t like to think it’s my own kind- but this is almost certainly the doing of a youkai. Humans don’t use magic anymore, or walk around without shoes,” she yawned, her eyes snapping to the man, “Sit like you’re a guest, Engun. You can be informal when you’re home.”

“Yes, Lady Chen!” he laughed, climbing onto his knees and resting back, one hand on the miko’s head, “Not like we could put it past any youkai, though.”

“Yeah- she was awful.”

“To your kind, anyway,” he corrected, “Nice to us”

“Yeah, whatever, thanks for helping out. Sorry for dragging you into this, Mokou,” she said, “I owe you.”

“Don’t worry,” Mokou replied, “That’s what friends are for, you know?”
“It’s no worry,” she said, scratching below her ear.

Tsu yawned noisily, her eyes drooping half-closed while drifting to her left, towards the white-haired woman. She felt the glance of those red eyes on her. They wanted something, she could tell. What was it, though? What did those observant eyes, the ones that had been watching since Tsu had arrived, want?

Her brow turned downwards, continuing to face forward and slouching over further than she already was. She shifted uncomfortably under the burning gaze, unable to hide from it.

She leaned onto the table, her mind wandering away from their talk, and her hand picking up that odd metal stick again. Beside it was another metal stick. She recognized this as a “knife,” a weapon her father had used in conjunction with her axe. It was dull and it was ridged with a rough edge like her front teeth. Running her finger along the edge, it didn’t cut her skin. It had the same handle as the weird flat thing. Did that mean that forked, flat stick was, too, a weapon? What was Chen doing with these blunt weapons?

More importantly, why was she handed one of these tools with her cake?

Her legs shifted and shook around as her eyes moved to the corner of the room. Maybe Chen was asked to sharpen them? Was Tsu to sharpen these objects as some sort of ritual? Either way, it made sense that Chen wanted them sharpened. Just like her axe, grinding them down to fine edges to stab and hack at prey and tree alike. Her whetstone was over there, of course. She didn’t feel like getting up to retrieve it, though, not yet. If she were to get up now, she wouldn’t sit down for a while. She would sharpen these weapons for the bakeneko later.

As she made the motions she decided to take on the pronged blade, her thumb acting in place of the stone, she heard her name being uttered. She looked up, facing Chen and putting down the two weapons.

“Uh?"

“What do you think?” the cat asked, orange eyes looking into hers.

“Wah…”

“Would you like it if we went out to eat?”

“Uh… ah…” Tsu murmured, patting her belly. Where were they going? The human village? She would like to finally walk around outside for a change. Her excitement to go into the world outside these walls grew, now that it was just at her fingertips. “Mmh… yes!” she said in an absentminded shout.

A hand patting her back was followed by a small chuckle. “A loud gun carries few bullets, doesn’t it?” Engun asked, “You sure can shout!”

“Yah, yah…” Tsu mumbled, her fingers coming up to her lips. A gun… they had those here? Her grandfather talked about guns before- metal sticks that made loud noises and killed things from far away. Of course, she’d never actually seen one. Maybe she would actually get to see one, eventually. Hopefully. How would it work? How would it make noises? How would it kill? How would it be used?

Her curiosity carried her all the way to where Chen took her.
Despite protest made by the maiden in white, they made it to the village with another gap. She wanted to walk, navigate there on foot and map a path. The gaps disoriented her. She couldn’t find where she was, and her head spun.

All around were yellow-orange lights hanging from bare trees in the ground, singular branches holding out luminous orange fruits, two on each trunk. The ground beneath her was hard and brown, dimly illuminated by the trees that intermittently dotted the square. On all sides of this open patch of ground were buildings, covered in signs that were, in turn, covered in symbols she didn’t understand. There was a rhythmic hum of something echoing between the walls of the buildings surrounding the patch of land.

All around her were people walking every which way, some stopping and marvelling at everything. She felt like she was being watched, with all these people around, but she was going to be fine. After all, Chen and Engun were here beside her.

The party of two, Mokou having gone home, were heading without relent to a small out-of-the-way wooden structure. It was a table, the top of which was obscured by red cloth held up by a roof. Under the canopy that hung the curtains were circular cushions of varying color, held up on four long, spindly legs that were bound together with struts.

Approaching it, Tsu was greeted by the smell of food, and the hissing of something boiling on a pan. Her mouth began to feel flooded as she approached, a dull smile growing on her face as the last traces of vertigo drained from her system.

She climbed onto one of the stools, legs open and her arms holding her body up between them.

In front of her, across a small counter, was a woman with short, yellow hair that shone golden in the light of the metallic trees’ fruits. On top of her head was a brown hat, from which spilled two white, floppy ears. This girl looked to be a bunny- in the same way Chen was a cat.

She was reminded of how she would trap and eat white rabbits with her father by this girl. It seemed that this time, instead of eating a bunny, she would be eating food cooked by one.

“Oy,” Engun greeted, lifting the curtains and sitting down, “Applebun!”

The rabbit turned up her head to face the three. “Hey there, Engun! Oh- is that the new miko?” she greeted, her red eyes locking onto Tsu.

“The one and only,” he said, pointing to her and Chen, “These two are on me, alright?”

“Yes, please, Ringo!” the man cheered

“Okay! The usual?”

“Okay, what will you two be having?”

The cat youkai stopped and placed a hand on her chin, her eyes turning up to something Tsu followed her orange gaze to a panel hanging from the ceiling. It was a thin, wooden slab, hanging at an angle that faced the three. On that sign, there were many symbols, complex patterned shapes that ordered themselves neatly into pretty rows.

Tsu couldn’t read any of these symbols. However… there was one food she really wanted to eat. It wasn’t that cake that was given to her. It was something close to her.
Her thoughts wandered back to the snowy wastes she called home. It was another memory, sung to her by the blowing of wind and the wispy steam coming up from a piece of metal on this rabbit’s burner.

Her feet, clad in her old, tattered, hide pants, held her up in a tree. Her mitten-clad left hand grasped onto her dear axe, which was hooked onto a branch. With the wintery winds not blowing on that day, and the snow barely a sprinkle, she could see much farther than she usually could. Her constantly-wandering eyes led her to a cluster of sticks in the nook of this tree, the cluster of sticks she was facing.

In this small cluster of sticks was three small, deformed, white balls. Her father was down below, with her shed baggage as she picked them out, curious as to what the girl had found.

Her right hand picked the white specks, holding them gingerly in her grasp. They were hard, yet felt so fragile. The first one she’d picked up had broke in her hand, dripping a yellow-and-white goo.

Her tongue reached out, licking the goop from her hand and the egg. It was soft and tasty, and smooth when it went down. The speckled shell was also fascinating, crunching softly in between her teeth until they were a slurry. Gently, she picked the other two balls from the nestled bundle of sticks.

“Papa! Catch!” she called, unhooking her axe from the tree and descending the small distance from the bottom, into her jolly father’s arms.

The man staggered, laughing like the happy man he was. It was the first time he’d caught her like this, but they both managed to not fall over.

“What did you find?” he asked the young girl, leaning over to see what was in her hand. Opening her hand, she revealed what she found.

“Ho, ho-” her father laughed, pointing into her hands, “You found some eggs! Birds lay these to make more.”

A twinge of guilt hit her. A baby bird was to come from this thing, but she’d stopped and ate that. Her eyes misted up as a whimper escaped from her throat.

“Hey, Tsu, it’s fine. It’s fine. It wouldn’t have made it anyway. Its mother probably died in the snow drifts somewhere. In fact, it’s very good that you found them- eggs are very tasty, especially when you cook them!”

“Really?”

“Yes, really!” he said, dropping his sack of things and reaching into it.

Her brief reminiscence ended as she felt three pairs of eyes expectantly looking at her, as if waiting for something.

With a warm smile forming across her face, her mouth opened.

“Eggs…!” she said.

The bunny laughed. “Okay, eggs it is!” she reached down.

Tsu’s eyes widened as one egg was pulled out and placed on the counter. Something was different
from the eggs she’d eaten, though- this egg was massive. It filled Ringo’s fist and was a pure, beautiful white.

“Whoa… Big!” she cooed, mesmerized by the giant white ball.

“Your eggs are just small,” Engun laughed.

“He’s right- this is a normal egg!” Ringo added.

These giant eggs were normal here… They were common, common as can be. So common they were considered normal. Tsu couldn’t help but love Gensokyo- a world where eggs were three times as large.

“Want me to make soup with this egg?” she offered.

Soup… with eggs? She could do that? Tsu nodded. She wanted to see this.

Her eyes absorbed every detail of what was done to the egg. It was cracked into a cup and beaten, before gently being stirred into a small pot of liquid. What was Ringo planning on doing to this egg?

Eventually, Ringo had finished the cooking. She poured the beaten egg in water into a bowl, placing it in front of Tsu.

“Eat up.”

She dipped her finger in the hot liquid, unsure of how to eat this pool of whipped eggs. It smelled wonderful, but this seemed more like a drink than food… Idly pulling out a cobweb of egg and placing it in her mouth, another thing started to bug her. She couldn’t quite put her finger on it, but she felt like something was off.

It hit her as she leaned over, slowly nursing the soup from the bowl without picking it up. One of her hands tugged on Chen’s sleeve, wintery-green eyes looking towards the cat.

“Oh, what is it?”

Her hand moved over and pointed at the rabbit, who was idly chatting with the man to her left.

“Youkai,” she stuttered abruptly.

“Oh- yes, I guess I haven’t told you, yet…” Chen said stiffly, “There’s this place where we get a lot of things for sick people. They only give it to human villages that treat rabbits like humans.”

She nodded, returning to nursing on the soup. It was a shame it had to be like that. This rabbit seemed so nice, yet the village had to be threatened to let her in.

Her mind half-listened to the rabbit and the man on her other side rattling off like great friends. It baffled her how they could talk so much, but they somehow did it, endlessly jabbering on about different things. The other half of her attention was on the bowl of whipped egg-water. It was full of chunks of other things, and rode smoothly down her throat, filling her stomach with a radiant warmth.

Being the first to finish her food, Tsu climbed off the seat. Her restless legs needed to walk after sitting around all day, at least for a little bit.

The other three seemed to be preoccupied with what they were doing, so she didn’t bug them as she
sauntered clumsily off, still not entirely acquainted with her new footwear. They wouldn’t mind, right? She just had to ensure that they were always in her line of sight.

The miko could feel her body shudder with every heavy step, head bobbing around as she wandered in a random direction. She could feel people watching her as she made her advance, her blank face belying the captivation in her eyes by the glowing fruits.

That was the first thing she headed towards, one of the metallic trees.

They were a pretty shade of dark green, having appeared much taller from afar. She judged that she could reach up and pick one of the glowing fruits. Instead, weirdly, they were just out of reach of her gohei.

Her ears picked up a ruckus in a nearby alley, pulling her attention away from the light. Her feet hastily moved forward in her clumsy geta, stomping into the narrow road leading into it, and away from the lights.

She was met with the sight of a group of three people, one of them holding a writhing sack open while another picked something out of small wooden boxes he had torn open. They looked about her age, if not slightly younger, with smiles on their faces.

Curiosity got the best of her as she made an approach.

“Oy, lookie here!” one of the people said, his greenish eyes locking onto hers

Once again, all eyes were on her as they stopped what they were doing, turning to see the miko who had come to investigate.

“Is that the new shrine maiden?” the girl holding the bag whispered.

“What’s with that outfit?” the other one asked.

“Hey, what’s her name? Su?”

“Tsu…” the girl corrected, her arms hugging herself while the three murmured amongst themselves.

“Yes, yes. Thanks!”

“Tsu, you’re from the outside, right?” the boy who was tearing apart the wooden boxes asked, his brown eyes piercing hers more than the rest. All she did in response was nod sheepishly, gritting her teeth uncomfortably.

“I see! Wanna play the game we’re playing?”

Her eyes widened. A game? What kind of game. Letting go of herself, she nodded vigorously, spouting out a “Yes!”

The boy reached into the squirming bag and pulled out a small… human? It was alive. Was it another youkai?

“This is an inchling,” he explained, “They’re a youkai who are allowed into the village, since they’re so safe and harmless. See those little huts? Kids like to build them for inchlings to sleep in. Something fun we like to do is pick them from these inchling houses and play with them. The way they scurry around is funny!”
Tsu took a step back from the encroaching boy, who was roughly stroking the yellow-haired inchling’s head with his finger as the helpless girl was locked in her grasp.

“I see. You don’t want to play this game?”

Tsu took a deep breath, preparing to speak. These three tore these inchlings from cozy sleep and were going to toss them into a fearful, crowded corner. How was that fun? Were these people the kind who hated all youkai, even the ones who were safe enough to live among?

The small girl in his hand, grunting and squirming around, piped up. “Urgh… Do something! If you want to replace Yumi, act like it! Help!” she cried out to her, before a large finger squished against her mouth.

“Oy, don’t scare her,” he laughingly scolded, “she might start crying again!”

Anger began to frost her veins, her hands flexing and shaking. She knew exactly what he was referring to. She was surprised it had spread so fast, and angered by this slightly-younger boy who teased her.

“Hey! Now you’ve done it!” the boy said, “Why are you relying on such a childish wuss to get you out of this, anyway? What’s she gonna do? Curl up and cry? There’s no way she could fill her shoes! Hah… she has the face of a youkai, doesn’t she?” He lightly shook the small girl in his hand.

(BGM: Stirring an Autumn moon ~ Mooned Insect)

Without thinking, Tsu felt her hand ball up into a fist, and without realizing it, her arm was flying, careening into the boy who had taunted her. Spurred on by the inchling’s cries, and the boy’s teasing, she pushed her whole weight into the fist while a loud growl rang from her throat.

Before the boy could put his hands up, her knuckles smashed into his face. An explosion of pain shot through her fist, sending her reeling back while the man dropped the small girl. She grasped her blood-covered fist, grunting in pain and stomping her feet.

Her body stepping back a few paces, she almost fell over. One of her geta had fallen off, almost tripping her up.

The boy she had struck flopped to the ground, face covered in blood. His brown hair stuck to his forehead, a splash of red tracking up his face.

Immediately after kicking off the other one, she realized the situation she was in. The greenish-brown-haired girl had tossed the bag aside, and the other boy had squared up. Tsu resisted drawing the axe that was sheathed at her waist. She was in danger, but these were two humans her age. She couldn’t use that.

There was a small pause before the girl ran up, a fist raised in an attempt to strike Tsu in return for her friend.

She barely reached her, however, before the teetering over. Her light gray eyes widened as she flopped onto her front with a squeak. A quick glance would reveal three of the small people gathered around the girl’s feet, toying with a string wrapped around her ankles.

There wasn’t enough time to acknowledge their action, however, before the other boy was upon her. He threw a punch out at Tsu, slamming her in the chest. She reeled back more, all of the air forced out of her lungs. Another punch landed on her gut, sending a sick feeling through her body.
She barely recovered before jumping out of the way of a third swing, when her hand tightly grasped the boy’s bluish-tinted black hair.

