And What Alice Found There

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Summary

A tiny, haunted valley in rural Japan is no place for a Wonderland, even in 1884.
Minerva shut the door behind her, pulled off her hat to shake out her hair, and then did a double-take at the other person in the room.

She had paid a premium for the use of one of the inn's private rooms, giving the innkeeper a vague explanation about needing a quiet space to prepare for her performances. Further incentive for a lack of questions had been paid, possibly overpaid. This had thus far failed to make a dent in Minerva's travel funds; sleepy little villages in the English countryside hardly saw the sort of money that regularly exchanged hands with nary a glance in the metropolises.

The woman casually leafing through the large leatherbound tome Minerva had left on the desk was surely no servant. A surreptitious glance at the strongbox indicated no sign of the lock being forced; whatever the woman was here for, money was not on the list. And the woman herself seemed entirely unsurprised to see Minerva, carefully closing the book and replacing it on the desk.

"Miss Minerva Margatroid?"

"I'm afraid you have the advantage of me, madam," Minerva said, leaving out the obvious followup of "and who the hell are you?" The woman was attired almost garishly, in a long pink and purple dress with strange designs on the front. Her long blonde hair was coiled up inside her light pink bonnet, decorated with a thin red ribbon. A pink lace parasol hung from one arm, while the other held a folded-up paper fan. If Minerva had to guess, she would have assumed a strong Oriental influence, mixed liberally with Continental styles.

"Of course. It took me a great deal of trouble to discover your present whereabouts, but I spared no expense. And surely you agree that a small country fair like this one is hardly the best stage for one of the greatest magicians of the world?"

Minerva's attention snapped back to the present. "I don't know what you're talking about, I'm sure," she said coldly. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave my room. And may I add, madam, that it is unworthy for any lady of breeding to rifle through another's belongings and literature like some common thief."

Violet's smile remained insolently in place, as did her person. "Pray do not be too hasty in dismissing my offer," she said, as though reading off a mental script. "I am no charlatan or trickster, and I assure you that my interest in your particular skills is wholly sincere. I have no small claim as a practitioner of the art myself, but the problem set before me is insurmountable, save by-"
Minerva silently opened the door, and stood by it, waiting.

Violet lowered her eyelids. "Very well, then. As a show of my goodwill, I shall depart for now."
She reached into... Minerva tried not to let her confusion show, maintaining her haughtily indignant facade for the sake of getting this intruder out of her room, but it had to be some hidden pocket in her dress somewhere, and Minerva was simply too tired to have caught the sleight of hand... and laid a piece of paper onto the desk, beside the book. "I shall be in the village for the next few days. It's a lovely place, isn't it? Quiet and idyllic. Much better than the hustle and bustle of London, where the air is simply intolerable..." Still reciting off that internal script, Violet descended the stairs down to the first floor of the inn, and out of sight.

Minerva shut the door once more, and quickly strode over to the desk. She flipped through the book, scanning the handwritten pages, searching for any evidence of tampering. The book was her life's work, and she had been careful not to let anyone else handle it, save those she trusted implicitly, and that Violet Hearn person was certainly not in that class of acquaintance. Luckily, Minerva had left out certain key elements to the descriptions in the book, more out of magical prudence than anything else, but it did have the added benefit of preventing any casual plagiarist from making use of the techniques within...

Everything looked fine. No obvious signs of additions or subtractions to the contents of the book, at least.

Almost as an afterthought, Minerva picked up the piece of paper Violet had left behind. Expecting nothing more than an address to contact, or perhaps some overwrought drivel intended to convince her of whatever Violet had been selling, Minerva glanced briefly at it as she began to crumple the paper.

She stopped, eyes wide. Smoothing the paper back out, she leafed through the book, stopping at a certain design. She compared it to the sketch on the piece of paper, her finger tracing over the lines, lips moving silently in incantation...

The sound of knocking at her door startled Minerva out of her studies. It turned out to be the innkeeper, who had the uncertain expression of someone not quite believing their latest stroke of good fortune, and expecting the other shoe to drop at any moment.

"Begging your pardon, Mistress Margatroid, but I'd just like to thank you for your kindness, and, uh, we'll do our best to make ourselves worthy of your generosity. The missus is cooking up a feast right now, but she'd like to know if you'd be joining everyone for supper?"

Head still full of thaumaturgical theory, Minerva could only gape at him. "I'm sorry?"

The innkeeper writhed. "Only you've been having your meals in your room, which is your right, I'd never be saying otherwise, but your friend, uh, Mistress Hearn, said that you wanted to treat all the guests at our humble village fair to the best supper they've ever had, and she's already given us the payment, so we were wondering if we could show our appreciation. Our Shawn's been watching your puppet-show every day, and skipping his chores, but I'll not begrudge him that now, begging your pardon, mistress."

Minerva resisted the urge to slam the door in the poor innkeeper's face and get back to her work. She put on her most dazzling stage smile instead, and nodded. "I would certainly be happy to join everyone else tonight," she said, while wondering whether she actually meant it. "Please do inform me when supper is ready. Until then, Goodman, I need to prepare for... tomorrow's performance, and I'd appreciate it if I were not to be disturbed."
After the innkeeper fled in relief, Minerva forced herself to pace the small room for a few circuits, stopping midway to toss the heavier parts of her performance regalia onto the bed. Once she felt she had sufficiently calmed down, she went to the pile of luggage in the corner, and rooted around until she found a thick packet of papers. Emptying it out onto the desk, she spread out her preliminary notes, with the sketch Violet had left behind on top, and went to work.

The next day, after the show in the morning, Minerva found Violet admiring, with all apparent enthusiasm, the best specimens of produce the local farms had set out proudly on display. The farmhand with the evilly gap-toothed grin manning the stall seemed oblivious to Violet's strange fashion; perhaps he believed all city folk dressed like that.

"It seems you've done me something of a favour, Miss Hearn," Minerva said conversationally.

Violet turned, the lower half of her face hidden behind her paper fan, but the smile of delight was obvious in her eyes. "Just a token of my sincerity," she said. "I enjoyed your little magic show, by the way."

Minerva had not seen Violet in the crowd, and she had been looking. "Thank you. I believe you have something you wish to discuss?"

The two women strolled in what seemed like a randomly-picked direction that nevertheless brought them away from the bustle of the rest of the festival. "Power is the problem," Violet mused, apropos of nothing. "Power enough to maintain the flow."

"So I've discovered," Minerva said. "The note you left me helped me realize what I was missing from that design. And what I was missing is not something that can be solved by a few extra drawings."

"You've been quite efficient in your designs," Violet said equably. "In fact, I don't think anyone else's style can make use of as little power as yours can, to put out a much greater effect."

"Miss Hearn, I would suggest that we not waste any more time on small talk. What do you want?"

Violet snapped her paper fan shut. "As I've mentioned yesterday, I wish to make use of your talents, Miss Margatroid. Your abilities are wonderfully suited for the great task set before us, particularly since power is very much wanting."

They had stopped in the middle of a copse of trees; Minerva's long blue stage dress snagged on the low branches and thorns, but Violet's far more complex outfit appeared to flow easily through the tangles.

"If you're looking for efficiency," Minerva said, nettled, "Reed is in London."

"Reed has already left for the Orient," Violet countered. "Hong Kong, if I'm not mistaken. He is not available. You, on the other hand..."

"... have yet to hear anything which concerns me. I am waiting, Miss Hearn."

Violet lowered her gaze, conceding the point. "Very well. To summarize, I require assistance in saving humans from monsters."

Silence descended, broken only by the distant sounds of revelry in the village.

"If you hadn't already proven yourself with your grasp of the theory of magic," Minerva said
"I'd be walking back to the village right now. I recommend that you do not over-extend your credit, Miss Hearn."

"My apologies. I thought that might have gotten your attention. I would rather say... I know of a way to save a certain beleaguered group of humans from the monsters hunting them. Perhaps 'monsters' is not quite the right word... they bear more in common with your fae, from the old tales." Violet shifted her parasol to her other hand. "I haven't seen many of them around in my time here, I should add."

Minerva waved a hand vaguely. "The... power is receding. The magic is not as strong as it used to be. I still understand the theory, but unless I am provided with an alternate source..."

"Oh, I don't mean here in England, Miss Margatroid. The work here has already been done. Begun in Wiltshire in times long past, and there may be a little tremor somewhere around Essex soon... the basic principle is the same. Your churches may be many things, but when they are of a mind, they can be... efficient." Violet sighed. "The issue is, and has always been, power and control. I need your magic, Miss Margatroid. Not your puppet-shows in little country villages, that would think nothing of holding their own witch trials if they knew what you are truly capable of."

"They are not so superstitious," Minerva protested, even as uncertainty coloured her words.

"Oh, no doubt. This is, after all, the age of enlightenment, and no longer do housewives have to put milk out for the piskies, or children walk home with salt in one pocket and bread in the other. We dare go a-hunting, for there is no more fear of little men. Wouldn't you want the same for those still threatened by their... superstitions?"

Minerva looked away, towards the village.

"You needn't make your decision immediately, of course." Violet extracted a large package from... somewhere... and handed it to Minerva. Inside were travel documents, banknotes in various denominations and currencies, and a few books. "Provided you do intend to aid me, you will find the necessary travel arrangements in that package, and more than enough petty cash for the majority of any foreseeable needs. The ship leaves Southampton at the end of next month, so you have until then to decide."

"Ship?" Minerva gently replaced the items back into the package. "Where is this... monster infestation?"

"Oh? I must have forgotten to mention it; my apologies. The community of humans you will have to save is in a rural area of Japan."

"Japan?!"

"Just so," Violet said calmly. "I would advise you to make your arrangements quickly, Miss Margatroid. If, of course, you agree to my proposal; otherwise, you may keep the money and items in that package as a souvenir." The fan hid Violet's mouth. "Of what may have been."

"You expect me to venture halfway across the globe to a land I have never seen, in a language I do not speak, and solve your little problem?"

"You will not be alone," Violet said, turning away. "Someone will be waiting for you at Edo... I beg your pardon, I meant Tokyo. From there... we shall see. The decision, Miss Margatroid, is yours and yours alone." Stepping easily and lightly, Violet started making her way back to the village.
The year was 1884, under the reign of Queen Victoria. The smell of spring filled the country air. Minerva closed her eyes, listening to the distant sounds of the village fair and festival, listening to the voices raised in celebration and haggling, listening to the streams and brooks flowing towards the river, listening to the calls of the creatures of the forest welcoming the end of winter.