“Hey, leggo-” he protested, before the miko’s other fist pounded into his belly. She repeated this action, punching his gut a few more times before tossing him to the ground.

Violently punching at nothing, as if to get rid of the last of her rage, the girl calmed down. A few flashes of light alerted her to the crowd that had formed around her. People were holding strange, flashing boxes that chattered and made noise at her. The chattering and clacking boxes didn’t bother her, though, as much as the huge wall of people surrounding the street.

Nobody seemed to advance, though- they just formed a circle around her, as if they were just watching. The only ones who seemed to approach were the three inchling girls, who had seemingly finished tying up the one assailant’s legs.

The blonde one, who was stuck in the boy’s grasp, seemed to only be five inches tall. It was no wonder they were called “inchlings.” She raised her hands, calling out “Hail, big friend!”

A look of bewilderment showed across Tsu’s face as she looked down at the small woman. She was wearing a tiny red kimono that was held together with a black ribbon, which was tied up on the back. It was clear that she was the “alpha” in this small pack of small people.

“Kneel down, friend!”

Tsu collapsed downwards into a squat position, her feet flat on the ground and her body hunched forward. Her arms dangled onto the ground between her legs, knuckles flat on the dirt.

“You’ve saved us from a lot of trouble, big friend” she said, her gray eyes looking into Tsu’s, “Thank you.”

Tsu blushed, and she nodded softly.

“What is your name, big friend?”

“Tsu.”

“Just Tsu?”

“Yah.”

“Such a strange name; truly fitting for a girl from another world.”

Right...

The small woman paused for a moment, looking back before speaking again. “Oh- I have to thank you- You have done us a great service,” she said.

Tsu reached a hand out, prodding the small blonde’s cheek. She reeled back a bit with a yelp, but she immediately seemed to be fine. Did Tsu hurt her? Worry hit her, before the girl peered over her finger with a smile.

“First time dealing with us, I see?” she laughed, stroking the human’s middle finger as if to assure her it was alright. The nosebleed that had begun to spout out didn’t help, however.

She nodded.
“Well, don’t worry, it happens to all of us every now and again! Just be more gentle,” she said, planting a kiss on the tip of her finger before bowing and backing away, “Yes, I’m sure they won’t bother us again with a strong person having shown them who’s in charge.”

Tsu gently smiled, stroking the small girl’s hair. The inchling giggled in return, “You’re such a sweet girl. We must go, though! I must to find another set of houses to sleep in. We hope to see you again. Please enjoy this new world you live in, I’m sure it beats being all by yourself.”

It sure did, so far…

Tsu stood up as the small pack wandered off, back down the narrow road that ran away from the square.

Turning around, she was greeted with a red-and-gold clad cat pushing through the crowd, followed by a blue-eyed man in a rather mundane yukata.

“Tsu, are you alright?” the cat asked, grabbing her arm, “What happened?”

The girl clammed up again, looking to Chen’s eyes. She raised her bloodied hand, which smeared her clothing, and pointed to the three people her age, lying prone in the street.

“Ho, boy, this is going to be trouble…” Engun stated, having noticed the blood-covered miko.

“You didn’t kill anyone, did you?” Chen asked.

The girl’s heart sank for a moment as her head turned around. That one kid she first threw a punch at- he dropped to the ground without a fight. Did he die?

No, he was still breathing. Heart raising again, Tsu shook her head. Nobody died. Chen’s angry face loosened, but she was still clearly mad.

“I’ll deal with you later. In the meantime, go home,” Chen ordered, a gap opening up beside her. Without words, Tsu entered the rift, which closed behind her.

(BGM: The Refrain of the Lovely Great War)

The girl had taken up a crouching stance, squatting on the ground with her feet flat on the wooden floor. A tired frown was spread across her face as her eyes observed her red, sticky knuckles. Her mind replayed that previous event. That was nasty… How was she going to stop violence when she couldn’t even stop herself from throwing a punch?

It’s not like he didn’t have it coming, though, that kid… She tried her hardest on this day, and for some stranger to deny her even that, it would make anyone else seethe.

As well, she couldn’t let them get away with bullying those three small women, right? It was her obligation to stop the hatred and violence, and she would have to use violence at some point, right?

Who was Chen really mad at, anyway? Her, or the three people who she’d attacked? How much did the motherly cat see?

Before she could think any further, the gap heralding an angry Yakumo had opened. She looked up, her eyes staring into Chen’s orange slitted eyes.

“You’re not hurt, are you?”

She shook her head.
“Don’t be so apprehensive. I’m not mad.”

Was she? Was she, really? Tsu squinted, the hand that was resting on her knee rising to scratch an itch that bugged the top of her head.

“You know it won’t look good,” she said, “you beating up three kids.”

Her face stayed the same, defiantly relaying how little she cared. She honestly did not care how random people she didn’t know would see it. She could always correct them if they were wrong, anyway, right? How else was she going to resolve it?

“Why did you attack them?” Chen asked, “Were you defending those inchlings?”

All she got in response was a wave of her hand, trying to indicate that she was partially right.

“Was there another reason?”

A nod.

“Tell me.”

Tsu clammed up. Her mind paced back and forth, wondering how to tell this cat what happened. Her hands came from their resting positions again and started to move.

“Use your mouth for something other than eating, Tsu. I don’t have the time to read your vague sign language,” Chen snapped, causing the miko’s mouth to clam up tighter, “You could have avoided that incident back there if you’d just used words.”

She grumbled under her breath. It was at this point Tsu gave in, realizing that the longer she’d clammed up, the longer she’d be squatting here getting scolded like Chen’s kitten.

“They… teas’d me,” her voice cracked, right hand patting her chest to indicate herself.

“What?”

“When… when I cry’d…”

The frown on the cat’s face softened. “Ah, I see. It was like that. That’s not fun at all. You have to understand, though; You’re not in a dangerous, lonely world anymore, Tsu. You have to talk for certain things; temper yourself. Don’t lash out like that, alright? Do you recognize that boy you smashed in the face?”

A twinge of confusion and discomfort touched her chest. Chen was right. She wasn’t the only person anymore, but she knew that. She could have drawn her axe at any moment and split their heads like they were deer… but she didn’t, because she knew they were human just like her. Why did she ask if she recognized him?

“Did you recognize him?”

“No…” she mumbled, the feeling tugging on her heart ever so slightly more. What was Chen getting at? Was she supposed to know this boy? Was she not?

“That’s Daimu’s brother you knocked out.”

Gravity suddenly yanked her heart downwards, knocking her off balance and onto her rear end. “Gu-ah…! M-miss… Daimu…?”
“Yes. What will she think of you, Tsu?”

Her heart stopped. That sweet woman who helped her, she probably hated Tsu now, for doing that to her brother, someone she had to take care of.

“She told me how cute she thought you were, like you were a little sister. Wouldn’t she think differently about you, when she finds out you beat up her real brother?”

Her heart was nearly out of her body at this point. Tsu wanted a sister, desperately. She was always alone, without a sister to keep her company. It was something she always wanted, especially after being alone for so long, but something that was always unobtainable, a status she could not control.

To think that someone had begun to feel that way about her already, even though she’d only been here a day or two… and she ruined that in not even a minute.

Chen kneeled down, staring into her eyes. “Do you see how strong words can be if you use them right? They can make you feel this way, so imagine what they could do during conflict. Some of the greatest moments in history were because of words. Just think what they can do to someone who’s teasing you, and bullying a helpless person.”

All she could do was nod. Chen was right; it would have gone much better had she used words. No matter how much she hated speaking, it looked like she couldn’t avoid it.

“Now, what are you going to say to Miss Daimu tomorrow, to let her know you feel bad?” she asked.

“I’m… Zhorry…” she murmured, looking down away from Chen.

“Good. Now, Tsu, it’s time for a bath, and then bed. We have another busy day tomorrow.”

***

Tsu played with the fringes of the long, pink nightgown she was put into, as Chen opened the door to the bedroom. It was long and frilly, light, too. If not for the weight of it being on two straps that hung off her shoulders, it would be too light.

“Hey, you don’t mind sleeping alone, do you?” Chen asked.

She shook her head, still unable to look the cat in the eye.

“Good. I-it’s not a punishment. You just have to get used to it. I live elsewhere, and there will be periods where I won’t be able to see you for more than a few days….”

She already was used to it, having slept alone for three whole years. It was fine. Nodding, she entered the dimly-lit room.

“I’ll be there in the morning. Good night, Tsu.”

“NI-ght,” Tsu choked out awkwardly, before flopping onto the futon and pulling the sheets over her.

The door closed behind her, and Tsu’s eyes drifted shut, the weight of her tiredness crushing her even more than the uncomfortable guilt.

The sleep didn’t last long, however, before a creeping nausea filled her insides. It scrambled her guts and drove knives into her forehead as she rolled around, trying her hardest to fall asleep.
She’d felt this before. It was an uncomfortable feeling brought on by bad food that made her throw up. This was different, however. She couldn't throw up, only lay awake as her stomach twisted itself into knots. All she could do was hold her hands to her stomach and cry hopelessly for Chen to come.

Eventually, of course, she did. It was early morning, however; time to wake up. Time for the funeral.

“Guh… Chen…” Tsu groaned, pushing herself off the floor-level bedding. She stood up shakily, a light smile hanging open on her face. Something fluttered in her heart, even in this state. She was ready to hang out with the three humans she’d met yesterday, and apologize to the violet-haired girl.

Before she took a step forward, however, Chen advanced towards her, a worried frown across her face.

“Tsu, are you feeling okay?”

She shook her head, hanging onto the cat who wrapped herself around her.

“I expected this… Sit down,” she commanded, and so Tsu did.

The otherworldly girl looked up at the cat, who kneeled down into a crouch in front of her. Taking in a deep breath, Chen prepared to speak.

“There is no ‘magic,’ in the outside world, not anymore,” she explained, “Your body has never experienced ‘magic,’ or any sort of mystical energy before. It’s trying to get used to it. This is something all humans from the outside experience after entering this world. Don't worry, though, this will only last a day.”

Though half-distracted with trying to not throw up, Tsu nodded. This weird energy flowing through her made her sick, because her body had never felt it before. It was just like fire. Fire was hot, quite hot. When you lived in cold for a day, your body would not like being by fire, at least for a while, before it had gotten used to it.

Why did it have to be so rough, though?

Her body let out a heave as it quivered and tried to throw up. Weakly, her feet slammed into the floor as she prepared to stand up.

“No, no, no! Tsu, lay down in bed. You're really sick. You shouldn't be waddling around in your condition,” Chen scolded, placing a hand on her shoulder.

And why not? This sickness, it was awful, but she could still walk and move. She had somewhere she needed to be, and something she needed to say, to someone she needed to see.

“Ngo…” she moaned, “Ah need’a go.”

“No, you don't,” Chen stated, “I understand what you want to do, but it can wait until tomorrow. Daimu will still be around, and so will the rest of your new friends. Just rest easy until then.”

Before Tsu could protest further, the youkai leaned forward, her pink tongue extended outwards. The tongue was scratchy, as if covered in stiff hairs as it stroked up her forehead. The warm wetness was cozy, and the tongue almost seemed like it scratched an itch that didn't even seem to
be there. It dragged along, like a soft, cozy kiss from the cat youkai that rode up her forehead and combed her hair as it pulled off. She’d seen her doing this to Ran earlier. Was it just her, or did others do this?

“If it makes you feel any better, I know they'll come over to check on you after the funeral. I don’t think you want to pick through the bones of another person anyway.”

Bones?

“You’ve seen enough corpses in your life, haven’t you?”

That was true…

***

Hours passed as Tsu laid down in the futon. Her stomach churned and chills ran up her body, which forced itself to adapt to these energies it had never felt before. Threads of ice creeped outwards across the ground, taking the water from the thick air and laying a net of tiny crystals across the floor.

Meanwhile, it took everything out of her to try and pacify the growing urge to move. Her legs that were not used to sitting around for so long cried out to move a body that could barely stand up with the nausea inside.

It wouldn’t hurt to just go on a small walk, would it? What if it would make her feel better?

Chen wouldn’t mind, right? After all, this Tsu had been through worse. Much worse.

After a while of hesitation, the ill girl finally stood up, body swaying every which way to try and stabilize itself.

With her wavering and unstable posture, Tsu made it to a fresh pair of clothes and shakily put them on. It took nearly an hour, fastidiously fumbling with every ornate piece and each ribbon on her person. After it was all set up, she stared at the mirror again, the sheet of glass showing off the elegant, yet somehow odd figure draped in a white miko’s outfit.

For a brief moment, she felt like Yumi, the one before her, and the girl Chen had mentioned during her first bath. She felt just as pretty as Yumi did in the picture she saw. It was a shame, though, that she was so cruel. Eventually, the feeling subsided, and she turned away again.

Every step she took wobbled as she dragged her sick self to the main room, with the pile of junk in a corner, and the small table. It was something she would tend to later, but not right now. In the well-lit room, everything was easier seen. A handle that was hidden before was now plainly visible on the wooden wall.

Was this the exit?

Her fingers gripped the smooth, shiny wood, and dragged it to the side. The light pouring from the small crack in the wall made it clear that this was, indeed, the exit.

Carelessly slamming the door aside, she stumbled out of the shrine. Just outside, an overhang, supported by pillars down the front, shaded Tsu from above. It shaded her from a bright and blurry light, the likes of which have never before fell upon those green eyes of hers.

Just outside the door was a box, a large box. It was made of wood, and there was a seam on the
top, held by two chunks of metal. What caught her eye, though, was the grate on the top face, made of the straightest sticks she’d ever seen.

Her fingers found themselves running over the top, rattling on the slitted wood. It was rough and worn, but still a wonderful thing to feel. Her fingers pushed down the grate, stopping at the knuckle.

It was an interesting feeling, sitting down on it as well. Her body kind of… melted into the crevasses. Under the satisfying spell of the weird box, she’d almost completely forgotten about her dizzy nausea.

She had to get up, though. Her stomach said not to, but her heart compelled her forward. Even playing with that wooden box was boring, next to this beautiful new world that was greener than she’d ever seen. Her blurry vision wanted to take in more of this world.

Her eyes burned as she stepped into the harsh light beyond the shade. It was bright, too bright, brighter than her eyes had ever taken in before. Her left eye forced itself closed, unable to handle the harsh sun beaming down overhead, the sun that had always hid behind the clouds and miles of snow.

The buzzing that permeated the air had grown louder. It was like the wind, constantly howling and blowing; an abrasive sound that would eventually get tuned out and die off as suddenly as it began.

Her left eye forced shut, she began to think of her mother. Didn’t she have one eye? She couldn’t remember. How did she lose it? How could she have lost it? That woman who’d drowned in freezing-cold water to save her life pulled her guts down with her sickness.

She walked something like Tsu did, didn’t she? Because one eye was gone… in order to not bump into anything, right? Tsu continued to walk this way, the way she’d always walked anyway, her swinging vision making up for her left eye that refused to open.

Down the stone path she went, until finally reaching a set of stairs.

Her left ankle gave her trouble. It ached and creaked under the stress of her foot slamming into the hard ground. She’d almost lost her footing and fallen down a few times, thanks to that weak joint.

It was broken at some point, wasn’t it? So long ago, she’d broken the bones inside her ankle, and her father had fixed it.

After making it down, the rest of the walk was easy. It was slow and laborious, but she could still move, so she did. After advancing far enough, two voices carried themselves to her, drawing nearer.

“How do you know all this stuff?”

“...I have sources.”

“This is why people think you’re one of those guys.”

“Pff, do I look like I care if people think I’m a yuppie?”

“Yes, you do, actually.”

“Y-yeah… Right… ‘Ey, the miko’s out. Isn’t she sick?”
Tsu didn’t have to look up from the ground to know who those people were.

Her heart stopped when she looked up, the two worried-looking humans barreling towards her.

Tsu’s panting, almost-limp form was supported by Engun, one hand on her shoulder and another on her head.

It was at this moment that Tsu felt a large knot in her stomach. Suddenly, she felt even more sick. Mouth watering, her stomach seemed to flip in her body and suddenly squeeze very tightly. Her vision seemed to collapse and go black as her legs collapsed from underneath her body. She felt something rise in her throat before all of her senses blacked out, her feeling shutting down. She didn’t even panic before her mind went blank.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for posting late.
I wrote really far without realizing how long this was already. Oh well, at least chapter 4 will be half the effort. This was also really unfun and slow to write, but I feel like I had to get this through. This really is an exposition dump chapter, where a lot of stuff is established, including Tsu’s many various quirks, as well as a peek into her personal goals and how an autistic mind works. A lotta character establishment on her end.
The next chapter will focus more on the missing koden incident, as well as establish a few more things that will become important later in time, don’t worry.
I also managed to articulate, at least partially, why the fuck mokou is there, at least, in passing. :V
That's also something that will happen next chapter.
I hope you managed to enjoy this abominable, autistic mess.
I hope it ain't too long, I'm going by the standards of a novel in terms of chapter length and word count.
Friend

Chapter Summary

As Tsu's body acclimates to the energies of this new world, her sickness quickly goes away and she is finally moving again. After finally getting out and taking in the scenery, she seeks out a busy Chen to continue her ultimate goal.

Chapter Notes

How do I do paragraph indentation?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was like Tsu was floating on nothingness. It was cold to the bone, and pitch black. Her throat was sore and her body was numb, with a familiar sour and slimy taste filling her mouth. Her left ankle was wrapped in a dull pain, and the tips of her feet and hands stung from the cold.

Faint voices could be heard, too quiet to make out, jumbled and frantic.

Where was she…?

As quick as it began, her senses rushed back to her with the sound of a roaring and screaming cold wind. Her eyelids flew open with the crackle of frost.

She was lying on her back, sprawled on her futon. Half of her body hung off, touching the wooden floor. It wasn't just cold like it was, it was freezing. Her eyes facing the side that was laying on the floor, witnessed small crystals of ice strung between her arm and the floor. Curling her fingers, they left an imprint in their shape behind, which tugged on and tickled her skin. It didn't take any effort to remove them, but it was like they were stuck with a weak glue to the floor.

Lifting her upper half up, her icy blankets crunched and crinkled.

A gentle hand on her frosty shoulder turned her attention to her right, where a violet-haired woman with soft brown eyes looked into her own.

“Are you alright? You collapsed,” she asked.

All she could do was nod as she tried to figure out how to say what she had to say. She had to say she was sorry, but the words caught in her throat for some reason.

“A-ah, Daimu…”

The hand gently stroked her shoulder. “Yes?”

“A-ah… Am shorry…”

“About my brother?”
Again, she nodded, her eyes gravitating to her lap and away from the woman draped in a dark cloth, who sat next to her.

“Don’t worry,” she said, moving the hand to her head, “You’re new here, after all.”

Tsu nervously chuckled, looking towards her. Was it really fine? Was she mad at all?

Daimu chuckled in kind. “Don’t be so nervous, dear. Really, it’s fine. You didn’t know better. I’m assuming Chen scolded you for that, so you should now.”

“Yah..”

“Just don’t do it again, okay?”

Daimu nodded, and picked up a clear cup full of a clear liquid. She held it out for Tsu, saying it was for her.

Tsu grabbed it, her fingers holding it by the wet rim. It was cold, very cold, and the surface was covered in ice.

Slowly, she lifted the large cup to her lips, and her thoughts wandered to before.

Her mother and her father, all cuddled up to her during the long frost. The pricks of cold that pierced her skin reminded her of that time that was missed, even if it was just them. The icy-cold water sliding down her throat reminded her of the times of drinking melted snow by a lovely warm fire.

The question of whether or not she should miss those days, though, ran through her mind.

Her parents loved her, and she loved them, but it was just them and a sheet of white, with a week of red if she was in the right place. In this polychromatic world, humanity could be saved, and didn’t yet deserve to wither away. She could yet save it, and prevent another “her.”.

It was unquestionable that she did miss those times, but was it right to want to go back, especially when people now counted on her? It felt like a betrayal before anything had even begun.

“You don’t like to talk, do you?” Daimu piped up after Tsu had drained the glass cup.

She shook her head.

“Did something happen to you, or were you always like that?”

Tsu looked to the violet-haired woman and started crafting an answer. She was always quiet, even before anything happened, as far back as she could remember.

“Always,” she slurred.

“I see,” Daimu chuckled nervously, “it makes for some awkward moments, doesn’t it?”

It seemed so.

“Engun should be back soon with some stuff for us to do, so you don’t get bored,” she said, inciting a grunt of acknowledgement from Tsu.

That man… he’d caused her a bit of trouble at first, but his friendliness almost melted it away. She felt a twinge of discomfort at his name, thinking back to how she was talked into speaking in front
of the funeral, how she broke down… He was fine, though, if that was Chen and Daimu thought.

Dedicated, too. He wanted to help her so bad with those- what were they?

Her attention turned away from that, though, as her fingers idly scratched the frost that covered the floor. It was blazing hot out, yet why was everything covered in frost? It was the same when she’d woken up earlier… She looked quizzically back up to her friend, gesturing towards the icy floor.

“What is it? O-oh, the ice?” she responded, “I think that’s from you.”

“Eh?”

“When we brought you back, everything started freezing around you.”

Tsu scratched her head. She caused this? Was this from that sickness Chen talked about? Her bewildered eyes looked around the room. She did this? Was Daimu uncomfortable? At least she wasn’t violently nauseous anymore… She sighed in relief.

In its place, however, she felt a small fatigue cover her body. It was now just barely noticeable, but every time she moved her fingers she could feel it grow and spread.

She wondered how long this would last. Would it let her sleep? She let out a sigh and slouched down as it slowly intensified.

As if on cue, a small ching, followed by a ringing noise sounded out. The door to the room soon opened, to reveal the blue-eyed man who had hung out with her. He wore a gray yukata, like the day before, and was carrying a mountain of curious things. It was an odd skyscraper of rectangles of varying sizes. Some were plain white in the middle, others a faded brown, as if they were paper.

“Hey there,” he grunted, sliding the door behind him shut with his foot, “sorry I took so long. Good seeing you two didn’t freeze to death.”

Daimu greeted the man as he placed the stack on the floor.

“Hey, Tsu, do they have books in the outside world?”

She shook her head. She knew what they were, from her father’s many stories of before the outside world went to ruin, which he had heard from his father, but was barely given much of a description. She picked one off the stack. It was light and thick, maybe half the size of her face. It was bound together at one end, holding the sheets of paper inside. She opened it up, and on each sheet, there were many small symbols. It was like the signs on Ringo’s stand, except they covered the whole of each sheet. She tried to make sense of them. Some of the symbols looked like things, but most were unidentifiable.

She looked back and forth from the two people sitting aside her, then back to the book.

“Can’t read?” Daimu interjected, to which Tsu responded by shaking her head.

“I see. Here, can I see it?”

With just a nod, the book was handed over, and Daimu opened it from one end. All of the paper was on one end. It bugged her greatly, but apparently that was the way it was supposed to be used.

Thus began a more clear explanation of a book, and writing as well. It was much clearer: words on paper, without the need to speak out loud, each symbol meaning a sound or an idea.
What a lovely idea. She could convey what she was thinking without uttering a peep, if only she could master it.

(Girls are reading…)

The rest of the day, until late, the pair read aloud to her, showing her symbols and what they meant. It really was a wonder how they managed to talk so much without hurting their throats.

She listened all she could as they read out books of history and knowledge, even if she didn’t understand all the way. One event in particular sat in her mind- a skirmish which had destroyed a great amount of history. Everything but bits and whispers from more than three hundred years ago, gone, in a destructive blaze- an event that had come to be known as “The Alexandria,” just like an event that happened in the outside world, thousands of years ago.

All that history, destroyed, never to be seen again. Was it just like the outside world, how she was the only one left?

Eventually, the weakness creeping along her body got to the point where she had to lay down. She wasn’t hungry, or feeling dirty. It was a pure weakness, like her limbs were wilting. She would space out and return to reality as the fatigue worked its way into her mind. It hurt…

Her weak eyes slowly closed, mind slowly withering out. Just for a blink, they began to close, only a blink.

She wanted to hear more from those two.

(BGM: Visionary Game ~ Dream War)

Her eyes opened to the white ceiling above her. It was so odd, having a ceiling above her. Yes, it certainly was. It was different from laying down outside in the snow, huddled tightly within a sleeping sack, all alone. How similar it was to the clouds high above her that draped the earth, yet so different.

It was odd, she didn’t dream in her sudden nap. No dreams of her mother, her father, or her older sister who never was. Was this part of the sickness? It was disgusting, it was. The odd feeling this dreamless sleep gave her, the sense of discomfort and foreboding she felt. no words- or lack of words -could describe it, or how twisted and wrong it was. This had to be the worst part of this “magic sickness,” as she’d dubbed it- even the puking and fatigue could not amount to the weird and painful cloud swirling in her mind after this sleep that came without even the slightest fragment of a dream.

At least the fatigue seemed to have left her, though. It seemed to have disappeared upon going to sleep.

Her body able to hold itself up now, Tsu sat up, still wrapped in the white miko’s outfit she’d put on, and covered in the soft blanket.

Her attention was turned immediately to the blond fox beside her, sitting on her knees with her hands in her lap. The fox’s red eyes followed Tsu as she shifted in her position

“Good morning, Tsu,” she uttered with her broad smile, waving her hand and flickering her tail.

“Mornin…” the sleepy girl yawned in response.

“Lady Chen came by earlier, but you were asleep.” Ran spoke, the smile dropping to a more
neutral expression… or she assumed.

“Ah… I’m zhorry-“

“Don’t worry about it,” she sighed, “You can always make plans, but something will always get in the way, for better or worse…”

The eye contact from the fox dropped conspicuously as she spoke, and the last few words were quieter than the rest, as if she were saying it to herself.

Before Tsu could begin to wonder what this girl was thinking, she spoke up again. “Now, feeling better yet? Good, get up. Chen’s busy, so she left me to tie up some of your loose ends.”

Loose ends?

What did she mean by that? “Loose ends.” What was she saying? Was she going to tie up her limbs? Her hair? Was this some kind of ritual she had to do?

“You’ve never heard that saying before, have you? ‘Loose ends’?”

She shook her head.

“Silly, silly. It means leftover things. I’m here to get some things out of the way- you know, so you can maintain yourself. Don’t want today to be a total waste, do we?”

Oh, oh. That’s what it meant. There were things left to be settled, indeed.

“First, let’s get you something to eat.”

The fox in white tugged on Tsu until she stood up, the smile on her face returning as she led her to the main room.

_(Girls are eating…)_

Eggs, eggs for breakfast. Eating eggs for the morning meal. Cracked open, beaten, and piled up on a plate. It appeared that weird weapon Tsu had found on the table was used for eating, and that eggshells were not to be eaten. At least, that’s what the childish fox had told her.

Tsu never really cared to remove the shells. They were more or less part of the texture. While these were fine without them, and she’d eaten eggs like that before, but she liked that crunch the shells had.

That was made up for in other ways, though, with the addition of different things that… somehow made them taste even better.

Regardless, there was things to do. After breakfast, Ran insisted that Tsu took a bath. Something about how cleaning oneself at the start of the day being better than at the end.

That actually made sense… as well, it was nicer to get all of Tsu’s grooming done at one time.

It was when Tsu was just about done adjusting the ribbon in her hair that Ran let out an impatient groan.

“Tsu, it’s been an hour! how do you make this take so long? You’re not even using any makeup!” she whined, tugging on her sleeve.
Tsu didn’t know whether to be endeared or annoyed by her impatient groaning. This girl, who’d claimed she was sixty years old, looked and acted like she was much, much younger. She was a cute, huffy little girl, yet it was directed at her. The ribbon had almost come undone as her arm was tugged.

“Ish godda be right!” she groaned in return, swatting away the youkai fox with her elbow and pulling the ribbon tight one last time, “...ndere!”

Ran giggled. “You don’t talk much, but when you do it’s all funny.”

“Mm?”

“It’s cute,” she continued, grabbing onto Tsu’s hand.

She reached out with her free hand and placed it onto the fox-girl’s head, stroking and playing gently with her fluffy ears. It was cozy, soft hair that felt like it was floating in water. Her fingers loved the feeling.

“Hey, don’t mess up my hair! Besides, I still need to show you how to clean this place!” she laughed, tugging on the hand.

And so, Tsu followed her again.

(Girls are cleaning…)

The very first thing the quiet girl did was pack up her old backpack and neatly place it in her room. It was full of firewood and tinder, among many other necessities. It was absolutely stuffed when she’d gotten done setting it up. She wondered if she would ever need anything from there again…

Ran taught her how to clean almost everything. She showed Tsu every nook and cranny of the shrine as she did.

Of course, the fox also talked about the things relevant to her. She talked about those that came before Tsu, the ones she’d been around to see. She talked about Yumi the most…

Starting off was how to wash clothes, and, to end it off was the floor. She had to take a rag and run it across the floor… pressing against it until it was shiny. It was amazing that such a clean shine could be accomplished with wood, with no space in between the boards, smooth as glass.

The little fox had quite the mouth- she kept on jabbering about things- ranging from the mixed first impression Tsu had put out, to Chen’s plans for this day.

She wanted to try and socialize Tsu more, but she didn’t have time. What a busy cat… Chen definitely had a lot of things to do, mostly diplomatic stuff that Tsu couldn’t care less about. It made sense, though, with all the power she said she had. A lot of responsibility.

It was like Ran was expecting much of a response from the distracted and more or less apathetic Tsu. She paused to make sure she was paying attention, and constantly changed subjects.

Eventually, when the cleaning was all done, and they were cooling off by the table in the main room, she began to talk about Yumi again.