"I need to get out of here," she muttered.

Chapter End Notes

This was all written on a whim, after reading through Neal Stephenson's *Baroque Cycle* and not being able to get the stupendously verbose style out of my head.

**Intentional Reference Count:**

The months travelling from England to Japan passed relatively uneventfully, allowing Minerva more than enough time to indulge in her fondness for trashy literature no well-bred young woman would admit to reading. Minerva might have been effectively barred from the family fortune and titles, but her connections with the various mystical circles and clubs hidden among the secret societies of the world allowed her to live comfortably well-off. This irregular income was frequently supplemented by impressionable new members with more disposable wealth than talent, awed by her reputation and what few conjurations she could still manage in a world gradually losing its magic.

Violet had been right; Minerva had a knack for efficient power usage in her spells. It certainly helped that her spell architecture allowed for some especially flashy displays, useful for showing off to anyone requiring proof of ability.

From Southampton, she took a ship to Suez, and from there to Bombay. Given a choice of emulating Phileas Fogg's railway trip across India to Calcutta, Minerva instead chose more sea travel, and by the time the ship sailed down the Straits of Malacca into Singapore, Minerva had managed to become passably fluent in Japanese, thanks to the textbooks enclosed within Violet's package. The real test would come when she finally arrived in Japan, but Minerva had always been confident in her ability to pick up new languages easily. Practicing conversation with the puppets she had brought with her helped significantly; if any of the crew found it strange that their mysterious English passenger spent most of her time in her cabin talking to herself in foreign tongues, they gave no sign.

Minerva's luggage had been kept intentionally light, compared to most of her travels: the bulk of it was her performing equipment, with her stage costume and a few essential puppet dolls. A repair kit had been packed in as part of the set, and Minerva had bought some more materials for puppet-making along the journey, which she had resorted to when she quickly finished her limited collection of books.

And, of course, she spent the calmer parts of the voyage working on her book. Her collection of notes expanded tremendously, and Minerva had taken to reusing the pieces of paper in order to save space in her luggage. It wasn't as though anyone else would read them, anyway; the final, finished product went into the book. Minerva had not named it yet; "Margatroid's Guide To Magic And Magical Theory" seemed pretentious, especially since the book would essentially be self-published. Circulation would be limited, at best, among the few trusted and true practitioners of the magical arts Minerva knew personally.

It was of little consequence. A suitable title would probably come to her in time.

By her reckoning, it was probably around summer when she left Singapore, although being in the tropics made it intolerable both indoors and out. Minerva spent most of her time out on the deck instead of her cabin, practicing her puppetry, and regularly gaining an appreciative audience.

Hong Kong saw her sell off most of the books she had finished reading, in exchange for more stationery for her research and note-taking. Shanghai was spent ashore, under the hospitality of an American teacher living in the International Settlement, who happened to be a secret dabbler in the arcane arts. Minerva found him enjoyable company, if limited in skill, and she lingered perhaps too
long in his home.

"Japan?" he said incredulously when she told him of her journey. "Now why would you ever want to go there? Some job you need to take care of?"

"In a manner of speaking," Minerva replied cautiously.

The teacher shook his head. "You don't want to go to Japan," he said. "They don't know how to treat people right. The whole mess with what's his name, Richardson... one of yours, wasn't he? Bad business all around." He took a sip of lemonade. "Still, it's been twenty years. One would hope they've learned a thing or two since then."

It was on the final leg of the journey that the trouble happened.

The first sign Minerva had of anything amiss was the heightened concern of the crew, which had spread to the other passengers. Theories and wild guesses on the nature of the unease were the topic of conversations during mealtimes.

"It can't be anything dangerous," one of the passengers said. Minerva suspected him of being an officer somewhere, educated in Britain, but showing the faintest hint of something else in his accent. Prussian, Minerva decided. Here on holiday, or perhaps an opportunity to see the world as part of his military education. "They'd be panicking a lot more if it were."

"You don't think we are going to sink, are we?" asked a lady in hushed tones. Minerva didn't like her. She was almost flamboyantly French, travelling with her husband, who had taken to his cabin and stayed there, claiming seasickness. Minerva entertained the brief notion that they were actually spies, acting like the giddy couple to throw off suspicion. It would certainly have made them more tolerable.

"Of course not. That'd be happening a damned sight faster than whatever's gotten them spooked." Big, bluff, American businessman; Minerva guessed Texan. His purpose in going to Japan was clear enough, at least.

"Perhaps another incident regarding foreign ships in Japanese waters?" Minerva suggested. "The crew could have heard something on the radio that hadn't made it on the regular news yet."

The others at the table gave this due consideration.

"Has anyone asked the captain?" the lady said archly.

"Tried," the businessman replied promptly. "He just gave some assurances that it's nothing to be concerned about. I don't know about you, but that sort of thing just makes me even more nervous."

"I did see the crew counting heads yesterday," the officer mused. "And the cook seemed terribly distraught. Maybe we've got a stowaway."

"A stowaway!" The lady could have a respectable career in theatre, Minerva decided, as long as she took the roles involving screeching, sighing, and fainting dead away in shock. "Are we in danger? Could this stowaway be violent?"

"I am certain violence will not come to pass," the officer said, raising an exasperated eyebrow at Minerva. "We'll be arriving at Yokohama the day after tomorrow, in any case. The situation will likely be resolved by then."
In fact, it was mostly resolved just before dinner the next day.

Minerva heard the shouting first, along with the unmistakeable voices of her fellow passengers: the businessman attempting to take charge by means of raising his voice in successive tiers, and the lady's melodramatic wailing, accompanied by an unfamiliar voice Minerva took to be her husband barking in rapidfire French.

She laid down the stage costume she had been modifying, put her sewing kit back into the satchel, and crossed over to the door, just in time to hear a curious scratching noise from the lock. A few seconds later, there was a spanging noise as the lock was defeated, and the door opened to admit a small ragged blur.

Clearly the enterprising lockpicker had not expected to end up where she did, freezing in shock upon seeing the room occupied. Minerva took in a few details as she quickly slammed the door back shut, preventing escape: the child looked barely eight, although Minerva could have guessed a stunted ten. Blonde hair, as dirty as the rest of her, and dressed in whatever scraps of clothing she had been able to scavenge, in true street urchin style.

And as Minerva's hand ran over the lock, she felt the faintest traces of...

Someone else was rapping on the door, conveying a precise sense of polite urgency. Acting on impulse, Minerva quickly bundled the surprised stowaway into a corner, placed a finger on her lips to suppress the alarmed squeak, and tossed the voluminous costume across the child.

"Madam? Are you all right?"

The officer stood neatly outside Minerva's cabin at parade attention. Minerva resisted the urge to see if the stowaway had followed her instructions to hide. "I heard a commotion outside," she said. "What is this fuss about? Is something the matter?"

"We've cornered the stowaway to this area of the ship." The officer hesitated. "Or, I should say, the crew claims to have cornered the stowaway to this area of the ship. I have yet to see any sign of the culprit myself. Have you?"

Minerva held his gaze steadily. "I haven't seen anything out of the ordinary, I'm afraid."

The officer's eyes flickered to the side, coinciding with a faint rustle of fabric from somewhere behind Minerva. She shifted position, trying to block his view of the cabin interior.

A shadow of a frown crossed the officer's face. "Are you certain you haven't seen anything, madam? The... little rascal might be more mischievous than expected."

Little rascal, Minerva noted. And he claimed he hadn't seen the stowaway before. "I am. Will that be all?"

"I... suppose so." The officer bowed. "My apologies for disturbing you, madam. Oh, there is one more thing." This time, the glance towards the cabin interior had been deliberate. "Will you be joining us at the table tonight, madam?"

"Actually, I think I'll be having my meals in my room from now on," Minerva said. "All this excitement. It's a little trying on the nerves. Speaking of which, I'm surprised our French friend is up and about."

"Yes," the officer agreed, the corner of his lips quirking up. "There is more to him that it seems. There is, perhaps, more to everyone than it seems. I shall inform the others. Good day, madam."
He clicked his heels together.

Minerva closed the door with a sigh of relief. The lock worked perfectly, as though it had never been picked.

The little girl stood in the corner where she had hidden, clutching the dress in her hands. She started in surprise when Minerva caught her staring, and jerked her gaze away.

"It's all right now," Minerva said. She held out a hand, not quite sure of how to deal with small children in a manner that did not involve a puppet show.

After a brief hesitation, the child took her hand, and Minerva felt the tingle of power once again.

"You have a strong talent," she said, kneeling down to brush the girl's hair away from her eyes. "But I'm not sure how you came by it. Raw talent, perhaps, untrained... but the way you opened the lock so quickly means you've done this sort of trick before. Or are you just naturally nimble?" She chuckled, aware of the edge of desperation in that sound. "Maybe I should check my belongings to make sure they're all still there."

The girl stared at her.

"Can you understand me?"

A prompt nod.

"Can you speak? Just say something. Anything at all."

The girl's stare grew quizzical, but she remained silent.

"But you made a noise just now, so you're not completely dumb. Unless it's some form of aphasia." Minerva sighed. "Where did you come from, child? What are you doing on this ship? And am I making a mistake by taking you in?" She stood, the girl's hand still in hers. "Let's get you cleaned up first. I'm afraid the plumbing on this ship is a little basic, but running water is all we need."

Further mysteries were soon revealed: despite the girl's condition on first sight, she did not show any signs of protracted malnutrition. And what dirt she had seemed more consistent with hiding away in the nooks and crannies of a steamship than a lifetime on the run.

The girl did not resist Minerva's ministrations, apparently trusting her implicitly for some reason. There was a brief repeat of the hastily-improvised concealment when a crewmate delivered Minerva's meal, but there were no additional incidents.

"What shall I do with you?" Minerva wondered, as she watched the girl wolf down the meal. Having no clothes in the child's size, Minerva had dressed her in a spare blouse and a shawl for now. "I don't suppose you have any family?"

The girl glanced up, and shook her head once, before returning to her food.

"Poor thing. I can't turn you over to the captain, obviously. And someone with your power is... well, I'd rather not leave you with whatever authorities there are in Japan. I doubt they care much for abandoned foreign children. But I can't send you anywhere else alone, and I don't have enough money on hand for a return trip to England like this... what's your name, by the way?"