She was a killer, a bully, and loved to pick on Ran. This wasn’t someone Tsu would have liked to meet.
The more she was talked about, the more a twinge of anger gripped her heart. This woman who had committed atrocity, why did she have to exist?

Her grasp tightened on the glass full of water in her hand, as if it were the girl’s neck, or something. She was almost enraged by the thought of Yumi, the bully.

A loud crackling sounded off, and suddenly the hand with the cup was almost painfully cold.

Tsu yelped and dropped the glass, holding her clammy hand in the other.

She expected liquid to fall from the upturned glass. Instead, a gravel-like pile of ice flung itself out onto the table. It was solid, and surrounded by a fine cloud.

...what?

Ran just sat there, staring bewildered at the pile of crushed ice that had just exploded from the cup.

And Tsu did too, picking through the pile of ice that had just happened.

What had just happened?

Ran slid her own glass across the table. It was half-full, and the water inside sloshed around as it moved.

“...D-do that again,” she murmured.

Do what again? Freeze water? Tsu didn’t even know what happened- it just sort of froze. She froze as well, eyes darting around the room as she wracked her brain on how to proceed.

“Hold the cup,” Ran clarified.

She picked it up.

“Now, throttle it! Get angry! That cup stole those koden that belonged to you!”

And she did. Tsu thought back to that funeral, the offering she had gotten by default, how it was stolen from her, right from under her nose. It wasn’t only that it was stolen- it was that it suddenly disrupted everything further- it disrupted her rough start even more. It was another thing she’d have to deal with, another thing she felt the need to fix, and it was only in the way.

Her hand tightened around the glass, almost shaking. She was shaking. An icy anger tugged down on her chest, and an icy cold spread from her fingers.

It was the same result.

A loud crackling noise, and a hail of ice erupting from the cup. This time, the foreign girl held on, not letting go as ice showered from it with a bang, even when the glass itself cracked.

Another wave of piercing cold slunk up her hand from her fingers, and a web of ice crept around the glass, coating it in a cold and crinkling sheet of frost.

The cold was getting uncomfortable, so she placed it back down on the table. Her heart was fluttering, her eyes were wide, her breathing was heavy. She focused her mind on the glass… and it froze.

“Wait here!” Ran said, bouncing to her feet and disappearing into the general area of the kitchen.
A few rattling sounds, followed by the fascinating noise of a cup being filled, filled the air, and the little girl soon returned. She placed them on the table and made one more trip. It was amazing how none of the water got spilled. Of course, that was the least weird thing she’d seen since three days ago.

Once Ran set them up, she made Tsu get on her feet.

“Alright, try and do it from a distance, and without getting mad.”

Why not?

Tsu focused on one cup- the one in the far right corner. Her arm raised up, and she focused on the cup. She wanted it to freeze. She wanted it solid, and in a single piece. Yes, the icy gravel was a start, but it was ugly. It would be better as one piece.

The water in the cup roiled and bubbled, droplets jumping around in the air, before another shower of rubble flung itself from the glass.

The loud pitter of the small fox clapping filled the air when the chaotic eruption subsided. It was nothing like what she wanted, instead just a mess of ice that would need to be cleaned up later… Regardless, a defeated sigh escaped her mouth as Ran’s cheering forced her to accept the meager progress made. There were so many cups anyway- it wouldn’t hurt to try more.

And so, that’s what she did.

That’s what Tsu and Ran did for the day. At least… some of it. She’d finally got it down, freezing the water solid in the cup, and Ran was keeping track of successes.

Around the thirty-fourth success, Tsu had gotten bored. Her attention wandered away from the ice, trying to avoid the clammy cold that pricked her fingers as a result of using this new power. The shot of awe she got died quickly anyway.

Ran and Tsu parted ways. Ran wanted to go home, Tsu stayed at home. Ran was bored, so was she.

Eventually, though, she thought of Chen. That brown-haired cat-lady that had brought her to this world. She didn’t know why, but she wanted to see her.

Did she need a reason, though? Of course, the cat was very busy, but this is what Tsu wanted.

She could have passed it off as wanting to show off the ice she could create, but that would have been a lie- she just wanted to be with Chen.

She didn’t worry about it much. It would all work out somehow, right?

Now that she wasn’t sick, Tsu could see everything much nicer than before. There was so much green, and the sky was a beautiful pale blue that she’d never seen before. Everything was bright- almost too bright- but it was all fine.

Down the steps she went. This time, her stiff and achy ankle hurt less, and it didn’t give her trouble as she made it down the steep hill and back to the trail she was on, before being so rudely interrupted by sickness.

In the beautiful green and brown and blue, she had almost become lost. She kept track of where she was going, but didn’t know where she was relative to the shrine and the village. Where even
was Chen? Where could she be? Was Tsu even heading in the right direction? The trees changed… that was something. They turned from thick and brown to a thin, pale green straw that reached and canopied into the sky. How long did she even walk? Why didn’t she pack anything? That was the question that worried her. How come she did not leave without the bag on her back? She was lost, she didn’t know where to go, but she never had anywhere to go before.

It would all work out in the end anyway, right?

Tsu had just drawn her axe, undid the button that held it in its sheath, to begin chopping down a tree. She wondered how well this weird tree burned, what it felt like, what was inside it.

“Are you lost, Tsu?”

She yelped. In this singular march of hers… she forgot she wasn’t alone. She was not the only person anymore. Tsu was around other people, and a voice that was more than just a memory carried by the wind could speak to her. It was almost scary… It was almost comforting.

The girl turned to face the voice, almost in the opposite direction of where she was scanning the trees.

The source was a human woman, with long white hair covered in ribbons. Yes- her again. That lady who kept looking her way, What was her name?

“This place is dangerous, it’s easy to get lost. What are you doing here?” she asked, a hand on her hip and the other rubbing the back of her neck.

Tsu stuttered, pointing and looking every which way, before finally managing to spit out “A-ah… I want Chen,” in her slurry tone.

“You won’t find what you want here… Chen is busy right now,” she paused, “But, I know where she is. Do you mind if I take you to her?”

What did that mean? Did she mind? She’d never heard it used that way before… How was she supposed to respond? Yes?

Before she could finish wracking her brain for an answer, the girl spoke again with a laugh. “Do you want me to take you to her?”

“Y-y-yes!”

“Okay, come,” she said, before stalking off in one direction.

And so, she followed.

It was silent at first, the only sound being the crunch of underbrush beneath the pair’s feet as the woman lead her through the forest. It was broken soon, though, by the staring woman’s words.

“Bad leg?”

“Eh?”

Her ankle was that bad?

“You’re limping- did you hurt yourself getting here?”

“No… Is old.”
“What happened to it?”

“Angkle broke… buht Papa fixed it.”

“Lucky… your father must have been a great man. A broken bone should have been a death sentence for you.”

Tsu smiled and looked down, her cheeks dusting a pale red when the woman complimented the old man. She missed her father… but she’d forgotten how he disappeared.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the woman observing her again.

What did she want?

She was thinking of something, definitely. This stranger girl wanted something from her. Was she hesitating? Was she watching? She felt like a deer by a wolf, who watched her every move.

She kept it to herself, though- it couldn’t be that bad, right? A friend of Chen’s would never hurt Tsu, would they?

“You don’t talk much,” she piped up.

“…Ah don’ like it,” Tsu said back.

“You don’t like… speaking?”

She shook her head.

“Like it or not, you’re gonna have to, eventually.”

Tsu nodded. She figured this. Speaking was how ideas were to come from one person to another, right? She could still keep it brief, though.

Tsu felt a hand on her head suddenly, this woman’s hand. She lightly stroked the black-haired girl’s hair and gave her a hesitant smile. “You like this, right?”

She nodded. She liked it a lot.

This touch, the feeling of being stroked on the head, Tsu reveled in it. Her love for the sensation shown above all else on her face as she closed her eyes and smiled widely.

Meanwhile, she pranced through her head, trying to remember this woman’s name. She listened to the lazy wind, hoping for it to whisper to her again and tell her name. It sounded… she didn’t know how to describe it. It started with a-

Yes, this person’s name was Mokou, if she remembered right. That was the name she could barely hear the soft leaves rustling in the quiet wind say.

What did she want? Why was she helping Tsu? Why was she observing?

A little further down the road, the hand left Tsu’s head, met with minor protest as she tried to place it back. The woman was firm, and resisted her attempt.

If she didn’t want to anymore, that was just fine.

Something else escaped her hushed mouth, though, later after the minor squabble was settled.
“Are you my friend?” Tsu asked loudly as she tried her hardest to eek out the words.

Suddenly, it made sense.

This woman wanted a friend, she wanted to be Tsu’s friend. That was fine with her, that was very fine with her. She also wanted friends, three years alone would do that to someone. Yeah.

Mokou’s face briefly filled with bewilderment, that faded just as quickly as it appeared. She sighed.

“That’s what I’m trying to decide,” she said after a pause.

“Eh?”

“You, of all people, should know how fast we can destroy ourselves. We don’t have infinite time, and I can’t be your friend if you’re just going to waste that time.”

True- In a matter of years, the people of the outside had been destroyed. How fast would the humans here destroy themselves in a war such as this? No time needed to be wasted- She needed to start what she had promised to do. She needed to see Chen.

Then again, wasn’t that just so she could waste time?

Why did she want to go, anyway?

“We’re here.”

What?

Oh.

They were already here.

It was the edge of the forest, the strange trees that reached the sky had given way to lush green grass that reached her ankles. It was green, just green, with the faintest treeline poking out from the horizon. In

the middle of the green, there was a figure in red and white and gold sitting on the side of its legs.

Yes, it was Chen.

Tsu slowed down. She was busy today. She wanted to come see Chen, but wouldn’t it just inconvenience her? It was clear there was no time for her, and she didn’t even want anything.

But it felt wrong without Chen

Maybe she wanted Chen to tell her to do something- a direct order, a request, something she wanted her to do.

That was how the last three days have gone, right? She needed to hurry up.

It wasn’t like she had infinite time.

Yes, to begin. That’s what she wanted, that’s what she wanted from Chen. How was she supposed to save people if she hadn’t even started?
“Oh- hello!” Chen said, “What brings you here? Besides your new friend, of course!”

Tsu stuttered out “A-a-a- I, uh… I wanded-” before becoming silent again. Her mouth closed shut tightly as she desperately rushed to figure out what to say. She had to say something, but what could she say?

“You want something to do? I assume Ran did everything I sent her to do?” Chen asked, reaching for a fat metal container. It was round and had a tail raised tail with a lid. A handle was at the top, which Chen grabbed a hold on. Her other hand held the lid on as she tilted it over, and a greenish liquid poured from the tail into two cups.

A cloud of steam rose from each cup as she placed the fat gourd back down on the small rack.

“Y-yes!”

She sighed. “Ah. good… Come, have some tea with me.”

Tsu lowered herself into a squat, feet flat on the earth as she accepted the cup she was handed. She wrapped her hands around the cup, interlocking her fingers around it on the other side.

“You know I have things to do today, right? I have to go get someone in a few minutes.”

Tsu nodded. Chen sighed. “Well, you’re welcome to relax here, if it will make you feel better- have you gotten back to Daimu yet?”

She nodded.

“That’s good. Was she mad?”

Tsu shook her head. She wasn’t mad. At least, that’s what she said.

“Words, please?”

She pressed her lips tighter together.

All Chen did was laugh. “Okay, we’ll work on that later. Now, the public is what you should be worried about- opinion is still up, though. All the newspapers like you, for now. Until they learn you’re going to try and uproot this humans-against-youkai thing, so even the rest of the people will be fine.”

That was fine.

“Have you ever had tea before?”

Yes, actually. She remembered tea- her mother used to steep pine needles in melted snow. She enjoyed the water flavored by the prickly leaves- it tasted wonderful. It was clear the tea in her hands wasn’t pine or fir, but it tasted just fine. Sweet, tingly, cozy, and most of all, warm. She nodded.

“Really? What did you use?”

“Pine,” Tsu murmured.
“Sounds like a treat.”

It was.

"Now, as for the those loose ends Ran didn’t cover, we’ll begin tying those up tomorrow, don’t worry. Just relax for now."

Tsu shifted. That was not fine. Wasn’t there more she could do on this day?

“Antsy, aren’t you? Relax, Tsu- you’ve been doing nothing but stressful things since you’ve been here, since you’ve been alive, even. Your everyday is no longer a fight for survival- Take a break from everything, get used to being free. You’ll hurt yourself if you go too fast. In fact, you might already be hurting yourself.”

Was that alright?

Was it really alright?

She held her head and took a deep breath. Was it really, truly, okay?

She felt a hand on her head. It was Mokou, the girl sitting down beside her. It was funny, she was shorter than both of them, but she was suddenly taller now that they sat down. They were on their rear ends and knees, and she was crouched on her feet. Despite this, there was still no struggle to reach her head. She closed her eyes and sighed.

It was a nice feeling, being cuddled and stroked on the head. It was a cozy warmth that radiated from the hand as it passed over her hair, especially this woman’s hair.

“That’s not like you,” Chen said to her friend with a chuckle.

“I don’t like touching, but she likes it,” Mokou stated, pressing more weight into her hand. “I think this will ease her into this world”

“It looks like Keine has rubbed off on you.”

Who was that?

Tsu felt the other woman’s hand stiffen.

“Maybe...” she whimpered.

“Oh. I’m sorry, I-”

She was interrupted by a loud ding. Tsu’s eyes opened to see a small gold disc being pulled from Chen’s pocket by a long chain.

“It’s about that time. Tsu, get acquainted with your new friend- I must go and get another of mine to discuss a very important issue. I will be back shortly.”

Chen quickly stuffed the small disc into her pocket, chain and all, and just as swiftly disappeared into a gap.

She sure did like those things, didn’t she? Those gaps, those rifts in the world; They looked convenient, but how did they not make her sick?
Tsu turned to Mokou, who had retracted her hand again and brought her knees to her chest. She looked sad, very sad. It wasn’t just any sadness, though—the sadness on her face was that of a bereft friend, someone who’d lost something. It reminded Tsu of her father after her mother died, and it reminded Tsu of herself after both had died.

Her heartful of cozy comfort drained away with the sweat on her brow, as if it was keeping a heartful of lead afloat.

She reached out and placed her hand on Mokou’s head.

Tsu liked it, found comfort in it—would she?

This girl was not a friend of Tsu just yet, but Tsu would be a friend to her.