The query was ignored in favour of the food. The girl had cleaned up most of the meal, and was licking her fingers clean.
"Stop that. I see table manners is something else I'll have to teach you." Minerva reached out with the napkin to wipe the girl's mouth. "My name is Minerva Margatroid. You may call me Miss Margatroid, or Miss, or... or anything at all, come to think of it. As long as you call me something, rather than remain as speechless as you are."

The girl stared uncomprehendingly.

Struck by inspiration, Minerva dragged her luggage over to herself. "Look, over here." She pointed at the embossed nameplate. "Minerva Margatroid. Min-er-va, Mar-ga-troid. Oh, never mind. I don't even know if-"

The girl extended a finger, running it over the letters. "Mah, Margah. Mah gah tuh-roid." Her voice was quiet and light. "Margatroid."

Minerva could not resist the smile that spread across her face. "So you can read. And speak." Without thinking, she brought the girl in for a hug. "My dear little child."

The girl made a few muffled noises of surprise at this sudden show of affection, before yawning widely. She was missing a few teeth, Minerva noticed; the perils of growing up.

"Oh, that's right. You must be tired, after today." Running around the ship, hiding from the crew and passengers, stealing what food she could, and finally ending up in the wrong room... or maybe it was the right room after all.

After she tucked the girl into bed, Minerva retrieved her sewing kit, and checked the oil lamp in the cabin. The extra light did not seem to bother the sleeping child, but Minerva was not looking forward to having to work with needle and thread in these conditions. In addition, she was running out of spare clothes; she would have to visit a dressmaker when she arrived in Japan, for yet another drain on her dwindling funds.

But that was only a temporary situation. She'd finish what Violet Hearn had brought her to Japan to do, and improve her solvency at the nearest banking institution affiliated with the Crown. The sun never set on the Empire, after all; she'd find her way back to England somehow, her new ward in tow. Maybe she could prevail on her contacts among the magical community for advice, and hand the child over to someone she trusted, leaving the girl's instruction and protection in far more capable hands.

Or...

No, it was still too soon to think about that, and there were too many obstacles to overcome. And yet, Minerva glanced at her unfinished book of magic, the idea taking root with insidious temptation. After all, it would not take all that long to rewrite some of the more complex portions with an apprentice in mind.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from *Sylvie and Bruno*.

Had to add in the bit about Singapore, for general patriotic purposes.

I have no excuse for Minerva's sudden fluency in Japanese, other than author fiat and
convenience. I feel really bad about that, but I can't think of any useful and reasonable alternative.

Intentional Reference Count:

*Around the World in 80 Days*, the Kanagawa Incident
Minerva's descent from the steamship in full performance costume had captured the attention of a sizeable number of bystanders. In deference to not making more of a scene than was unavoidable, she had left off the hat.

The officer was the first to recover. "Madam, had I known you possessed such a magnificent bearing and regal dress, I would have been more persistent in requesting your presence at our dinners."

Minerva's smile was worthy of the stage. "Thank you, kind sir. Alas, my choice of dress today is the result of necessity rather than choice; due to certain conditions, I did not have anything more suitable to wear on hand."

To his credit, the officer kept his gaze steadily forward. "If I may escort you, madam? The footing around here may be treacherous. Please, I insist."

He was the perfect gentleman, patiently taking Minerva's pace, until they were both safely on the soil of Yokohama. Minerva returned his bow with a nod of thanks; curtseying was out of the question.

The businessman wore a wide grin of appreciation. "Theatre, eh? Wish I could see it. Are you performing anywhere around here?"

Minerva affected an expression of regret. "I'm afraid I have arrangements elsewhere. Your interest in the performing arts is noted and appreciated, however."

Thankfully, the French couple were nowhere to be seen. Minerva kept her smile through the rest of the polite pleasantries, before excusing herself and gliding slowly towards the closest secluded area, near some crates.

"You can come out now," she murmured.

The little girl had a few false starts, before she managed to make her way out of the large billowing skirts of Minerva's costume. She blinked in the sunlight, gawking at the scenery.

Minerva looked critically at the simple improvised dress the girl wore. "You'll need something more professional made," she said. "Or at least more material to work with. Still, I hardly think you'll attract too much attention." On a whim, she undid the ribbon at her neck, and removed her capelet, placing it around the girl's shoulders instead. "There. Now you look a little more presentable."

The first order of business was to find a hotel to stay in for a few days, while she reoriented herself. The stage costume was also not quite suited for this subtropical climate, and Minerva was looking forward to changing into something more practical at the nearest reputable-looking hotel. This was easy enough to achieve, although the conspiracy to keep Minerva in Japan gained a new wrinkle.

"We speak English, Dutch, and, uh, doitsu... German? German!" the clerk behind the reception counter said proudly, in thickly accented English. He was a fairly young man, clearly enthusiastic about his job, but old enough to have an air of competent experience. He had goggled at Minerva's
costume for a moment, before falling back on cheerful professionalism. "May we have your name, please?"

"Minerva Margatroid, and ward." At the clerk's desperately blank look, Minerva appropriated a nearby pad of telegram notepaper, and printed out her name in neat block letters.

"Minerva Margatroid..." the clerk read slowly. "Ah! Miss Margatroid! We have been expecting you."

"Oh?"

"Yes, a Miss Violet Hearn has paid for your accommodations for... five days." The clerk consulted a memo written in Japanese. "With a provision for newspapers, meals, and telegraph services. We have a wide variety of amenities available for the discerning traveller! Please feel free to make use of our services," The clerk began to bow, but hesitated midway. "Ah... is this your first time in Yokohama, Miss Margatroid?"

Minerva kept a firm grip on the little girl's hand, to prevent her from wandering off in boredom. "It is."

"Then please take note of the, um... advisability of staying within the Kannai," the clerk said seriously. "It will not be good if you venture too far without an escort, especially for a woman."

"Kannai?"

"Yes, Kannai."

After she had settled into her room, Minerva returned to the hotel lobby to visit the money-changer, where she converted her remaining currency to the silver-backed yen. The bewildering array of different banknotes made Minerva suspect that she had been cheated outrageously, somehow, but there was no helping it; at least the coinage seemed sound. She left the little girl in the hotel room, with strict instructions to stay there until Minerva returned. The little girl seemed discontent with this arrangement, until Minerva unpacked a few of her puppets for the girl to play with.

Minerva's next purchases were a guidebook to the local area, written specifically for the international community in Japan, as well as a pocket dictionary.

The mysterious Kannai turned out to be the unofficial name of the foreign settlement area of Yokohama, surrounded by a system of canals and waterways that Minerva whimsically interpreted as a moat for a besieged castle. Samurai were not allowed into the area, and foreigners were usually not allowed outside, in order to prevent any further unfortunate misunderstandings that might result in messy deaths and retaliatory naval bombardments. Kannai was, literally, inside the barrier, keeping the foreigners in, and the rest of Japan out.

It was in a thoughtful mood that Minerva returned to her hotel room, laden with the results from her shopping trip into the city. The little girl was seated on the floor, playing with the puppets with far more dexterity and skill than Minerva had ever possessed, making little murmurs of delight as she acted out scenes from the fantasy story in her mind.

"You're full of surprises, aren't you?" Minerva said cheerfully, as she dumped the armload onto her bed. The girl glanced up at Minerva's arrival, before focusing her interest back on the puppets. "Do come here, when you have a moment."

With obvious reluctance, the girl abandoned the puppets to stand dutifully in front of Minerva. In
deference to the girl's impatient fidgeting, Minerva made her measurements as quickly as she could, jotting down notes as she read off the measuring tape. The girl scampered back to the puppets after she was done, to resume the interrupted performance.

The first dress was finished by that evening, since Minerva had the advantage of being able to alter one of her existing blouses for the base white top, adding a skirt and suspenders in blue. A bow at the neck, and a ribbon in her hair, and the little girl looked as perfect an English child as could be. This, Minerva decided, could do for now; a spare set of the same was next, and the more complex designs could be completed at leisure. A pinafore, possibly, or a longer blue dress with a white capelet, as an assistant during Minerva's shows. A hint of red in the ribbon... her shoes would have to be changed often, of course, since she was a growing girl...

A noise of frustration, as the strings of the puppets were tangled up. Minerva hurried over to the girl's side to help. "It's all right, child. These things happen, no matter how careful you are. There's a better way to do it, but..."

But what? If Minerva was going to take care of the girl, shouldn't she start her instruction as soon as she was able?

"Leave that be for now, dear. I have something to show you." It was nothing more than a parlour trick, in Minerva's opinion, but it helped her with her concentration and control. The little doll, worn with age but lovingly kept with care, danced a simple waltz across the bed, as the child's eyes widened in astonishment. "There are still strings controlling the doll, but you can't see them. They're magic strings, and they won't get tangled. It's just one of the things magic can do, if you spend the time to learn. Would you like to?"

Wordlessly, the child nodded.

Minerva released control of the doll, which flopped lifelessly onto the bed. She put her hands on the girl's shoulders, looking her in the eye. "Now, I want you to promise me something, if you want me to teach you. First of all, I want you to do exactly as I tell you. No arguments, no disobedience, and especially no experimenting on your own. The road to magic is not a quick or easy one, and with your talent, the temptations will be that much stronger. I need you to trust me to know what's best, even if you don't agree. Is that clear?"

The girl's face grew solemn, as she considered this. Minerva was fairly certain that most eight-year olds would not have the emotional maturity to fully grasp the implications behind the terms of apprenticeship, which made the girl's thoughtfulness both heartening and peculiar. Another mystery to add to the growing pool.

After a long moment, the girl nodded firmly.

"Good. The next lesson... can wait until tomorrow." Minerva watched the girl carefully, and was faintly amused to see the girl try to suppress her clear disappointment. Time would tell whether the girl would be able to keep that promise in mind, but it was a good start. "For now, shall we have some supper?"

On the fourth day, they had a visitor.

Minerva had spent her time divided between teaching the girl the basics of magical theory, continuing her work on her book, and trying to arrange train tickets to Tokyo, in that order of success. The girl had picked up certain aspects gratifyingly swiftly, particularly those involving actual practical uses of arcanology. Pure theory, however, visibly bored her, and while Minerva
had been able to coax the girl to recite her lessons aloud, these quickly became exercises in frustration for both teacher and student.

Someone had taught the girl how to read and write in English before, as well as simple arithmetic. Other languages included a rudimentary level of French, German, one of the non-Mandarin Chinese dialects, and Latin; Minerva suspected the first two to be a clue to her past, while the Chinese could have been picked up when the girl was in Shanghai. She seemed to have a hint of something Continental in her speech, although by now it had been corrupted by Minerva's essential Englishness. History and geography were completely unfamiliar to the girl, and Minerva abandoned them for much later, after she had explored the depths of the girl's ignorance. Geometry came naturally, and provided the bulk of their non-magical lessons.

In contrast, all attempts at booking passage to Tokyo were met with bureaucratic incomprehension, and probably a fair amount of linguistic incomprehension as well. Minerva was confident in her Japanese by now, which made the puzzled stares of officials even more infuriating. She had to make a conscious effort not to let her annoyance spill over into her lessons, and the girl bore the occasional lapse with admirable stoicism.

The concierge's message arrived in the middle of a difficult lesson on Latin. Minerva suspected the grammar to be something they would have to work on for a very long time, but due to many mystical tomes being written in that language after the influence of the Church, knowledge of Archaic and Classical Latin was indispensible. With ill-disguised relief, Minerva received the message informing her that a certain Japanese lady was waiting for her at the lobby. Judging from the concierge's reaction, this Japanese lady must be from a noble house, or whatever the local equivalent was.

As Minerva prepared to leave, however, the girl clutched at her skirt, looking questioningly at her.

"Oh, very well," Minerva decided. "It's not as if we're making much progress here."

The woman in the lobby was barely out of her teens, but held herself with a bearing that made her seem far older. She wore a light pink kimono with blue and purple butterfly patterns, and held a bamboo umbrella in one hand. A floral hair accessory decorated her black hair, trimmed in a bob cut, and complementing her pale, almost doll-like complexion.

She rose as Minerva approached, and bowed deeply. The sight of the little girl produced a noticeable double-take.

"Good afternoon," Minerva said politely in Japanese. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

The visitor looked curiously at Minerva. "Where did you learn your Japanese?" she asked, in near-flawless English. Her voice was soft, but had a quality that would have made it clearly audible in any circumstance. This was a lady who was used to having her orders obeyed, and thus had no need to raise her voice.

"I've taught myself," Minerva said, taken aback by the visitor's forwardness. From what she knew of Japanese culture, this was uncommonly bold.

"I see. You sound like a textbook." The visitor smiled quickly, presumably to cover up her lapse in manners; Minerva was not entirely certain this contrition was genuine. "I am Hieda no Aya, of the Hieda family. We have been... informed of your arrival, Miss Margatroid."

Minerva could sense the pattern as easily as anyone else. "By a certain Violet Hearn?"
Aya blinked in puzzlement. Had that been a faulty guess? "No, I was told by... well, it does not matter, but I certainly suspect the involvement of youkai." The word was unfamiliar to Minerva, and Aya must have caught the confusion on her face. "The term 'youkai' is like your English... demon, or spirit, or monster. And yet not always evil, or associated with theological... never mind. It would take too much time to explain here."

Monsters, Minerva remembered. Saving humans from monsters... "And? What brings you here, Miss... Hieda? Or is it Miss Aya?"

"Just Aya is fine," Aya said. Minerva tried not to imagine an implied "for you stupid and ill-mannered foreigners". "I came as soon as I heard you had arrived in Japan. Luckily, I was on business in Tokyo, and it did not take me long. If it would be all right, I would like to offer myself as a guide and escort to our destination. I understand you have been encountering difficulties in securing transportation outside Yokohama?"

Whoever this Hieda no Aya was, her information network was extensive. "I assume you will be able to assist me in that regard?"

"Undoubtedly. You must understand that foreign elements are treated with... suspicion, here in Japan. No, Miss Margatroid, I said you must understand, and what you have come across so far is nothing compared to what you have yet to see. Hopefully my presence, and the name of my family, will be able to bypass most of that." Aya shook her head. "We are not going to Tokyo. It is not necessary at this stage, as we can travel directly to our destination."

Minerva made a noncommittal grunt. "How long will that take?"

"Two to three days by rail, depending on our luck. From there, another three days in a carriage."

Aya looked askance at the little girl hiding behind Minerva's skirt. "I confess I did not expect a child to be present."

Minerva moved protectively to shield the girl. "She won't be any trouble, I assure you. And I'm afraid that if I am to go, she is to accompany me. That is not a negotiable condition, Miss Aya. She is my ward."

Aya inclined her head. "Very well. We shall begin our departure at dawn tomorrow, Miss Margatroid. I will return then. The porters will handle any luggage, for you and your... ward."

"We'll be expecting you." A thought struck Minerva. "One more thing, if I may. Where exactly is this place that is overrun by monsters... by youkai?"

Aya started to give a name, but reconsidered. "The official name given by the government will not be of much help, I'm afraid; this era has not yet settled, politically. It is a valley, surrounded by mountains and forests, haunted by myths and illusions. The locals call it Gensokyo."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from *Sylvie and Bruno*. Information about Yokohama picked entirely from the Wikipedia article.

No inexplicable random references this time. It's a miracle!
Aya broached the subject as soon as they were settled comfortably on the train. "Why does the child not have a name?"

The child in question glanced warily at Aya, apparently mistrustful of the disapproving gaze Aya had bestowed on her. She had bounded to their seats in the train carriage with excited glee, as young children often did when on a trip with their family. Minerva wondered if their little party seemed like a peculiar example of a family; the girl looked nothing like Minerva, and Aya was clearly of a different race, so there were undoubtedly all sorts of speculations and theories running busily through the minds of everyone they passed.

Besides, Minerva flattered herself into thinking that she surely did not look so old to have a child of that age, even if her actual age did make it quite possible. A governess, then, bringing the daughter of a well-to-do family on a tour of the exotic East. Circumstances had removed the parents from the immediate picture, to return only when the narrative deemed it convenient, but an elegant Japanese lady friend had volunteered to play the tour guide...

"I hadn't really thought about the matter," Minerva admitted. "She seems to respond well enough when I call her, but you are correct. I haven't been able to decide on a name that we can all agree on, however... what do you think, dear?"

The girl resumed her sightseeing of the scenery outside the train window.

Minerva gave Aya a helpless shrug, which Aya received without comment or reaction. Minerva returned to the books and papers spread over her lap, managing to find the map she sought after a few moments.

The train journey would lead them through a roundabout route to their next transit point, where vigorous activity behind the stage curtain organized by the Hieda family and retainers would provide them with horses, carriage, and a driver to lead them. From consultations between the maps and the guidebook, the length of the journey to Gensokyo was not so much due to distance as poor travelling conditions. Their destination was not even listed, presumably because any foreigner who had an interest in the area must have had a very good reason to go there, and thus already provided themselves with knowledge, native guides, and more than a few well-maintained firearms.

Minerva suppressed the impulse to scrawl in "Here Be Dragons" on the map. There was a non-trivial possibility that this may very well be the case.

"What book is that?" Aya asked curiously. Minerva followed her gaze to the hardbound book which had fallen unheeded by her side, when she had upended the satchel it had been in for the contents, instead of rummaging fruitlessly in the dark.

"Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," she replied, picking up the book and holding it out for Aya's inspection. "With the Tenniel illustrations. It's a little childish of me, I suppose, but it has a certain charm, even at my age."

Aya's brow furrowed, as she tried to read the English text."... 'and what is the use of a book,
thought Alice, without pictures or conversations?" She looked up in surprise at a movement; the girl had plopped back into her seat, and was leaning forward intently. "What is it?"

"She may be interested in the book," Minerva guessed. "Haven't you read it before, dear, when you looked through my luggage? No, it looks like you haven't..."

Aya relinquished the book to the girl with a thoughtful expression. "What sort of place is this Wonderland?"

"A nonsensical one," Minerva replied promptly. "Which was the point of the story, all told. A place where common sense does not apply, and the fantastic is perfectly normal. Strange beings and people, all with their own quirks and tales, holding up a mirror to the nonsense of our own world."

"In other words, a land of fantasy," Aya said.

"That's correct."

"Like the place we are going to."

Minerva stopped short. "I... had not thought about it that way. But no, none of the people of Wonderland Alice meets are monsters. Peculiar, certainly, but apart from a few, they are largely benign. From what you've told me, I hardly think this Gensokyo is some sort of Wonderland."

"More like an outskirt of a Christian Hell."

Aya's faint smile was not quite polite enough to hide her smug satisfaction at a conversational point scored. "They may have more in common than it seems, Miss Margatroid. Especially when we have a little girl stumbling into-"

The girl looked up from her book. "Alice," she said.

Minerva looked at her, startled. "What did you say, dear?"

"Alice," the girl repeated firmly. From her progress through the book on her lap, she was having some difficulty with the words, but she was dutifully struggling ahead anyway.

"She seems to like the name," Aya said, amused.

The girl nodded eagerly, but hesitated, looking uncertainly at Minerva.

Minerva smiled. "If that's what you wish, then I certainly have no objections. You have my blessings in your choice of name, my little Alice."

Christened with her new moniker, the girl grinned widely as she swung her legs from her seat. Returning to the book, however, her cheer faded in the face of the effort expended in trying to read the book, her mouth silently forming the shapes of the words as her finger slowly traced across the page.

Minerva reached over to pull the child into her arms. "Allow me." Alice made a small sound of surprise, but did not resist, settling easily onto Minerva's lap. "Where have you gotten to... all right. 'In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again...'"

The carriage that would take them to Gensokyo seemed to have been bought second-hand, and
taken out of deep storage only very recently. It appeared sturdy enough, although the comfort level of the ride, especially over the rough roads leading to Gensokyo, may have been less than ideal.

The driver was a solidly-built man of middle age, dressed in a faded Western-style suit. From his bearing, Minerva suspected he had far more responsibilities than merely ferrying their party from one place to another. A butler? One of Aya's personal servants?

"Aya-dono," he greeted Aya in Japanese, bowing deeply. Minerva turned to face him, away from watching the various porters piling the luggage onto the roof of the carriage. "Please accept my humble services. And, er..."

"This is Margatroid-san, and Alice." Aya gestured genteelly at the two in introduction. "I apologize once more for asking you to do this for me, Kamishirasawa-san."

"Not at all," Kamishirasawa replied. "The Hieda family has always been a great help to us. This is the least we could do to repay your kindness."

Greetings accomplished, Aya nodded pleasantly to Minerva. "Mr. Kamishirasawa is an old friend," she said in English, "as well as a respected member of the community in Gensokyo." In other words, despite his current job, Minerva was not to think of him as a mere servant.