Chapter End Notes

Stupid autist Tsu pats dangerous immortal on the head literally seconds after she says she doesn't like being touched.
Good job, girl.
Really short chapter, tbh. Less words than the last two.
Might have been longer depending on who you are. Not much happened and it was all extremely detailed, like it always is.
The slow and uninteresting part is over, though. The last two chapters were a real lull for me, especially chapter three. Quality should be up, though. There is a lot of stuff I wanted to do this chapter, but I decided this ending was alright. Should definitely, definitely, be all done next chapter.
I tried to have a few defining moments for Tsu in this, in terms of her opinions and her inner mentality. As well, I tried to reaffirm some core beliefs and motivations. It should be more consistent from here on out.
As for Mokou, it was rather uncomfortable for me to write her at first, because of my very first ideas about this thing, as well as the fact that she is one of my favorite characters. It was too late to ignore her, though, since she was there. But, after reviewing and refining her motivations, I was able to get her to a state I feel comfortable with while still conforming to canon to a comfortable degree. I wanted to start off as an observant character with her. She wants in (for reasons that will be revealed first thing next chapter, I promise.), but isn't sure whether or not it's safe to. Fair call, not like she really offended the doormat, either.
Tsu is black-haired and green-eyed with ice powers. Mokou is white-haired with red-eyed with fire powers. This is pure coincidence, I promise.
Practice Run

Chapter Summary

Mokou reprimands Tsu for headpatting her, and she has Tsu fight her in a test of skill, after which Tsu makes a new friend.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for being late with this chapter. I got lazy and had a bit of writer's block.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mokou was quick to swat away Tsu’s hand, quick to scold her.

Well, she was within her rights, yes. She’d just said to Chen that she didn’t like being touched.

Tsu wished she did, though. She looked sad. She almost saw a tear welling up in her eye. Mokou was saddened by the mention of this “Keine”, and Tsu didn’t know how to comfort her in any other way.

She wished she knew how.

She wished she knew what to say to her.

She never knew, ever. That was why she hated words. Even when she did, they wouldn’t come out right, so why bother? Why bother, ever, except for what was pertinent?

She wished nothing was ever pertinent enough to use words for…

Tsu had managed to squeak out an apology, at least.

At this rate, would Mokou ever become her friend?

The person Chen had brought up, Mokou probably cherished them dearly, whoever they were.

She wished she could be like that.

“Mo-mokou…”

“Yes?”

“A-ah- I’m shorry.”

She braced for more harsh words.

“You already- It’s fine, Tsu. Just pay attention better,” she said, releasing a loud sigh.

Was it of frustration? Tsu didn’t know- she couldn’t tell, but it seemed like it. What else could it
really be, anyway?

The white-haired woman’s eyes turned to Tsu. A sadness was all that could be seen in them. It was a deep sadness, and even the bright sun reflecting off them seemed nonexistent when compared to the “herself” Tsu saw in them.

The two red mirrors reflected the appearance of Tsu. She wondered, ever so slightly, what Mokou was thinking. Tsu saw herself a pale and disheveled creature, with her mouth just barely hanging open in a frown, and the sadness of Mokou reflected back into her own eyes. What did Mokou see of Tsu?

Tsu reached a hand out to touch the girl, to hold her hand, or anything. To comfort her, it was all she knew how to do. Just being close to someone would make her feel better. She had to catch herself, for she knew it didn’t work for her.

If she tried to reach out to her like that, Mokou surely wouldn’t want to be her friend.

“You’re sweet… almost like-” Her voice trailed off, wavering and weak. She didn’t finish the thought.

“K-kei… ne?”

The white-haired woman almost froze. Should Tsu have left it alone?

“Oh, that damned cat,” she sighed, releasing her knees and laying down, off the blanket and onto the grass, “It seems you do pay attention, Tsu.”

Sometimes.

She smiled. It was a smile that was belied by something in her eyes, that Tsu couldn’t define- almost like the picture of Yumi. Wasn’t it also the smile her father had?

“Yes, almost like Keine.”

“Who’s Keine?”

The smile quickly vanished, replaced with a frown and a sigh.

Mokou held her chin, as if she was trying to figure out what to say.

“She was an old friend… My best friend. A half-youkai, or half-human. I guess you can say she was one of the guardians of this world. She loved human and youkai alike- all things considered, it’s better not to denounce half of what you are, but that’s not the point. She wanted human and youkai to love each other like she loved them, and for a time, that’s the way it was.”

That was good. What happened, though?

“Dreams never last, though. She lived through it, but she lived to see what she’d worked so hard for fall apart… She was killed… soon after the world she had made…”

A good friend… that’s what she was, and she died some time ago. She’d left behind Mokou, who somehow managed to keep herself alive for so long. How it must have anguished her.

“If she was alive to see what this place had become, she’d-” She took a deep breath and bent her legs, “I don’t know what, not anymore, it’s been too long…”
Tsu barely remembered her mother’s one-eyed face. She barely remembered her father’s voice. How they acted was a mystery, almost. Why did her mother teeter when she walked? Did she even teeter? What were her last words? What happened to her father? Why did Tsu want a sister? Did she ever have a sister? Surely, the way Keine walked and talked was now but a mystery to the figure sprawled out in front of her.

Tsu had to stop herself from leaning over to touch this woman, from bringing her into a hug.

Tsu took a deep breath.

“Miss Mokou… A-ah’ll be like Keine,” she slurred, holding her arms to herself to keep from trying to reach out, “an’ I-it’ll stay this way, an’ you’ll be happy…”

Tsu was going to make it better, she was going to make this dream come alive once again, so that this person would be happy, so that everyone could be happy, so that another person like Tsu would never happen again.

There was a pause. It was a long one where the gentle wind could be heard over the silence that drafted over them.

“You say that,” she responded, “but are you able? How do you know you can do it?

Tsu thought for a moment.

She… didn’t know if she could do it, bring peace back between these two peoples at the verge of killing each other. She didn’t know if she was able.

Tsu thought for another moment.

She cleared her throat.

Chen was kind enough to bring her in, and this world was kind enough to give her people to cherish, and to give her the cozy futon she could sleep in now.

She owed something to Chen, and to this world.

She would do anything to get away from the icy wastes of her old world. That was what she’d said to herself. Anything was worth an escape from her isolated prison.

Tsu didn’t know how she was going to do it, but she was, and she knew she could, because if she didn’t, would it not be the same result?

She didn’t know if she was able to, but…

“I’ll become able,” she said, “Ah promise.”

“Heh, you’re an idiot, but…” she half-laughed, “a sweet one. I don’t expect much, but, just try your very best. For the sake of everyone, I want you to do your best to become able.”

She nodded. Tsu was prepared to do everything she could in order to bring this dream to reality. Her whole body burned in her desire to save this beautiful land she had been brought refuge to. No matter how hot it was, no matter how quiet the wind was, and no matter how harshly the sun assaulted her eyes, she was going to fight to her very last breath to keep this place together.
Mokou sat up. “I’ll hold you to your word, so don’t quit halfway through. I won’t be your friend if you did that.”

“Don’t worry!” Tsu replied, pushing her head into the hand.

Mokou chuckled. “I’ll help you do your best, every way I can, okay? We both want the same thing,” she said, “but, right now, I don’t know what you’re capable of, and is that not also important?”

Tsu nodded. She didn’t understand why, but if this wise girl advised it, then it must be important. She wondered why nonetheless, though.

Tsu thought back to that funeral, when the koden were stolen. Chen had told her she wasn’t ready to face whoever stole them. She thought back to that incident in the alley, where she’d taken on three people by herself.

Perhaps Tsu was able, already, to take care of whatever needed doing.

She inwardly mused at how she’d bloodied that one boy. Daimu’s brother or not, he had it coming. While she felt bad about it, she enjoyed the thought that she was able to take on that challenge.

There was one way to demonstrate her prowess to this woman, though.

Tsu sighed and cleared her throat. Her voice already hurt from talking so much, just like it always did. She would speak a few sentences and grow tired, her throat filling with a soft knot. Oh, how she hated to speak.

But, oh, how she wanted to show off.

Just for Mokou, maybe a word or two.

“I can show you,” she invited, holding out her hand.

“Then, you want to try and beat me up?”

“If ish what’chu wanna do.”

“Well, how else will I find out?” she asked, grabbing her hand and helping herself up.

That was true, very true. Tsu nodded, adjusting her footing before standing up again. Come to think of it, though, Tsu couldn’t imagine doing it right now. Chen would be back any second, with someone else in tow. She wondered what they would think about it.

“When an’ where?” she asked.

“Now an’ here’ works just fine, Tsu. We’ll just move a little away from the blanket, so we don’t disturb what Chen will be doing.”

“But-”

“Chen won’t mind,” she assured.

Was it really okay?

(Girls are Moving...)
The first thing that stuck out about this field was how quiet it was. All was still, except for a weak and warm wind that barely blew along the grasses beneath around Tsu’s feet.

“This field was the site of a large battle long ago,” Mokou had said, “It was a fight many people ended up forgetting through the passing years. Chen likes to talk diplomacy here, partially because it’s clean and quiet, but also because she wants to remember what she’s trying to stop. We call this place ‘the silent field’.”

The silent field. It was quiet, ever so quiet. So much so that it was just as overwhelming as the massive, chilly winds that had whipped the earth into the wasteland it was.

At least there was some kind of cover, though. Tsu felt exposed, exposed by her bright whites and reds, and exposed by the grass that was barely longer than a finger. There was nothing to hide behind or in, nothing to strike from.

“I’m going to hold back for you, so you don't die, but I don’t want you doing the same for me.” she instructed.

But what if Mokou died?

Perhaps that's what she wanted.

Tsu pulled her axe from the holster it was clicked to, and inverted it. Regardless of her instructions, Mokou was important. Not only to this cause and her, but to Chen. How would she feel if her friend died at the hands of the person she'd brought in?

“Tsu, why is your weapon backwards?”

“Ah don’ wanna kill you,” Tsu pointed out.

All she got in response was a snicker and a thoughtful look.

“Oh, so Chen or Ran haven’t told you yet?”

No?

“I hear the book club paid you a visit yesterday,” she said, holding her chin, “How do I… Did they bring any books on immortality?”

Oh, Tsu remembered they said something about that. A special elixir, a cursed drink, that would make someone live forever, even until the end of time, even if they were turned into fine dust. One of the many things that were said to have existed.

Of all the crazy and insane things she’d seen and heard of so far, this had to be too far-fetched to be true. Even Daimu wrote it off as a lie. One couldn’t just take three sips of a drink and live forever. Who, even, would want to anyway?

She huffed and murmured something under her breath. Something about a “he” not bringing her up. What, exactly, was she getting at? She gave her weird look.

Wait… was she saying she couldn’t die?

“Hourai?”

“Hourai indeed,” she confirmed.
“It’sh bullshit,” Tsu growled, stepping one foot forward, “Errythin’ dies.”

The deer die, the wolves die, the rabbits die. Even the trees die, eventually. Nothing lives forever, and anything can die to an axe. If Mokou was implying that she was immortal, she was lying.

“I thought so too, Tsu,” Mokou said, still maintaining her casual posture, “But then I found that elixir, and took a drink.”

Tsu squinted.

“Now, if you don’t believe me, land a hit and find out for yourself. I’m sure with how strong you look… you could do it.”

Tsu steeled herself, gently flipping her axe. It looked like this was what she wanted. Still, she didn’t believe it. What if she did actually die?

Regardless, she had to show how she fought, so she took a deep breath.

Tsu lunged forward, her eyes focusing straight onto the girl who had invited her to a fight. “If’ya die,” she said, “ish your fault.”

(BGM: Reach for the Moon ~ Immortal Smoke)

Maybe she just wanted to make Tsu feel better about killing her? Did she even want to live?

Mokou’s face lit up as Tsu made her lunge, as if she was almost excited.

This lunge, though- it was fast, almost too fast. It was like she’d thrown herself.

Mokou sidestepped, and Tsu barely landed on her feet in the sodden ground, a fair distance away from where she was, far away from Mokou.

What? It was so far away. How?

“You let your guard down!” Mokou stated, suddenly charging forward as well with a fist, leaving no time to dwell on the weird leap she’d just done.

She just barely missed, just brushing on her clothing. Her fist flew past with a flash of light and a wave of heat.

Fire?

She couldn’t let down her guard again, though- not now. If that was fire, she was in for one hell of a charring. Tsu jumped back, away from her

She swung as Mokou made another lunge. It landed, actually, slicing into her arm. A large splatter of blood followed, creating a huge spot on her shirt.

Great.

Tsu growled again, tearing the axe from her flesh and making another swipe. This time, though, it was a clear miss. It went right over her head.

Tsu immediately felt how vulnerable she was in this position, the swing’s momentum carrying her forward with a ducking Mokou beneath her. She could see her hand, fingers curled in with her palm exposed, almost glowing.
It was glowing.

That steely look in her eye, she wasn’t going to hold back, was she?

Tsu tightened her stomach, preparing to be hit with a burn even worse than those times she’d pulled out still-hot sticks from the embers of her fire.

The white-haired woman thrust her palm out. It was almost upon her, she was going to go flying any second, wasn’t she? She already felt a small, warm fire flooding around her.

She closed her eyes.

It didn’t come.

Her eyes opened gain. Mokou’s hand wasn’t burning, and just propping up her belly, and her other was on Tsu’s shoulder, suspending her on her toes.

“You’re slow, work on that,” Mokou said to her, pushing her back up into a balanced position.

Tsu managed to get on her feet, and was given a chance to calm down.

She was shaking. That was scary.

Somehow, this woman could control fire. Maybe it was just like her ice?

“Ready?”

Yes.

And so, they jumped right back into it. Tsu swung, as hard as she could, but kept missing. Mokou would throw a punch and have it deflected away.

“You don’t have to put everything into one swing,” she’d said three times now.

Tsu deflected another hit, sending sparks of fire flying to the right. This time, unlike the other times, she’d staggered, just a little bit.

She couldn’t react in time for her axe to be wrenched from her hand.

She reached for it, but it was already out of her grasp.

“What now?”

No matter what she tried, Mokou kept it away from her. She tried using her fists, but none hit. She tried leaping for it, but that didn’t work. She would have used her ice, but there was not enough water around…

Wait, no, there was!

Tsu remembered that tea, the cup that was half-empty, the one that Chen had poured for her. It was not her mother’s pine tea, but it was still great. It also still had water.

She had to get it.

Dashing towards the blanket, she was quickly tailed by the girl with red eyes. Meanwhile, time nearly froze and her heart pounding. She dove towards it, taking it up off the blanket. It was still
hot, the tea. Would it work? Surely, the hot water would be harder to freeze, and this woman of fire wouldn’t be hurt by heat, right?

Ice, though…

Tsu ran another fair distance, far away from the blanket, where Chen and another person had come back, and slung it at the trailing Mokou, the liquid splashing out. There was a lot of tea in that cup.

And now there was a lot of tea on this woman.

And now, now it was frozen. The shock on Mokou’s face was vividly apparent as she was first scalded by the hot tea, which suddenly froze all at once to be as cold as the bitterest winter.

She grabbed the axe from Mokou in her confusion.

What was she about to do?

She was about to swing down and bring this axe into her head. Certainly, certainly, Mokou would die from this.

If she was immortal, though, then it would be of no consequence.

Tsu roared out heartily as she sliced the blade through her hesitation at full force. Mokou’s head provided no resistance when compared to the struggle to follow through.