... or so Minerva assumed. Was Aya hinting at Kamishirasawa's status as Someone To Know, if she wanted to get anything done in this Gensokyo? Or was he Someone Not To Be Crossed? The way people here seemed to be able to convey a wealth of meanings from what they chose to say or not say, even without changing their tone, was something she had yet to become accustomed to, compared to the social maneuverings in the drawing-rooms of the English gentry. In any event, she curtseyed politely; after a moment, Alice did so as well, taking her cue from her guardian.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Kamishirasawa-san," Minerva said in Japanese. "I hope I will be able to provide some small amount of assistance towards the problem plaguing your village." Aya had coached Minerva during the train journey on speaking a less obviously textbook-learned form of Japanese, and it was only much later that Minerva would realize how well the instruction had been given, based on the rapid improvement of her speech. Aya might have been unthinkingly arrogant and casually disdainful of all foreigners, but she was a superb teacher.

Of course, Alice seemed to pick up the language much faster than Minerva did, and certainly more easily than any of their lessons prior. Minerva could swallow enough of her ego to realize that she had nothing resembling Aya's skill in teaching others. Maybe she could leave Alice in Aya's care, at least for the immediate future.

Kamishirasawa did not seem to notice anything odd about Minerva's speech or mannerisms, although his eyes flickered dubiously towards Alice. "If there is nothing else," he said, opening the carriage doors, "we must begin our trip as soon as we can. Please make yourselves comfortable inside, for it is a long way to our destination."

Minerva had lost track of where they were at the moment, although from her best reckoning they were somewhere in Yamanashi Prefecture, heading vaguely north to northwest. What signs she could spot taxed her knowledge of written Japanese beyond its limits, but queries to Aya led only to a dismissive shake of her head.

"More importantly," Aya said, still in Japanese, "you should try to learn as much about Gensokyo as you can, so you won't repeat the mistakes of the other youkai hunters." She held a book, bound in the Oriental style with silk stitching, in her hand. "It was a stroke of luck that my business in Tokyo was regarding this, and happen to have a copy at hand. I'll help you with the harder words,"
she added dryly.

The book was filled with columns of neatly-printed Japanese text, which Minerva recognized to be descriptions of assorted mythical creatures. Alice, having glanced curiously at the book in Minerva's hands, lost interest as soon as she found it was devoid of any pictures, and spent the rest of her time alternating between the view outside the window, and cooing at the doll she was playing with. The bumpy ride in the carriage did not help with comprehension of the unfamiliar words, but after a few difficulties with the cardinality of the text direction, Minerva realized that this was a guide of sorts to dealing with the youkai around Gensokyo.

"This is the latest edition of the Gensokyo Chronicles," Aya said. "It is a... responsibility laid on the Hieda family, in order to help the populace know the strengths and weaknesses of youkai. Characteristics, countermeasures, and the best way to survive should a confrontation be inevitable. It is my hope that every person in Gensokyo will be able to own one of these encyclopedias. It is not an exaggeration to say that lives may depend upon it."

Minerva closed the book. "While the sentiment is commendable, no doubt you've already considered the problem of the average literacy level in a small, rural village. The circles and societies I am acquainted with in Europe had the same issue, when it came to informing the public of the habits of the fae."

Aya nodded. "Gensokyo is not as backwards as you imagine, but yes, some of the outlying farms do not have the time to learn how to read, or rather read well enough to make a difference, should they encounter a youkai. Kamishirasawa-san has been instrumental in raising the literacy level of the people, but his efforts are only as effective as the willingness of others to learn. He has been thinking of opening a school."

"Are there none in Gensokyo?"

"None of the sort he envisions, certainly. A few classes held irregularly, for the children of the village, but there is always more that can be done. For my part, I have taken some liberties with the organization of information, using some of your Western styles for the table of contents and the indexing. Improvements can certainly be made, however. Perhaps next time I will be able to implement them." Aya indicated Alice with a tilt of her head. "After all, if I could maintain the interest of a child such as her, she would be more inclined to read the rest of the book, and make use of the knowledge within. Your own story of Wonderland has a valid point: what is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?"

Minerva digested this. "Next time?"

Aya's smile was beatific. "The ninth edition of the Gensokyo Chronicles, to be written a hundred and twenty years or so hence. Needless to say, everything would have to be rewritten. Who knows what the world will look like? This is but the seventeenth year of the Meiji, or what your calendar calls 1884, in the years of your Christian God. In a hundred and twenty years, who will be sitting on the Imperial Throne? Or will we have adopted your Western calendar, the same way we have adopted everything else?"

Minerva let out a sigh of frustration. "There is no point in haranguing me about this, Aya-san. Besides, if you say you'll be writing the next edition of the Gensokyo Chronicles, then don't you think you will be around to see the next hundred and twenty years?"

"Margatroid-san, I do not think I will live to see the end of the decade."

The rest of the day's journey passed in silence.
I had to give her a name some time, and this seemed the quickest way.
Minerva rose early the next day, sometime just before dawn. She moved slowly through the unfamiliar room of the inn, trying not to wake Alice; best to let the child get as much sleep as she could for now. On the other side of the room, Aya mumbled something in her sleep, and turned over.

Washing up was done as best as she could in a place devoid of standard plumbing. Through slow repetition of key phrases and some desperate gesticulation, Minerva managed to obtain the basic ingredients for a sandwich from the inn's staff, who seemed suspicious of this foreign request. From oblique hints and arched brows, Minerva gathered that breakfast, presumably Japanese-style, would be served soon anyway.

"I am just going out for a walk," she told them firmly. "I will be back in time for your breakfast."

The staff muttered darkly among themselves, but let her through. Minerva stepped out onto the dew-covered grass, feeling discontent, outlandish, and thoroughly English.

No doubt everything in this strange land had its own name and history that only vaguely matched up with what Minerva was used to back in Europe, but she could not help thinking of the place the horses and carriage were kept as the coach-house, whatever it was also called in Japanese. In any case, Kamishirasawa was also there, tending to the carriage.

Minerva cleared her throat, politely announcing her presence. Kamishirasawa glanced at her, looked back at the wheel of the carriage he was working on, and then apparently decided that the wheel could wait. He straightened slowly, in the manner of men who intended to live to an old age unburdened by back problems. "Margatroid-san," he greeted neutrally.

"Kamishirasawa-san." Minerva tried to smile reassuringly. "Would you like some assistance?"

He gave her an odd look. Was it her unwomanly offer of help, or some vestige of her self-taught Japanese? "That will not be necessary, Margatroid-san. The problem is not a major one."

"Oh. That's good, I suppose." Surely that was not the limit of their conversation. "Kamishirasawa-san, I don't know if you are aware of why I am travelling to Gensokyo-"

"It is not difficult to guess." Kamishirasawa patted his pockets absent-mindedly, but stopped when he realized what he was doing. Minerva recognized the habits of a man deprived of his habitual tobacco. "I mean no offense, Margatroid-san, but I do not think you are prepared for what lies ahead."

"So I have been told." Minerva had stayed up the previous night reading the book Aya had gave her. Her presence this early in the morning was due in large part to the disturbing dreams she had, based on the descriptions of the youkai within. "And yet nobody really tells me why, or how. Am I to hunt down these youkai, without knowing what they actually are? The faeries of Europe I understand. The youkai of Japan, however..." Minerva shook her head in exasperation. "I did not even know I am not the first youkai-hunter Gensokyo has had. All I was told was that I am to save a village of humans from monsters. It seems to be a noble enough goal, but as each day passes, my suspicion grows. There is something else in this request, Kamishirasawa-san, and without more
information, I will be working blindly, making even more mistakes. Please, for both our sakes, and for the sake of the village that is our destination, tell me all you can."

Kamishirasawa leaned against the coach-house doorway, looking contemplatively into the middle distance. "Gensokyo is not an easy place to describe," he said. "It was not always called such, of course. But for as long as I can remember, Gensokyo was as illusionary as its name suggested. We have always... lived, and existed, alongside the youkai. Everyone in Japan did. But then the land changed, and some things are... forgotten. Best left forgotten, perhaps. Except in Gensokyo, where we are reminded of the ones who live alongside us every day." He sighed deeply. "We do not know why. We do not know if we are the only remote village, in the mountains of Japan, far from the cities, to be faced with youkai. But sometimes the young people leave the village, to go to the cities, and they seldom come back. Why should they, when all that is waiting for them back home is darkness and fear? Yet the letters they send back are full of new ideas and thoughts, Japanese and Western alike. And the march of progress will reach Gensokyo, someday, and uncover the truth of these youkai. On that day, perhaps the name 'Gensokyo' will no longer be remembered."

Minerva looked at the gas lamp inside the coach-house, illuminating the interior. "The light of progress, across all of the world," she murmured. "Chasing away the shadows."

Kamishirasawa nodded. "Where would the shadows hide, then? And the old tales, the stories full of fear and warnings, would be forgotten... useless. Stories told only by the old, who still remember what the darkness held, once upon a time. The future is for the young. If the young never meet a youkai, then there is no need for them to remember how to deal with one."

Bread in one pocket, and salt in the other. "How long have you known Aya-san?" Minerva asked distantly.

Kamishirasawa took this change of topic in stride. "Since the day she was born. The Hieda family is... special, particularly in Gensokyo, and Hieda no Aya-dono is even more so. She has a great burden thrust onto her, and she accomplished it admirably well."

"The... Gensokyo Chronicles?"

"Yes. The Kamishirasawa family have been friends to the Hieda family for a very long time, and between each writing of the Gensokyo Chronicles, the Kamishirasawa family have held the responsibility for it in trust."

This, Minerva reflected, was typical of the conversations she had been having with anyone in this benighted land: questions answered with assumptions that the querent would already know everything about the subject matter, and poetic riddles from which the truth had to be sieved. Couldn't these people speak plainly? "Is the Hieda family important? Nobility of some sort?"

Kamishirasawa's expression was impossible to tell in the dim light of dawn, but Minerva assumed it consisted of equal parts pity and donnish patience. "Hieda no Are helped compile the Kojiki for Emperor Temmu... it is like a history book, but more so. It tells the story of the birth of Japan, and the countless kami, and what has happened since then. The myths, legends, and histories of our nation, put together and recited for the first time, over a thousand years ago. I believe it has been translated into English by one of your countrymen; should you come across a copy, I recommend reading it."

As opposed to a Japanese copy, Minerva thought sourly. Then again, considering the trouble she had had with the Gensokyo Chronicles, a thousand-year old book would be far more incomprehensible. The Kojiki sounded like an authorized collection of creation myths, commissioned by an ancient Emperor, and Aya was a direct descendant of this Hieda no Are... or
was there more to it?

"If you will pardon my rudeness, Margatroid-san, I do have a matter I would like to clarify."

Minerva started, her train of thought derailed. "What is it? Please, don't hesitate to ask."

"That little girl who accompanies you..."

"You mean Alice?" Minerva pondered the best way to explain. "She is... what is the word? A foundling? An abandoned child I encountered during my journey to Japan. She has..." The man was a respected member of the community in a valley frequently and blatantly haunted by youkai; he would definitely not blink an eye at magic. "Alice has a certain power, a very strong power, to cast magic. I don't quite know the reasons for this, but you must understand why I cannot leave her be. If nothing else, she will be tutored in the arcane arts as well as I am able, and I intend to continue caring for her after my business is done in Gensokyo."

Kamishirasawa did not seem satisfied with this. "Where did she come from?"

"I do not know myself, Kamishirasawa-san. I assume she stowed away on the ship when it was in Shanghai; before that, I have yet to discover. My best guess is that she was taken there from Continental Europe for some... purpose." Traces of magical weavings surrounded Alice, cast by a mysterious mastermind, but fading with each passing day. Had Alice's power been endowed, or was it innate? "As I promised before, she will not be any trouble, Kamishirasawa-san. But if you are curious about her background, then I can only admit that I share your ignorance, and that the only point of origin I can confirm is Shanghai."

"Speaking of whom," a new voice interrupted. This turned out to be Aya, already impeccably-dressed in another kimono. "Your Shanghai Alice is impatiently waiting for you to come back in for breakfast." She nodded in acknowledgement of Kamishirasawa's bow of greeting. "Please do join us as well, Kamishirasawa-san."

Minerva lowered her voice, as they made their way back towards the inn's main building. "Aya-san, about yesterday..."

"It is all right, Margatroid-san. I have been reconciled to my shortened lifespan for a long time, ever since I learned about it from the records. That is why I finished the Gensokyo Chronicles as early as I could, in order to prepare for what comes after."

What information have you picked up here, Minerva? The Hieda family evidently had a problem with the longevity of certain important members. They knew about this for long enough to have written down not only records of these short lives, but also some sort of... preparation? Ritual? Something that they would have to do before death took them. Was it mystical or mundane? Did it involve the spiritual world, or was it merely settling debts and composing a will? What was the supernatural world like, here in Japan?

Aya caught her puzzled expression. "It is best if you see Gensokyo for yourself," she said. "Trying to find the right words, especially between languages, is not very productive."

Breakfast passed without incident. Minerva had suddenly realized how hungry she was, despite the sandwich earlier, and quickly polished off what was set in front of her. Alice had trouble with the chopsticks, which necessitated Minerva having to feed her; Western eating utensils had not yet penetrated this far into the Japanese countryside. Or maybe they had, and this inn was one of the holdouts against foreign influence.
Kamishirasawa wanted to leave as soon as breakfast was done, but Aya overruled him, claiming a need to let their digestion work for an hour or so. "The roads will only get worse from here on," she told Minerva. "I've tried travelling across them right after a meal. I insist we wait before departing."

While waiting, Minerva took the opportunity to pull down her luggage from the carriage, placing it under the shade of a tree. She sat upon it, jotting down a few more notes for her book. Aya ventured over to watch. "Where's Alice?" Minerva asked, not looking up.

"Seeing the horses," Aya said. "Kamishirasawa-san is looking after her. What are you writing?"

"These are notes for the book I'm working on, on magical theory." Minerva frowned, and crossed out a line. "I prefer to plan everything out first before setting it down permanently. What I am hoping to create is a sort of... textbook, or manual, for untrained magicians to grasp the essence of magic."

"A limited run, I assume." At Minerva's surprised look, Aya smiled. "Come now. It is obvious that any such textbook would be dangerous in the wrong hands. The Gensokyo Chronicles would hardly be a danger to anyone, save as a bludgeon; your textbook will have far larger repercussions."

"I am arming my hypothetical readers with the knowledge that could save them, just as you did. Human beings needed every advantage they could have against the otherworldly." The vast majority of folklore Minerva could recall offhand on the fairy folk of England and Europe had been concerned with passive protection, from charms and wards to simple words and phrases to outwit the fae. It was often assumed that the average human would not have the power to harm the fae, not without inviting retribution. A single kobold may be trapped and killed, but there were always more out there. No household could remain vigilant forever, and the fairy folk had long lives and longer memories.

And yet, the more malicious and evil examples of the supernatural often had equally deadly countermeasures. A brownie could be appeased with a saucer of milk, and that was all the knowledge of them most people bothered with, but vampires had a large assortment of famous weaknesses for the well-prepared hunter to exploit. Lycanthropes were dealt with by silver, and for witches there was always fire...

Minerva had studied the Gensokyo Chronicles. Gensokyo had no shortage of malicious and evil youkai.

"What guarantee do you have that your readers will have the wisdom not to use this knowledge against each other?" Aya challenged.

"None whatsoever," Minerva replied equanimously. "What guarantee does the blacksmith have that his scythes and rakes will not be used on his fellow men, instead of fields of wheat? I am not a fool, Aya-san. I have included due diligence in my work; should it be used for ill anyway, the culprit likely does not need my textbook in the first place to cause mischief."

Aya made a sort of ladylike grunt. "So if I were to read that book and learn the lessons within..."

"You might be able to perform some small magic," Minerva allowed. "Some trifle or bagatelle. You do not have the talent for magic, Aya-san." Minerva did not mention that Aya seemed to have something else about her, quite unfamiliar. There was a peculiar power tied indelibly to Aya's fate, but not something that could be consciously utilized. "Everyone has a different ability for magic, destined since their birth. It is a matter of... fortune, I suppose." Or misfortune.
"And you yourself have been... fortunate?"

"I can hardly flatter myself," Minerva said, "but what power I do possess pales beside that of little Alice. The child has some of the greatest potential I have ever seen."

Aya glanced towards the direction of the stables. "Is she so dangerous?"

All that was mentioned was Alice's potential, Minerva noted. Nothing had been said about danger. "Alice requires training and study," she said slowly, "to achieve that potential. Which is what I have been trying to provide." She sighed at Aya's unconvinced expression. "Aya-san, know you this: no matter how powerful a magician may be, there is a limit to what the human body is able to accomplish. The best, greatest, and most dangerous magicians understand this, and so they often tap into other sources of energy to power their spells."

"Other sources?"

"The means are myriad. If I wanted to work an immense spell, for example, I could draw on the magical power inherent in every living thing around me, or every object with a name and history. I could use tools to focus my ability, be they inert tools for channeling or tools with their own source of power, created by artificers of great skill. I could draw on the energy of another world, often by creating a contract with the denizens therein; this is the favoured method of the diabolists, as well as the more fanatic or radical members of the Church. I could use the potential within other humans or animals, and perform a ritual of sacrifice; blood is an excellent link. I could do any combination of these, and many more besides." Minerva tapped her pencil against the piece of notepaper. "I have yet to fully explore the possibilities available to me here in the Orient, beyond what vague and corrupted information I have heard from my colleagues in Europe and the Americas."

Aya seemed about to say something, but she was interrupted by Alice's voice, calling for them from the carriage, which had been brought out into the open. Aya gave Minerva a guarded smile. "It is time to go, I believe. We had best hurry, if we want to make good time; the wait was necessary, but not kind to our schedule."

Minerva began packing her notes back into the satchel. "We can continue this later, if you'd like. I do need to review what I have read in the Gensokyo Chronicles, and I'm sure Alice must be bored of sitting in that carriage, staring at nothing but farmland. If it is all right with you, we could improve our knowledge of Gensokyo and Japanese at the same time."

"That will be acceptable," Aya said. "I thank you for the lesson in magic, Margatroid-san. However, as your student in this, I do have a question for the teacher."

"What is it, Aya-san?"

"Which method will you use to obtain the power to save Gensokyo?"

Before Minerva could answer, Aya was already making her way towards the carriage.

Chapter End Notes
The conversation with Kamishirasawa was written entirely to be able to use "Shanghai Alice". Of Meiji 17, no less.

It might help to have played, or watched a playthrough of, *Persona 4* when trying to get into the mindset of Progress Vs Tradition.
Minerva wasn't sure when the roads had turned into nothing more than glorified dirth paths, but by the third day of travel in the carriage, it was all too easy to imagine themselves passing through an invisible boundary line between human habitation into another, more inimical world.

Even the skies seemed to match the gloominess of the place, grey and sunless. If it wasn't for the occasional sight of a lonely farmer tilling the fields in the distance, the carriage would have seemed like the only place that held any sense of reality; anything else outside the windows were but illusions, lulling the viewer into a false sense of normality, but not quite getting it correct. The eerie feeling permeated their surroundings, of things not quite being what they seemed, and another world hidden underneath the veneer of farms and fields.

Alice had been getting gradually more restless as they neared their destination, even now dozing fitfully on Minerva's lap. Minerva herself felt oddly discontent and distracted, although she could not pin down a reason for this. Something in the air, it seemed, even within the hot and stuffy carriage. The clouds overhead did not help, even as they blocked out the direct rays of the sun; even so, there was never enough of a breeze to counter the heavy, muggy summer heat.

Aya, for her part, remained unperturbed. Minerva's initial impression of her doll-like nature was reinforced by her demeanour here, perfect and still, as though on display. Would anyone purchase a doll such as Aya? She was certainly pretty enough, even beautiful, but there was something about her that made one uneasy to be in her presence. A sort of unrealness, not quite within the same realm as the rest of humanity.

"Is something the matter?" Aya asked politely, and Minerva started in surprise. Had she been staring?

"I apologize. I was just lost in thought." Minerva spoke quickly to forestall the obvious follow-up. "It's nothing important. I was indulging my imagination on what we would find in Gensokyo. Not on mere flights of fancy, of course, but possible incidents and setbacks we may face due to Gensokyo's... unique circumstances, as well as how to overcome them." She forced a smile. "One of these scenarios would involve this carriage being attacked by youkai. I am fairly confident that I will be able to prevent any harm to our persons, but should they damage our means of transportation..."