She let go of the axe and watched as the “immortal” stiffened, blood staining her hair and showering the earth.

She reached for the axe with both of her hands, missing both times in a desperate attempt to remove it while her eyes struggled not to widen and glaze over.

The bloody figure collapsed in a flurry of ribbon-covered white hair.

Tsu’s adrenaline-hazy mind suddenly cleared up as she realized what she’d just done.

She’d just killed her friend.

That immortality thing… it was a bunch of bullshit, and now there was already blood on her hands. She didn’t even want to kill anyone, but it was too late for that.

What would Chen think?

Tsu held her head, staring at the limp corpse in front of her.

Then, her heart froze like the tea covering the woman as she suddenly wasn’t so limp anymore.

A small fire erupted from every blood splatter on her person, dwindling out as the blood evaporated from her body. Her axe was forced from the head of the woman as it sealed shut in a matter of seconds.

The deer die, the wolves die, the rabbits die. Even the trees die, eventually. Nothing lives forever, and anything can die to an axe.

Except for this woman, it seemed, even if her head was cleaved nearly in half in a fountain of blood. And now, she was on her feet, dazed and startled. Was it because she’d died, or was she still in shock from the freezing water that had surely boiled off at this point.
Immortal, hourai, eternal.

She *was* telling the truth. Immortality wasn’t a lie, it seemed.

In this world, nothing was too far-fetched.

“Nice trick,” she grunted, shaking her head.

Tsu gripped the weapon tighter. It was one thing to see a being hacked away at and killed. That was how she hunted, after all. It was different, however, seeing it form back together and the figure rise again. It seemed Mokou was telling the truth.

It didn’t take long for the immortal to come out of her daze. Not long at all.

It wasn’t long, either, before she was moving forward and making it past all of Tsu’s defenses. It seemed like a switch flipped inside her, and suddenly Tsu was flat on the ground.

She stood up again and lunged forward with everything she had, her heart nearly breaking out of her chest and her blood freezing over in fear and something else, a roaring mass of white.

Her feet left the ground, sending her flying forward with all her might. She leapt a great distance, greater than any push of her legs could ever do. She didn’t question it like last time. It wasn’t the time for that, and landing on her feet wasn’t as important as landing a hit. There was no time to think of that.

Everything she had, though, was not nearly enough in the face of this immortal girl. Her mighty blow was easily deflected by a swat from the relaxed girl’s hand.

She was doing it so casually too. Was this going easy on her?

There was no time to dwell on this question, before her momentum was turned against her, a fist slamming directly into her sternum.

Tsu was able to handle falling from trees, being nearly trampled by deer. She was tough. She could take a hit, and she could fight off any sickness quickly, even magical sickness. She’d even had to hunt with a frostbitten and throbbing hand many times before.

The blow from Mokou, however, was beyond any of that. A pain shot through her body and the air was completely knocked out of her. Not even the blow from that kid she’d fought the other day hurt this bad, let alone badly at all. She could barely stand on her own feet from this hit.

Was Mokou even going easy on her?

Again, she barely had time to dwell on it before her stomach clenched tightly and she fell to her knees. She held where she got hit as she tried desperately to take in air, before she felt a familiar feeling rise in her throat. Before her eyes screwed shut, she saw Mokou looking down in shock. She was saying something, but she couldn’t hear over the ringing in her ears as her mouth filled with her half-digested egg breakfast.

She’d thought she was done with puking for a while, but it seemed there was more in store from her. The pain radiating from her gut spread all over her body and seemed to stick her to the ground as she continued a frantic attempt at breathing.

*Girls are Fainting…*
Tsu didn’t know how long it was until she opened her eyes again. Everything seemed to blur into one loud sound and feeling after being struck so hard.

She wondered if Mokou had lost faith in her. After all, she wasn’t even able to stand one punch from her. Would she ever be her friend at this rate, if there was even a chance anymore?

Tsu couldn’t fight. She wasn’t able to hold her own against her. She only got one hit in because of a “nice” trick, while Mokou played with her the whole time.

Tsu was alone again. The blood that sounded out in her ears slowly melted into the whistling wind that spoke something unintelligible to her. Her eyes opened wide to a world of pure white again, with snow streaking across her vision.

It wasn’t cold, it didn’t sting in the thin and loose miko clothing she wore.

It wasn’t her usual menagerie of pelts and old textiles that it was supposed to be. Why was she back in the snow again? Did Chen abandon her after seeing her fail so hard?

Tsu pressed forward, slowly trundling in a random direction as she did. She was alone again, all alone. Perhaps this was hell. Hell didn’t seem as hot as it would be, but what else could it be? Tsu must have died. Surely, she was dead. She didn’t have to worry about killing Mokou, but Mokou had to worry about killing her.

Tsu wasn’t good enough. She couldn’t repay what she owed to that distant land, so she was punished and placed in hell.

Surely, her beloved mother and father did good things, and weren’t placed in hell with her. They were up in heaven without her, never to see her again.

Tsu was never going to see even them again.

Her father said he’d wait for her. Unbeknownst to him, he’d be waiting for eternity.

Tsu was dead, dead and alone. In this lonely and snowy world where everything was the same, just like the outside world.

There was an icy sadness that gripped at her heart.

Nobody would ever be there for her. She was going to be alone for eternity.

As Tsu advanced forward, she found the world entangled in red flowers. They slowly got thicker and thicker and tangled up her feet. Slowly, her pace lessened and her advanced halted. Entanglement was to become her fate.

Heavy in heart, when her legs became wrapped enough in vines to become immobile, she accepted. She leaned forward. The red spring flowers that bloomed every year were to suffocate her forever in hell. Soon enough, she would be buried in the snow. At least she would be wrapped around in the embrace of vines.

The ground gave way to an inky blackness as she crashed down, arms wide open. Suddenly, she was falling, flailing and entangled in green and red, as white powder snow descended with her.

Suddenly, her eyes opened as she crashed into the ground, her whole body jolting as it did. Above her was a brown ceiling she hadn’t seen before.
Tsu was awake, Tsu was alive.

It was all a dream.

She sat up. Her body was under a blanket, a really thin one, and laying on a clean bed that creaked as she moved. It was hard, but not like a futon on the floor, and it bounced under her.

To her right was a wooden wall, to her front was a wooden wall, and to her left was two familiar figures in red.

They were facing away from her, conversing amongst themselves, and in front of them was a third woman, whose white hair was white like Mokou’s, but shorter and braided.

Her hair was still rather long.

It stood out against her blue-and-red attire.

She was holding a brown board, and moving her other hand over it as she spoke with Chen and Mokou. When the woman in blue and red looked up from her clipboard, her gray eyes locked with Tsu’s for a moment, a very brief moment.

“She’s up now,” she said, her eyes shifting to Chen. She pointed her finger out towards Tsu and the two turned around.

Mokou was the first to speak up, reaching out and grabbing onto one shoulder.

“Tsu, I’m glad you’re alright. I didn’t mean to hit you that hard,” she apologized, bowing forward and looking into her eyes.

Tsu looked into her eyes, grabbing onto her arm.

“Ish fine…” she grunted, forcing a smile.

Mokou was probably disappointed in her. Tsu couldn’t even take one hit from her, meanwhile she couldn’t even hit her.

She was okay with Mokou not being her friend. She wasn’t nearly as good as she thought she was. That boy she’d laid out in one punch was nothing, and Mokou was still just a human too. If youkai were stronger than humans, how would she fare against them?

Not good. That’s how.

“You’re a lucky girl, Tsu,” the third lady piped up, flipping a piece of paper up from that board and looking under it, “You have no internal injuries. Just some bruising.”

Tsu looked down to her belly, and to Chen, who piped up.

“If you’re feeling alright, do you want to head back home?”

“No,” the lady protested, “She’s fine, but I told you I’m still keeping her for today. I need a full physical on Tsu before I can release her.”

Chen turned to face her. “I can do that myself, thank you,” she growled. She looked antsy, like she didn’t want to be here. Why, though?

Who, even, was this doctor woman?
Tsu turned to Mokou as the doctor snapped back at Chen, and took a deep breath.

“Who’sdat?”

Mokou pointed to the lady. “Her?”

She nodded.

“That’s Eirin. She’s a doctor who runs Eientei. After you fainted, I took you here,” she explained, “It’s back in the forest I found you in today.”

Tsu nodded, and looked to Chen. Chen was starting to look angry, but her tone of voice was still calm and soft, like she was forcing herself to calm down. Were they really arguing about who gets to take her?

Tsu asked Mokou what Eirin meant by a “physical”, and she explained.

Eirin wanted to look her over, to see what condition she was in, and to measure her body. That and treating the sick and hurt was what doctors like Eirin were supposed to do.

And, apparently, Chen didn’t trust Eirin because she came from the moon, that pale white dot in the sky that cast shadows in the night.

“You didn’t care about the one who came before her, what makes her so special?” Eirin said loudly. She wasn’t yelling, but she’d raised her voice at Chen, who reeled back with her ears against her head.

The argument had gotten heated.

“She’s going to help fix this mess!”

“You took in a disabled, illiterate child who can’t fight, and tasked her with solving all our problems. Chen, she’s better off as just a refugee. Where, even, are her parents?”

Chen reeled, and Tsu felt the body of the person around her shift.

“They’re fucking dead!” Mokou interjected loudly, “Stop bitching at each other and let her decide! Tsu is can make her own decisions.”

All three women in the room looked at Tsu almost instantly, as if they were expecting her to speak.

Tsu clammed up again. She pressed her lips together. All eyes were on her, and they were hands wrapped around her neck, choking her. She hugged herself, pulling her knees up into her body and into a tight ball. She shivered as the fear grasped and clawed its way in again.

Their burning gazes hurt worse than the blazing weather.

Tsu closed her eyes and willed everyone away with everything she had. She never thought she’d yearn to be alone again, but she did. Everyone was looking at her.

The lonely white sheets that blanketed the ground were gone, and she’d never thought she’d miss them again, but every time everyone turned to face her, the longing for their return grew within her chest. Those entangling vines, at least, didn’t pressure her to speak.

A hand gently patted her back and rolled back and forth, sending warmth through her body as it did. Not the hot, summer warmth, but the good kind of warmth. The kind that almost felt like a
hug.

“Tsu is very shy, stop staring at her,” Mokou piped up again.

“But how is she going to-”

“I’ll take care of it, Eirin,” she snapped, the hand wrapping further around Tsu and hooking her into a hug, “I’ll take care of everything.”

Tsu’s shaking slowly subsided as the hug grewed around her body, and she held one arm across her chest. Her breathing slowed.

This was Mokou’s arm. Why was she hugging her? Why was she hugging anyone at all? She didn’t like touching, so why was she doing it.

It had been too long since she last had a proper hug, though…

Before she knew it, Mokou was curled up around her, resting her chin on her and stroking her arms.

“Tsu… you like this, right?” she asked.

Tsu nodded.

Mokou chuckled. “Touchy people like being touched, always. Take your time thinking it over. They’re not staring anymore.”

Tsu sighed, and thought it over.

If she went, then surely Eirin would push for it again if she were ever to make it back here. As well, Tsu had wondered about her ankle, and her social inability. Maybe Eirin had something that could fix those things?

“Stay…” she murmured.

“Speak up, Tsu. They can’t hear you,” Mokou instructed.

“Ah’ll stay,” she repeated.

Tsu opened her eyes. Sure enough, they weren’t staring at her, and it was Mokou’s pale arms wrapped around her. She squinted. Why did she do that? Why was she doing this thing she didn’t like? Why was it okay this time? Was Mokou just shy too?

Chen’s ears flattened to her head and her lips curled. Her eyebrows furrowed as her nails dug into the bed. Her eyes were burning, almost, awash in anger.

She took in a deep breath and closed her eyes. When she did, her shaking stopped and her ears sprung back up. She dropped off the bed and stroked her temples with a deep sigh.

“It’s her decision, I won’t force her,” she conceded, “Send her back to me when she’s ready to care about Gensokyo.”

Eirin nodded as Chen gapped out.

Tsu couldn’t help but be disappointed by this display. Chen was angry, angry to the point of near-violence… because she was being watched over by a person from the moon? Did she hate Eirin that much? And then she said that… Did this really get her angry enough to say that?
Tsu cared. She cared about this place. What could make Chen think otherwise?

“I can’t believe that cat…” Eirin grumbled.

“At times, I can’t either,” Mokou stated, starting to unwrap herself from Tsu, “She has a lot on her plate.”

Tsu resisted as Mokou tried to release her from her grasp, but she eventually gave up after a little bit of struggle. Her body drooped loosely, and her heart sunk deeper to the floor the longer she dwelled on Chen’s parting words. Why was Chen acting like this?

“I thought you didn’t like touching,” Eirin said.

“I don’t, but she does,” the other woman said with a shrug, before climbing off the creaky bed, “I’ll help her with this kind of situation when she’s out.”

“Of course.”

Mokou stalked to the door and cracked it open. “When she gets released, she’ll know who to look for.”

Eirin waved her off as she left the room, before turning back to Tsu.

“Can you walk?”

Tsu nodded.

“Get up, then,” she ordered, “I need you to do some things.”

Tsu turned to the side of the bed and climbed off. Her bare feet slapped onto the smooth wooden floor, heavily weighed down.

“Tsu, you’re pathetic. Chen didn’t mean what she said. She’s just cranky because she had to deal with a lunarian,” she said.

Tsu lifted her left foot and cranked her stiff ankle, hearing it crack and pop as she worked on it. There was a weird look on Eirin’s face as she did.

“What’s wrong with your ankle?”

“Ankle broke… Papa fixed it,” she sighed, putting her foot down and stomping toward Eirin.

Eirin tsked. “Lucky girl… that could have been set much worse than it did. Go stand on that platform by the bed,” she ordered, pointing to a small platform with a post sticking out of it.

And so, she complied.

The rest of the day consisted of Tsu being measured in every which way and pricked with various needles. At first the needles were a little scary, but Tsu got over it quickly when she found out how little they hurt.

Eirin offered to break her ankle again and set the bones right, but she declined. It would put her out of commission for way too long. It wasn’t like it was too much of a big deal anyway. Because of the broken ankle, though, Eirin took her to another room to observe it. It was unsettling seeing her bones through her flesh, but she disliked even worse how Eirin described exactly what happened to it and how it broke, how to properly fix it.
This was information Tsu didn’t care to know. At all.

Mokou had, apparently, also talked about the abilities Tsu had as well, which Eirin asked to demonstrate.

Tsu could leap, flinging herself forward with more force than her legs ever could, and she could freeze water.

Afterwards, Eirin sat Tsu down and asked her questions. Things like “Do you know your condition?” and “Were you always like this?” were asked, referring to her distaste for talking. Tsu answered accordingly, naturally not speaking if she could simply gesture.

It was already dark outside when Eirin had finished everything she wanted to do with Tsu.