"That is not necessary, Margatroid-san." Aya seemed amused by Minerva's speculations. "Youkai almost never attack groups of travellers, and certainly not anyone in a carriage. Any who do are likely to be under the command or coercion of a stronger, more intelligent one, and those can always be negotiated with."

Minerva glanced upwards at the roof. "Would Kamishirasawa-san be aware of this?"

"Of course. Kamishirasawa-san is a... special case, in Gensokyo. In a way, he sympathizes with the youkai, or at least believes that they need not be wiped out to the last. He is well-known for his ideals of co-existence, despite opposition from various other groups. Most people believe it is because he is a good person at heart, but he does not fully understand the depredations of the youkai against the humans, and so youkai attacks are merely academic reports that he reads, distanced from the scene." Aya frowned. "Personally, I suspect he knows the dangers of youkai
very well. There must be something more."

"You haven't asked him?"

"Contrary to what you may believe, Margatroid-san, I do not pry into the affairs of my close friends. He is here, despite his high position in Gensokyo's society, because you can hardly be expected to drive yourself to a place not even listed on the map, and I have... certain circumstances which prevent me from doing so as your sole guide. Kamishirasawa-san is the only person who was willing to perform this favour who could be trusted."

Deductions: other people were available as coach-drivers, but Aya did not trust them for some reason. There may have been other people Aya trusted, but they did not want to leave Gensokyo. Also, Aya did not consider Minerva a close friend.

"In any case," Aya continued, "we are already within the borders of Gensokyo. The exact demarcation line is not exact, but in another hour or so we shall be at the village. The farms and settlements out here are just as much a part of Gensokyo as the village, as far as humans are concerned. We are understandably reluctant to seek out youkai settlements, but we are indisputably in their territory."

"Oh?" Minerva looked out of the window at the fields, across the gently rolling hills, culminating in the distant mountains. "I haven't seen any youkai."

"As I mentioned, youkai will not attack the carriage, and when youkai do not plan to attack, they seldom show themselves. We are more likely to see bandits than youkai."

"I haven't seen any bandits either."

Aya smiled widely enough to show her teeth. "The practical restrictions regarding youkai attacks on carriages do not apply to bandits."

True to her word, the village in Gensokyo could be seen trundling past the carriage within the hour. After a few clarifications with Aya, Minerva discovered that whatever name the village had held before, people now referred to it simply as the village. Aya had rattled off a list of names kept on record by the local civil service, each one from a different period of history, when one shogun or other had held the general area. None of the area's governors seemed to care much for the valley of Gensokyo; it was too far out of the way of anything of strategic importance, and there were no regional specialties, unless one counted the unusually high number of youkai.

The village was a large one, far beyond the tiny hamlet that Minerva had imagined, but there were obvious signs that it did not survive alone. Trade existed with the rest of civilization, and Minerva could see sprinklings of modernization, as the carriage swung by the village proper without entering. Their destination would be the Hieda family residence, a large mansion located a short distance from the village on a low hill.

And Minerva finally managed to pin down a small portion of her unease. "Aya-san, the village here in Gensokyo does trade with other towns and cities, doesn't it?"

"Of course."

"Then why haven't we seen any other caravans or wagons on the way here? I wouldn't have expected much traffic, but the solitude of our journey seems odd."

Aya frowned. "You're right. I'll ask around and see if there is a reason for this. I have my suspicions, but surely..."
Surely?

Aya shook her head. "It doesn't matter. What's done is done, and we shouldn't guess, without evidence. It likely has very little to do with you or your assignment here, Margatroid-san. Don't let it bother you."

Alice woke groggily as they finally approached the Hieda mansion. Minerva predicted a sleepless night for her, which should serve as a useful lesson on not over-napping during the day. It was impossible to tell the time from the overcast skies, but Minerva guessed it to be just after noon.

Kamishirasawa stopped the carriage in front of the entrance to the mansion, and walked around to open the door for the ladies. From inside the house, what seemed like a small army of maids and manservants streamed out to greet Aya, who acknowledged them with a regal nod.

Minerva stepped out of the carriage as well, while Alice seemed torn between hiding behind Minerva's skirt and gawking at the mansion. Minerva fixed a smile onto her face as Aya introduced them, enunciating their names clearly for the servants; from the general reaction, they had been expecting a foreign woman of some vague description, but actually seeing Minerva in the flesh was another thing entirely. Minerva wondered if she lived up to their expectations; were they expecting someone flashier, full to bursting with magic and power? Or perhaps a missionary of some sort? At least Minerva did not need to prove her estrangement with the Church by trampling on religious portraits, ever since the Meiji emperor had rescinded that edict.

Kamishirasawa murmured a few standard apologies as he departed with the horses and carriage, intending to store them wherever such objects are stored. The luggage had been unloaded with gratifying speed, and teams of eagerly helpful male servants were efficiently carrying them inside.

"We have a few spare rooms," Aya was saying, "although some of them have not been aired out in a long time. If you require anything, please feel free to summon a servant; I have told them that you are an honoured guest in my home, and shall be treated as such. I would advise you, however, not to venture out into the village on your own, as it is easy to lose one's way. Do take someone else along with you."

Minerva began to nod, thought better of it, and curtseyed instead. "Thank you for your courtesy, Aya-san. I owe you a debt of gratitude. I hope I will be able to pay my respects to your family soon?" She made it a question; why hadn't anyone else from the Hieda family come out to greet Aya?

Aya seemed puzzled by the request. "My family... oh, you mean the others in the Hieda family. They will be back in a few..." She broke off to consult briefly with a maid. "A few days. They will also be staying here, but the mansion is large enough that your paths need not cross."

Was Minerva being relegated to an impromptu foreign settlement inside the house? Or did Aya not want Minerva to meet the rest of her family for some reason? Was it her, or them? Or even both?

"We'll have something to eat as soon as you freshen up," Aya said, causing Alice to brighten up considerably. "We have plenty of modern conveniences for your use. After that, your time is your own, although I believe you may prefer to unpack your luggage first." Alice made a sour face.

"And what will you be doing, if I might ask?"

"I'm not sure," Aya admitted with a smile. "It has been a long time since I had the freedom not to be sure."
The mansion had originally been built according to the traditional Japanese style, but here and there Western influences could be seen in varying degrees of encroachment. Minerva's room was certainly in the European style of extravagant luxury, complete with an ornate desk, a few expensively-carved chairs, and a large four-poster bed and eiderdown duvet. Alice had stared longingly at the bed, but Minerva had firmly vetoed bouncing, at least until after they finished with their immediate responsibilities.

This did not take very long, since Minerva was used to travelling relatively light, and the addition of Alice had not been a significant extra burden. The room did seem a little bare even after they were done; Minerva made a note to furnish it with the proper equipment of a magician, without bothering with the gaudy trinkets to fool the gullible. There was nobody here to fool but herself, after all, and if she failed to bring this Gensokyo business to a satisfying close because she had been wasting time on trifles...

But this was a strange land, and Minerva's instincts, accustomed to the cabals and rituals of Europe, could lead her through the wrong paths here. She needed more information. She needed to see Gensokyo for herself.

Unfortunately, any plans to explore the valley had to be put on hold for the day, as the clouds opened up. The rain eventually took the edge off the summer heat, but lent its own gloom to the atmosphere inside the house.

When Aya dropped by to check on them, Minerva was working on her Japanese, with the help of her pocket dictionary, fortified with a larger, more comprehensive one she had found, after inquiring with the servants. Alice was seated on the bed, idly stitching a doll-sized dress, although it was clear her heart wasn't in it.

Aya gazed levelly at Alice for a few moments, before turning to Minerva. "Aren't you worried about Alice's safety around needles?"

Minerva set down her pen, and closed her eyes, bringing a hand up to massage them. "Alice is much better than I am at needlework," she said. "I've never seen her prick herself even once. After the first few times I supervised her closely, I could tell that it would just be a waste of my time and her talents."

"She must have been uneasy at being watched so intently, too."

"Hardly. Alice seems to shut out the world around her when she's working on something. She does remain alert enough to react when needed, though." Minerva smiled fondly. "I wish I could do that."

Aya casually took a seat. She seemed noticeably more relaxed than during the trip. "How are you settling in so far?" she asked.

"Well enough, thank you. I must say I'm surprised at all this..." Minerva waved a hand, indicating her room. "Familiar conveniences."

"I did say that Gensokyo was not the backwater you probably imagined it was, Margatroid-san. We do know what goes on in the rest of Japan and the world. You are certainly not the first Westerner here, although I will admit we are not awash in them either." Aya shrugged. "Western-educated Japanese, certainly, and they are often local boys who came back home with new ideas; casual immigration into Gensokyo is not common. But we are not so isolated by the youkai that we have lost all contact with the outside world. Humanity will find a way."
Minerva wondered why Aya kept emphasizing Minerva's ignorance of the intricacies of Japanese culture. "In any case, let me once again express my gratitude at your hospitality."

Aya accepted the polite change of subject with grace. "Do you have everything you need?"

"If I might impose upon you further..." Minerva sifted through the papers on the desk. "It would be useful if I could obtain certain items... mainly experimental apparatus, for my research."

"Magic?"

"And alchemy, among others. Speaking of which, it might not be a good idea to perform my experiments inside the house. Is there an isolated area nearby that is preferably downwind of any human habitation?"

Aya made a pained expression. "Margatroid-san, isolated areas are easily found in Gensokyo. Isolated areas free of youkai interference are considerably rarer."

She sighed. "I will see what I can do. In the meantime, do you have a list of the items you require?"

Minerva handed her a note. "I'm afraid I don't know the Japanese translations for some of these, so I wrote the whole list in English. Is there any item that is unclear?"

Aya studied the list. "I believe I know what most of these are. I am not sure if you will be able to obtain them easily, though. You may have to create a few of these yourself. As for the rest, there should be a few shops in the village that can get you what you need. Tomorrow, maybe, if the rain has cleared up by then."

Alice looked up at this, her expression making her feelings on the rain very clear.

Aya chuckled. "I don't suppose you have any magic to improve the weather, Margatroid-san?"

Minerva shook her head, smiling. "Not at this moment."

"Then it seems we will have to rely on our own methods." Aya sat down beside Alice, pulling an unused handkerchief out of her sleeve. "Alice, let me teach you a charm we use in Japan to make it sunny. It's called a teruterubozu. Te-ru te-ru bo-zu." Alice tilted her head, curious. "Now, we need two pieces of white cloth or paper, a piece of string, and some ink... Margatroid-san, if we may borrow your pen and inkwell..."