“It’s dangerous in this forest,” Eirin stated as Tsu began to leave for home, “There are a lot of dangerous youkai who lurk here at night. You can rest here if you’d like.”

Tsu stopped to consider the danger.

Tsu was weak. She could barely handle a fight with a human, and she wasn’t even completely a miko yet… could she fight such an enemy as a youkai? Especially one powerful enough to have their danger noted? What if she ran into multiple? What if she got lost, like she’d already done once before?

Tsu wasn’t able to handle that. Surely, she would be eaten or slaughtered. Her bright white miko attire stood out in the night, especially to those who disdained what had turned into a profession of murder. She couldn’t fight her way out of that situation, and she definitely couldn’t talk her way out of it.

Home, though… The Hakurei Shrine was her home now, and it was emptier and less crowded than the claustrophobic Eientei Hospital. Through the walls in the room, she could hear other injured beings go about their lives in the hospital. Her heart tightened and her mind reeled at the thought of having to deal with more strangers.

Was dealing with strangers a worse fate than death, though? It probably was. Tsu would rather die than be in a crowd, but… she had a debt to repay. She had something she needed to do here before she could die.

“I stay,” she stated firmly, turning back to face Eirin and bowing, “thankyou…”

“It’s nothing, Tsu,” she replied, firmly patting her head, “I’ll have my most trusted rabbit escort you home in the morning. Do you remember which room you were put in?”

Tsu shook her head.

Eirin looked down at her notepad and back to the girl, who returned from her bowing position. Her attention then turned to a bunny pushing a cart into another room.

“Udonge!”

The purple-haired bunny’s rose-red eyes flickered between the cart and the black-haired outsider.
There was a frown on her face, and through her purple hair, Tsu could just make out her brow, which was raised in what Tsu presumed to be some kind of concern.

“I’ll have someone else take care of your tasks. Right now, I need you to take her back to her room,” she said.

“At once,” Udonge responded, walking over to the girl and grasping her hand firmly.

Her hand was shaking. Was she alright?

“Tomorrow morning, I also want you to escort her to the shrine.”

“Ma’am, if I may… why is she so important to have me watch over her?” she questioned, her brow still raised and her voice almost unnaturally calm.

“She’s the very last human from the outside world, it seems. It would be a shame to lose this specimen.”

“Very much,” she said, bowing towards her superior, before walking off with Tsu.

This steely and cold bunny, with ears that seemed crumpled up and mangled, she was Eirin’s most trusted? L Her eyes constantly flickered around, and she had a shake, yet there was nothing in her eyes, only a cold inertness that seemed to mindlessly move her forward. What happened to her? Was she always like this? Tsu felt the rabbit’s overwhelming and unfriendly presence bear down on her short frame and cause her to withdraw.

Soon enough, they were back in her room, where the bunny gave Tsu a small smile and bid her farewell as she sat back down in her bed.

Eventually, Udonge came back with food, explaining in further detail why Eirin wanted to ensure her safety.

Tsu couldn’t help but ponder why someone from that hellscape was so fascinating. She was just human after all, right? She was distracted, though, by the quantity of food handed to her. Tsu was used to going days or a week without food, eating what she can when she can, so she wasn’t particularly hungry. Udonge, however, after hearing of Tsu’s original eating habits, firmly insisted she ate with a forceful scowl. She stated that such an eating schedule wasn’t healthy, and it was probably why Tsu was so short.

It was true. At one hundred sixty-one centimeters, she was only taller than one person she’d met so far, and that one person was still a child. Did she have to bring it up?

After eating was over, Udonge left the room and showed her how to turn off the lights when Tsu was ready to sleep. Feeling tired after eating so much, her belly full and warm, she did immediately, feeling slightly comforted by the twitchy bunny.

Chapter End Notes

At first I really hated this chapter, but I gave it a few re-reads and it kind of stuck. I think the experience of writing this has left me a little better at foresight. I established a bit late some things about Tsu's dreams that will become important later in later chapters, as well as some other minor things.
It'll pick up and get more exciting next chapter, with some things about the mystery of the missing koden.
That said, this chapter seemed a bit short. Then again, it's 5k words and not as big as, like, chapter 2.
Wew lad, 5 chapters in and I'm not where I wanted to be two chapters ago.
Incident

Chapter Summary

Tsu returns from Eientei, guided by Reisen, who tells her stories of the conflicts long past, when an encounter with a rogue fairy brings troubling premonitions.

Chapter Notes

I finally got something of quality out at a decent time. Impressive, no? I also got exactly what I wanted in there, and everything is on course! Working on the next as this is posted.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tsu’s eyes opened to the same dream she’d always had.

White powder snow blasting her face, powered by screaming wind as it fell from the clouds ever so high up in the sky. Her legs advanced her slowly forward against the wind in the deep sheets of winter.

She was alone, very alone, though she had one goal.

She didn’t know how she knew, but her sister who never was, somehow, was up ahead.

How many times has Tsu dreamed of the sister whom her parents never made? How many times has the elder sibling narrowly avoided her grasp?

Maybe she wouldn’t have been as lonely with a sister.

Or maybe she would have just died too.

Her mother sometimes cried about it, didn’t she? Because she knew her child would be alone one day. Her father, too, lamented the lack of another child. It would have been harder to raise two, but if it meant Tsu’s happiness, it was well worth it.

Just barely at the edge of her view was a figure in black melting out of the cloud of snow that blasted the weathered landscape and obscured all vision. From the head flowed a dark and silken long hair that fluttered to the side.

“Sister?” she called.

Tsu waved. Was this her mother?

Her sister who never was.

No, it was too black, this outfit, and too organized.
There was a… ribbon of some sort around her neck, under the collar of the black shirt that was held together by buttons in the front. It was a bright, nightly purple and blew to the side, matching her hair almost perfectly. Through the woman’s hair, she saw a pair of shining blue eyes, with slitted pupils.

Her outfit didn’t conform to her body, instead it blew loosely in the wind, and the bottoms of her black pants tapered off into weird shoes. From behind, she saw a whitish and fuzzy tail that ended in a long and fluffy black tuft.

That wasn’t what truly stood out, though. What stood out was the bright red hat on top of her head that blew with the wind, a big ball of fluff hanging at the end. It was the same red as Tsu’s sleeves were, the same red as the red hems of her skirt.

“Are you lost?”

“Always,” Tsu murmured.

The figure was right in front of her now. Tsu had to turn her gaze up to make eye contact with the strange woman.

“You’re not alone, don’t worry,” she assured, her tired eyes scanning over Tsu’s face.

But was that true?

Mokou and Chen had probably given up on her, Ran probably didn’t care about her, and Daimu and Engun… she wondered if they would stop caring, too. Everyone else seemed to.

Tsu felt her chin get grabbed and her head turned from side to side. She was being looked over by this woman.

It was a gentle grasp, the kind that soothed Tsu’s heart and almost made her go limp in her hand. She took in the grasp of the woman, closing her eyes and sighing slowly.

She smelled nice, too.

“Who…” Tsu started.

“I’m just lookin’… don’t worry.”

Tsu was with someone again. Someone was in her presence, and she wasn’t alone. She wasn’t alone, and it wasn’t a crowd either. It was just one person and her, a new person she’d just met.

Tsu wanted a hug from this woman.

It had been a while since she’d gotten hugged properly.

And so, when her chin was released, she held out her arms and asked for one.

The strange woman held her own chin and thought. She looked up and down Tsu’s short stature and smiled a warm smile.

“Sure.”

The woman flicked her tail and opened her arms for Tsu to snuggle into.

A loud noise rang out, though, and the woman froze. She looked around briefly, her smile dropping
and her mouth hanging open. Her eyes narrowed into even thinner slits as they scanned around.

“I have to go iron my shoelaces,” she said, retreating from Tsu’s almost-hug.

“But… hug-” Tsu insisted.

“I’ll see you again. Don’t fret, girl,” she said, her body slowly turning into the snow and blowing away with the wind.

“Your friends love you more than you think,” she assured.

“Wake up now,” her voice spoke.

It sounded different...

“Wake up!”

“Wake up!”

Tsu’s eyes shot open in the brightly-lit hospital room, the purple-haired bunny from last night standing above and nudging her.

Tsu was tired.

She put her hands on her hips when Tsu sat up.

“About time,” she grunted, leaning over her, “You can go home today.”

Tsu rubbed her eyes and climbed out of the bed. This rabbit, she seemed so much taller than her with those crumpled-up ears. Her red eyes looked down at her, slightly bloodshot in appearance.

“Our bath house is full, so you’ll have to do it when you get home,” she said, “Let’s get you some food first.”

(Girls are eating…)

This rabbit, Reisen, as Eirin called her, took her to a slightly crowded room. It wasn’t too big, but it wasn’t small either. There, she retrieved two plates of food for the two of them, and sat down on a small table to the edge of the room.

There was a discomfiting murmur from the bustle of people, but the solitude the table brought turned it into mere white noise.

Reisen talked to Tsu to break the silence, speaking idly of fierce wars she’d fought, of friends come and gone, of the mikos that came before Tsu. Her red blood-eyes, surrounded by dark circles, locked onto her own eyes while she silently ate. The rabbit recounted what the outside world was like, long before the war that had turned the world to ice.

Rustling expanses of green that dwarfed even the Silent Field in size and beauty, quaint homes in the countryside among browning fields of crops, and bustling cityscapes that glimmered in the sun with glass and held strong against the elements on concrete pillars. It was hard to believe the steel-latticed stone that crumbled and collapsed so easily lasted so long.

Tsu was cursed to never have seen this beauty. She was born of a time where all that had come to ruin, and she was all alone. She wondered how nostalgic the rabbit felt, reminiscing about it. Of course, she was there for war, and she recounted the violence and tragedy she’d witnessed, but the
world in which it was fought was beautiful and innocent, it seemed, even more grand and wonderful than the cities on the moon, with a glorious blue sky versus the black, star-studded sky that shone even in the day.

Reisen was disappointed to hear that no such beauty existed anymore. In its place was a sky laden with lead-gray cloudcover, and a sun that barely peeked through. A snowy landscape of crumbling ruins and collapsing cities pockmarked with craters.

Soon, when they were done, Reisen walked her out, a gentle and shaky, but firm grip on Tsu’s hand as they checked out of the hospital. She was to walk her back to the shrine.

Eirin waved her off and said Tsu was welcome back at Eientei any time.

The bunny led Tsu into the forest of bamboo, the weird green tree that shot out of the ground like rods.

It was a little ways into the forest when Reisen spoke up.

“You bear the name of an old friend of mine, yet you come from the outside world. Why is that?” she asked, “Were you given that surname?”

Tsu nodded.

“I see… you don’t look the part,” she continued, “You look like just a youkai in miko's clothes.”

Tsu’s hand shifted in hers.

“My name is Reisen Udongein Inaba… you can just call me ‘Reisen’.”

“Rei-sen,” Tsu said.

“Good,” she said, continuing forward

Reisen continued the talk she’d had over breakfast, more talk of the wars she’d fought in. She used to fight for the lunarians. That was what she’d done in the first war she was in, seven hundred years ago. In a second war, only three hundred years ago, she’d fought against the lunarians, who were invading this world she’d found refuge in.

People always spoke of the valors of war, and Eirin praised Reisen as if she was a kind of war hero, but it was a soul-crushing and horrific thing. Reisen wasn’t always so distant, it seemed. She wasn’t always so shaky. The last war she was in, the one after the one on the outside world, was full of hard choices and strife.

Somewhere in the conversation, Reisen had bestowed the nickname “quiet” unto Tsu. She voiced a distaste for Tsu’s silence, and how she acted so childish. It wasn’t the time to be silent, or to act childish…

“I can’t help but feel there is another war on the horizon,” she said, “It’s been brewing for a long time.”

Tsu felt bad for her. Hopefully, Reisen wouldn’t be called on again to fight in another war, to lose more friends. Hopefully, another war wouldn’t happen, and humanity won’t destroy itself.

“We’ll all die… this time,” Tsu murmured, “I hafta stoppit.”

Reisen nodded, opening her mouth to speak in response to Tsu’s first real sentence to her, but was
quickly cut off by a loud rustling coming from a nearby bush.

“Behind me, Quiet!” she ordered.

Reisen put an arm across Tsu’s chest, pushing the girl behind her and picking something off her waist that was strapped on.

It was a conical shape, and white. Two bunny ears stuck out on the end, and it had a handle to hold it by that made the fat end point in the direction of her arm.

As soon as the gold-ringed cone was pointed at the bush, a small girl slowly made her way out from hiding, her hands in the air. She was dirty, her simplistic red dress covered in green stains, and there were red marks all over her body from being scratched by the bush. As well, four small wings sprouted from her back.

What was a young, winged girl doing out here?

“Oh, it’s a fairy,” Reisen said, reattaching the thing that was presumably a weapon to her waist, “What are you doing out here?”

The small blond girl spoke up, still shaken from the weapon being pointed at her.

“I-I’m from the human village squadron… I’ve gotten lost,” she said.

“Squadron? What are you talking about?”

“We fairies are going to war!” she said, “Our friend had the idea!”

The fairy’s anxiety seemed to be replaced with fervor and excitement as she continued to speak, her wild yellow eyes widening.

“Is this some sort of new fairy game?” Reisen pressed. She huffed a little, a smile peeking on the corner of her lips. Tsu’s heart sunk at those words, but why wasn’t Reisen taking it seriously?

“No, a real war!” the girl huffed suddenly, stomping her bare feet on the ground in frustration, “We are an army!”

“An army… of fairies? Just fairies?”

“Yes!”

The rabbit put a hand to her mouth, covering it as the chuckle slowly devolved into muted laughter. She looked down with red eyes at the fairy, her ears trying to stand up straight.

Maybe, if Reisen was laughing, it wasn’t something to worry about?

“Fairies can’t even organize a ball game… If it’s just you idiots, it’ll be over in an instant!”

The fairy’s brow furrowed deeper between her wild, narrowed eyes.

“You dare make fun of the hard work our pale friend put into this assault?” she questioned, her shrill voice straining to scream at the rabbit. This winged girl was stomping and swinging at nothing, nearly frothing at the mouth. It was funny, so funny that the rabbit laughed harder at the girl.

The fairy, out of words, and full of rage, swung her hand out.
beams of light that narrowly missed.

They all came from her hand, creating a rumbling “tata-tata-tata-tata” noise

They glimmered and shone, pulsating in the air as they moved just slow enough for Tsu’s vision to track them, but too fast for an entirely clear view. Her body dodged out of the way with complete ease. They were slow, and created a heat that amplified the warmth of the air around them. Where the bullet narrowly missed and warmed her skin, her body created a crust of ice, in order to counter.

Reisen also dodged. At a blinding and untrackable pace, she ducked under the beams and lunged forward, almost leaving an afterimage of sorts. She could see a trail from her glowing eyes as she pointed her weapon at the fairy.

The wide end of the cone was placed directly against the fairy’s chest. There was a similar noise that burst through the air, Reisen’s own bolts blasting out from behind the fairy with a cloud of shredded clothing and wings.

The fairy fell over, a smoking and limp heap with a surprisingly still Reisen hanging above her. Her eyes were narrowed, full of intensity, and the twitch was suddenly gone. Her lips were curled and her teeth were gritted.

Of course, a grizzled warrior like Reisen would leave no survivors. However, the corpse of the fairy was an unnerving sight, with lifeless eyes staring into the sky.

Tsu slowly approached. These beautiful lights could do so much damage… how scary.

“She’ll be alright, Quiet- fairies come back when they die,” Reisen said, putting her weapon back on her hip for the second time now.

Tsu was skeptical. It seemed they were immortal, just like a certain other woman she knew, but why hasn’t her body already started regenerating?

She squinted at the corpse, looking for some sign of life.

“They don’t regenerate like that. Their bodies disappear into whatever force they’re made of, and it’ll reappear somewhere else,” the rabbit further said, “Now come, we still have to take you home.”

“But… I gotta see Mokou…” Tsu protested.

“She’s at the shrine with the rest of your friends.”

(BGM: Bad Omen)

The rest of the trip to the shrine was a very simple journey. Eventually, the bamboo broke into the forested trail back home, which Reisen led her up, hand in shaky hand. The strong light that was filtered out by the bamboo hit Tsu’s face again, glaring in her eyes. Her left eye was forced closed again, and her right slowly adjusted to the world’s brighter colors. Reisen moved with an odd sense of urgency. Tsu groaned when they finally reached the staircase. The large stone flight of stairs that led up to the shrine made her ankle hurt and feel as if it was going to fall out from under her, especially in her geta.

She did her best to stay off her left leg on the way up, painstakingly hopping up as far as she can before letting it down to regain her balance. At a couple times she almost fell, but Reisen always caught her or she caught herself. It took a while, but she made it up to the solid ground on top of
As she approached, familiar voices spoke from behind the door, inside the shrine. It seemed there was some sort of heated conversation.

“Awful to you, child, you were awful to her as well,” Engun said to, presumably, Ran, “Also, she was our friend, of course I’m gonna help!”

“Friends with- are you some kind of bigot?!” Ran asked.

“No!”

“Then you’re some kind of fetishist!”

“ No! Shoo! I’m not taking any more of your crappy leads!”

Reisen slid open the door loudly, the panel slamming into the end of its rail with a sharp clack!

Everyone Tsu knew, almost, was sitting down on their knees at the table in the main room. The sole male fiddled with a stack of papers aggressively as he argued with the child-like fox hovering beside him.

They were on the right side of the table, with Daimu chatting with Chen across the table about some other topic. Meanwhile, Mokou had just walked into the main room from somewhere else.

Everyone’s heads turned to the door as it slammed open.

“I’m home,” Tsu murmured, taking a step inside of the shrine.

“Hey, I brought the cadet home,” Reisen said, stepping inside the shrine behind her.

Chen greeted the rabbit with a “How are you?” and “It’s been a while!” while Tsu closed the door behind her. She began her advance towards Mokou, but was quickly impeded by the fox and the two other humans standing up to greet her.

Daimu and Engun both were concerned about her. Clearly, they were told about her surprise trip to the hospital. They asked her if she was alright, and voiced their relief that she was back. Ran soon tried to talk over them, pushing herself between the two and wrapping her arms tightly around her. A sudden weight tugged her down into a hunched position as the fox put her whole weight on the miko girl.

“Your friend’s being mean to me!” she whined, wide-eyed and pathetic-looking.

“You’re impeding an investigation, get off her!” the man said, yanking Ran by the collar.

Ran’s grip tightened like a vice, and Daimu lurched in as well, to help remove the obnoxious child.

The protesting little fox growled and writhed, not showing any signs of wanting to let go, and disregarding entirely the shocked and wide-eyed girl she was clinging onto with all her might.

Tsu looked around, squirming as well as the fox as she tried to break free. Tsu was strong, but this fox’s grip was somehow stronger. It didn’t help that her arms were pinned to her side.

Tsu’s heart began to race as this girl kept squeezing. Too many people were around, crowding over her and blocking her field of view. They meant well, of course, but… they were just all over her in their attempts to remove the fox.
Tsu’s fevered gaze darted around the room. These humans were no help. She needed to take it into her own hands. She couldn’t reach her axe, so that was out of the question.

Her eyes landed on a glass of water across the room. Yes, water. It was in Mokou’s hand, which it seemed was what she got back from doing.

She desperately tried to reach forward, focusing herself and her power to bring the water from the glass and onto Ran.

Mokou, meanwhile, looked upon the spectacle with a cold frown. Her unreadable eyes snapped between Tsu’s gaze and the trio crowding around her. There was a small bit of some kind of anger under her brow, but anything deeper was lost to Tsu.

The miko inched forward, the water far out of the range of her influence. She couldn’t move much at all with the fox draped over her, and the two humans tugging at the obnoxious thing.

The hourai woman watched for a second more before she acted. Her gaze stuck to Tsu’s as she took one last sip of the water with a slightly-upturned smirk. She took a breath, and swung forth the remaining contents of the glass.

The water splashed out of the cup, flowing forward through the warm air in a stream. It fell, though it never made it to the ground. As it entered Tsu’s range of influence, the flow abruptly changed to a small jet of liquid, precise and agile, which struck true between the two humans. It splashed at Ran’s back, creating a horrific crackling noise as it froze, permeating her clothing and clinging to her back and hair.

The youkai let out a yelp, and seemed to seize up. Taking this opportunity, Daimu and Engun dragged her off. It wasn’t long, though, before Ran came to her senses. She stared coldly up at Tsu, anger and disappointment plastered all over her face. She crossed her arms and pouted.

After the crowd’s dispersal, Tsu was quick to calm down, the three humans standing there much more calmly.

“Sorry about that. The fox has been a pain in all of our necks the whole day,” Engun explained, “The way she’s been acting lately, I think there’s more to it than what I can figure out… You know, there’s the reason Yumi banned her from this place.”

The man, standing a full head above Tsu, reached out and put a hand on her head, whose gaze turned towards the child again.

Was Tsu missing something? She seemed to be acting normal, at least in Tsu’s own head. Then again, she never really saw much of Ran, nor was she ever particularly good at reading people. She’d have to keep an eye on the fox.

“No way!”

Everyone’s vision suddenly turned to look at Chen, who seemed quite shocked by something Reisen had just told her.

“Hey, Tsu. It seems we have an incident on our hands…”

An incident?!

“A-an army of fairies is attacking the human village- I think it’s time to prove yourself.”
Tsu stepped back and made a small noise, looking Chen in the eyes.

The cat had a frown on her face, and she leaned on her hands. Her yellow eyes were half-closed and flickered around the room.

“I wanted to do this in a few days, but how about we get your rites done now, so that you can handle this?”

Any misgivings Tsu had were completely destroyed at the word “incident.”

An incident, something Chen had told happened when a youkai causes trouble, or when some other force was going wrong. It was an event where the balance was on the line - something every Hakurei miko took on at some point in their lives.

And that time in her life was upon her at this very moment.

Sadly, nowadays it seemed they killed whoever was behind it, but she was told of a time where that was not the case.

She was going to solve this without bloodshed.

Tsu nodded, looking to Mokou and back. It seemed talking to her would have to wait.

“Shit, Lady Chen, I gotta go do something!” Ran said suddenly, bolting out of the door.

“Do what?”

“... Stuff!” she sputtered out, stopping only for a brief moment before disappearing down the stairs.

Chen’s eyes looked to the rest of the people standing around, eyebrows raised in confusion with a frown.

“That’s... not like her.”

“Something’s up- keep an eye on her,” Daimu said, “I-I have to get home now, to make sure my siblings are okay.”

It wasn’t long before everyone was herded out of the shrine, each into their own gaps which led to where they wanted to go. The sound, four-fold, hurt Tsu’s ears. Though she understood that opening the gaps out of earshot would be troublesome, she still felt disdain, she still felt resentment for those rifts in the world that the cat so liberally opened up.

(BGM: Witching Dream)

One last of the rifts she so hated was opened for her. She entered with Chen, hand in warm hand.

The cat reached up and took a string hanging from the ceiling between two fingers, delicately pulling it down with a click, which bathed where they had found themselves in a pale and warm yellow light.

It was a small room, with a table in the center. Dimly lit by things like the glowing fruits she’d seen at the village, a dark wood shelf on the side opposite the staircase leading to the entrance held twenty-four clay jars, labelled with the strange text Daimu and Engun taught to her. She didn’t recognize enough symbols to read what they said.

There were other items- sacks, boxes, and handled tools propped up against one wall, which looked
as if they hadn’t been touched in ages.

In the center of the room, taking up a majority of the space, was a wooden box. It was in the same shape as the box they’d put Yumi in, plain white with a lid split in twain.

There was a large clothed figure on the coffin, in the vague shape of a brown bear of some sort. One glistening plastic eye stared back at her, and a torn red ribbon that glimmered in the dim light. Where the other eye should have been was a nasty scar; a small bit of white stuffing that seemed to be squished from its hole.

Its left eye was gone.

It was just like her mother in that regard, wasn’t it? It was also probably lost in a fierce “fight” with a dangerous “wolf”.

“Don’t worry about the box… it’s just in case,” Chen stated, knocking on it with her knuckles.

Such a statement, very much so, did not bode well. This death-box in front of the two was designated for Tsu, wasn’t it?

Chen reached to the shelf, and picked the twenty-fourth of the jars.

In the other hand, she picked up the tattered bear.

“This is Mister Red. He will bear witness to the oaths you will swear on the ashes of the girl who came before you,” she said, placing the pot on the table.

This jar, and presumably the rest, were they full of the ashes of those before her?

The symbols made sense now… they were names. The set that was most common must have meant “Hakurei,” and the sole symbol on this one, is must have meant “Yumi.”

There were similar symbols on the coffin below her, painted in black.

Tsu, a single symbol, made of three curved scratches, preceded by the surname she was given.

“Ha-ha-hakurei… Yumi…” the pale girl murmured to herself.

“Correct,” Chen said, using her free hand to point out the symbols on the coffin, “And I presume you figured this out.”

“Yes… Ish me.”

“Correct, Hakurei Tsu. Now, place your dominant hand on the urn.”

Tsu reached out with her right hand, and firmly placed it on the jar of Yumi’s ashes.

The rough clay seemed to grip her skin. It was dry and cold, comfortably so. She couldn’t help but brush her fingertips on the jar that filled her hand with tactile elegance.

“Look into the eyes- or, rather, eye… of your witness. He will not judge you, or give you any mean looks. He loves you very much. In fact, he was excited to meet you,” Chen told her.

Tsu nodded, turning towards the bear.

“Clear your throat, and prepare your voice. In your strongest, most clear and passionate voice, I
want you to repeat what I am about to speak, word for word,” she instructed, taking a deep breath.

Tsu nodded, her gaze not leaving the eye of the cloth effigy before her.

“I, Hakurei Tsu, twenty seventh maiden of the Hakurei Shrine…”

Tsu repeated.

“Do solemnly swear, before my witness, and on the ashes of my predecessor…”

She stuttered, and continued.

The solemn speech carried on for a very long time, a time that Tsu was unable to keep track of. Mister Red’s fond gaze stared back as Tsu strained her throat, stuttered, and talked for longer than she’d ever done before, repeating Chen’s words. It was easier when she was told them line-by-line, unlike the fiasco at the funeral where she repeated from memory the example given.

Chen had her swear to a great many things, promises she needed to uphold. The great many things ranged from maintaining the border between this world from the one outside, to things Chen promised to explain later.

There seemed to be a lot of things to this job, but she could worry about that later.

These oaths were not the end, however.

With a snap of her fingers, and the beep of a gap sounding off, her entire outfit turned a pale white. While it was mostly white, originally, the inverse of the normal miko outfit, now it was pure white. No more red trim, or red sleeves. Even the small bits of black on her arms were turned into a luscious and clean white.

It was “good enough” for what Chen had in mind. If it was, then it was of no concern to her what was going to happen next, when the cat began to chant.

The chanting took nearly as long as the oaths she had to take, if not longer. Tsu’s ankle was stiff as a board, and her whole body suddenly felt different. She shuddered, her body seeming to leave her own control. Visions of a man with an unfamiliar face flashed before her, yet the feeling he gave off was familiar.

In fact, the presence she felt from this was something she hadn’t noticed before, but now that she did, she was bathed in it. It was an entity that lived here. Was it the god of this worn old shrine?

It was full of anger, rage. The being behind this was infinitely mad. Hateful, one would say. In the back of her mind, Tsu could feel the anger rise up, directed at Chen especially. It was a deep kind of rage, something that seemed impossible to suffer from. Yet, it was there, in the back of her mind, but it was empty. She could feel the entity’s feebleness- as deep and powerful as his rage-holding it down.

She felt bad for it.

As suddenly as it took over her, the overwhelming presence soon left her body to join the allegorical background radiation once again.

“Now, open your eyes,” Chen said.
Tsu did as instructed.

“Did you feel it?” she asked.

“Yes… th-the god?”

“You’re smarter than you let on. Indeed, it is the god of the shrine,” the cat assured.

From her hand, Chen cast a pile of rice at Tsu’s face. Another part of the ritual, it seemed.

Afterwards, though, as her eyes opened from the flinching, Chen’s face had turned into a frown. Her nearly-glowing yellow eyes narrowed, and her ears stood on end. Something wasn’t right.

“O-oh dear… That’s not- Tsu, be a dear and look down for a second…”

Of course, again, as per the usual, Tsu followed Chen’s instructions. Surely, absolutely, Chen knew what she was doing.

The loud sound of another gap opening up above her head caused Tsu to look up.

Her face pointing straight up, her vision was not obscured by the staring eyes of a gap. No, instead, it was a book. A book falling spine-first onto Tsu. Despite her reflexes, she had no time to dodge the falling object as it flattened against her face, directly against her forehead.

A flash of white as her senses went dark, the last thing she felt was the horrific discomfort of being hit on the nose, followed by a gush of blood from her face.

Chapter End Notes

I'm really enamored by the idea of a war-veteran style Reisen. She's an interesting character because of how inconsistently she is written, and I really couldn't pass off the depiction of her.

I re-read my first chapter and was disgusted by how much my style has changed. I prefer my old ways of writing, though some change was necessary. Without my friend Nathan helping me, this story would surely be of lower quality.

In writing this chapter, though, I had a small crisis and decided to return to my roots in some things. I took a step back, and looked at all the devices and descriptions I've been so inconsistently using, and took note of them. They were always in mind in this one. I've also set up a bit of foreshadowing for later events.

Who's the baku? What is Mokou's opinion of Tsu? Is Tsu worthy of her friendship? Why is the Hakurei god so pissed?

Find out next time on the next episode of Dragon Ball Z!

Wait, wrong franchise.

This isn't even an official work of any series.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!