Minerva tried not to show her initial reaction at the end result, which reminded her too much of a hanged man for her taste. A hanged doll, perhaps. Alice seemed perfectly enchanted by it, however, and immediately began working on the next one.

"These are to be hung outside the window?" Minerva asked, inspecting one of the finished examples. It really was quite well-made. "How many are usually required, Aya-san?"

"As many as you wish," Aya replied calmly, passing Alice a suitable length of string. "The total number is often determined when one runs out of material, or becomes bored of manufacturing. For the most part, the more teruterubozu that are put up, the more fervent the desire for clear skies."

Minerva glanced at the window. Alice would certainly not be able to reach up that high without assistance.

She stood, and walked towards the window. "I'll be looking forward to a tour of the village tomorrow, Aya-san," she said, reaching up to tie off the string.
Chapter End Notes

The whole business of fumi-e is one of those weird historical footnotes that would have been tossed out of any work of fiction for being unrealistic.

The even weirder thing is that history seems to consist almost entirely of these weird footnotes, all over the world. It feels a little unfair that when I write fanfic, I have to justify my weirdness.
Whether it was the work of the anti-rain charms or mere meteorological probability, the next day dawned bright and sunny. Alice was already awake, washed up, and dressed for departure by the time Aya finally managed to wake up. Minerva watched with amusement as Alice jittered impatiently in her seat at the breakfast table, while Aya dozed over her coffee. Apparently being back home had made Aya more complacent than Minerva had ever seen her on the road.

Possibly in deference to their guests, the Hieda household servants had prepared an English breakfast this morning, which was close enough to the real thing that Minerva forgave them the paltry portions. Aya had a lighter Continental-style breakfast of eggs on toast for her more delicate stomach; Minerva predicted a return to traditional Japanese breakfasts tomorrow.

"Are you sure you still want to come along?" Minerva asked Alice, in a conversational attempt to keep the child from running off to the village on her own. "It will probably involve a lot of walking, and not much by way of entertainment for children. I could buy something for you when I return... no? Very well, but you're not to complain about being bored, all right?" Alice had shaken her head emphatically, followed by an impatient look at Aya, who was breaking her fast without hurry or haste.

"There might be a few street shows," Aya said quietly, suppressing an unladylike yawn. "The village should be safe for a child like her to wander in. We don't have much serious crime to worry about, although it would still be a good idea to keep an eye on Alice."

The implication being the youkai outside the village were causing more than enough trouble, of course. Humans often banded together against an external threat, where they would turn on each other in the absence thereof. And yet, Minerva had not seen anything resembling a siege mentality from her cursory observations. Were the Hieda household servants a different breed from the average villager? Or did everyone just pretend that there was nothing to fear as long as they stayed within the village? Was it even a pretense?

Did these people need saving from the monsters surrounding them?

"Do you have that list of what you require?" Aya asked, nudging her cup of coffee suspiciously. Minerva had seen her pour in several spoonfuls of sugar and a prodigious amount of milk after the first tentative sip. "I can show you where most of it can be found, but I must warn you that it will be expensive."

"I'll have to find a patron, then," Minerva said. "Failing that, I might join those street shows you mentioned. I am told I'm very popular with children."

Aya glanced at Alice, who had finally settled into a posture of long-suffering patience. "No doubt."

The entourage that departed the Hieda mansion consisted of Minerva, Alice, Aya, and three servants: two young men and one older woman, who trailed a respectful distance behind them. Minerva could guess the use of the men, based on the likely combined weight of the items on this shopping trip, and indeed they both wore the resigned expressions universal to the role. The woman was probably the resident hard bargainer, Minerva guessed; Aya did not seem the sort to care about income and expenditures.
Now that Minerva had leisure to observe her surroundings, the village seemed more welcoming than the gloomy sight she had seen from the carriage window the previous day. The surrounding mountains still seemed to press in oppressively on the tiny human community that dared make their homes here, but the cheerily strident voices of the villagers hawking their wares at market would not have been out of place in any other rural village or town in Britain Minerva could name.

Their little party attracted several curious stares, which Minerva tried her best to ignore. Was it her obvious foreign appearance? Maybe she should ask Aya for some examples of local dress; if she was to get anything done in this place, it would be best not to create immediate suspicion and xenophobia, however unintended.

Alice, true to her word, refrained from complaining while prices were negotiated at length. The older maidservant made good use of the little girl's presence as what amounted to an exotic bargaining chip, haggling rapid-fire with increasingly harried-looking tradesmen. Aya limited her contributions to approving nods and the occasional cryptic comment, which nevertheless seemed to clinch the deal on the spot. Minerva could not fathom why a non-sequitur on the weather or an inquiry into the health of the tradesman would result in such drastic capitulation; was Aya merely reminding everyone of her presence? Did the Hieda family have that much influence in Gensokyo?

"In a manner of speaking," Aya said thoughtfully, when Minerva brought up the subject. "It is not easy to explain. It is... partly respect, partly courtesy, partly sympathy, and partly gratitude."

Minerva could understand the respect and courtesy the Hieda family commanded. Sympathy... "Gratitude? For the Gensokyo Chronicles, I presume?"

"Among others. I also help the civil service and any seeker of knowledge with their inquiries on the history of Gensokyo. You must have realized that the book I was carrying seems unusually slim for even just a list of youkai and their habits."

"I had some suspicions..."

"That is the... what would you call it? The mass-circulation version. Subsidized heavily by the Hieda family, with support from the leaders of the community in Gensokyo. I aim to have this guidebook be readily available to everyone in Gensokyo." Aya waved a hand. "But I digress. The true Gensokyo Chronicles are much lengthier, and are not to be taken out of the Hieda household. It is also an ongoing work, since I am still collecting reports of new youkai sightings even now. The information will be included in the next edition."

The next edition, which would be written by Aya's successor, a hundred and twenty years from now. Minerva wondered if the Gensokyo Chronicles would eventually reach a final version, a point where no new information could ever be included. Would it be a complete chronicle of Gensokyo at that point? Was such a perfect memento possible?

With a start, she realized that Aya had been falling behind. The servants were also closing the gap, looking concerned. "Aya-san?"

"I am all right," Aya said. She looked even paler than usual, and was breathing hard. "Just a little short of breath." She waved off the servants. "Please give me a moment."

Minerva consulted her list. "We're almost done for now, anyhow. We can head back to the mansion if you'd like."

"No need. I'll just rest under the shade for a moment." Aya smiled. "That tea shop Alice has been eyeing for the past few minutes would be ideal."
Alice looked properly abashed, growing redder as her stomach made her complaint for her.

The proprietor of the tea shop quickly ushered them to a cool area under the shade. After some low-voiced discussion, the two male servants returned to the mansion, laden with goods, while the woman remained by Aya's side, steadfastly ignoring Aya's murmured protests on her health.

Tea and snacks were served with alacrity. Aya's colour returned reassuringly quickly after a few bites, while Alice consumed her share with the speed of a growing child.

"These are quite delicious," Minerva said. "These, er..."

"Manjuu," Aya supplied. "Buckwheat shell with sweet bean paste inside. The ingredients and contents vary by region, of course. Gensokyo has quite a few varieties."

"Manjuu," Alice echoed.

"Don't talk with your mouth full, dear," Minerva said. "In any case, Aya-san, would you mind if I looked around by myself for the last few items on my list? They can't be all that difficult to carry, and it would save some time." At Aya's skeptical look, Minerva added, "I doubt I'll be so easily lost. I'm sure I'll be able to find my way back out there." She gestured towards the wide open area in front of the tea shop.

Aya took a sip of her tea. "This is the main village square, in fact. And there is only one more shop left likely to have what you seek. They deal in odds and ends, with a fair number of goods imported from outside Japan." She traced out an imaginary route on the table, giving succinct directions. "It's a large shophouse, but not so large that it stands out. Be careful."

"I can ask around if I'm uncertain. What's the name on the shop sign?"

"Kirisame," Aya said.

For such a large shop interior, the Kirisame Store seemed to be haphazardly laid out. The building was surrounded by others of its size or larger, placing it in near-permanent shade. It was clear that some effort had been made in brightening up the interior of the shop, but the overall impression was still not particularly inviting.

Minerva's entrance attracted the attention of the two people chatting at the store counter. The one on the customer's side was a solidly-built young man with intelligent eyes and animated features. He had an easy smile, and the confident, handsome air of a natural charmer, yet possessed a certain innocent naivete in his expression that no cold-blooded womanizer had. Minerva guessed him to be the local equivalent of the bachelor so desirable that none of the women dared to approach him. That, or he had some sort of unwitting quirk or flaw which removed him from the running, leaving him confused... Minerva averted her stare, before her speculations ran wild.

Behind the counter was a slightly older woman, who looked even more so due to the care-worn lines on her face. There were signs of a striking beauty once, before some tragedy had stolen the light in her life. Nevertheless, she maintained a tired smile, determined not to give in to her obvious despair.

She was also obviously not Japanese, with her blonde hair and amber eyes. Minerva felt an odd sense of spontaneous kinship with this fellow outlander.

The young man stepped back politely, taking Minerva for a customer in need of assistance. The woman put on a professional smile. "May I help you?" she asked.
Minerva cleared her throat. "Are you..." she began in English.

The woman's smile quirked in understanding. "Portugal," she replied.

Fair enough. "Britain," Minerva said. Switching back to Japanese: "I've just arrived here in Japan, and it has been something of a cultural experience. I hope I'll be able to acclimatize myself in due time."

"Then I suppose I should welcome you to Japan," the young man said, bowing. "And to our poor Gensokyo. What brings you here to this forsaken region, forgotten by the Meiji Emperor, may he reign in as many languages as spoken by the hangers-on surrounding him?"

"Seiji," the woman admonished quietly.

Unwitting flaw identified: this Seiji had a smart mouth. "It's a long story," Minerva said airily. "I'd be happy to elaborate, but first..." She handed the list of items needed to the woman. "Might I inquire if you have any of these in stock?"

The woman scanned the list, skipping over the crossed-out entries that the shopping trip had already resolved. "Alchemy?" she said, giving Minerva a penetrating look.

Minerva paused. It was hard to tell if the woman approved or otherwise of this subject. "Yes."

"A youkai hunter?" Seiji asked, before the woman could continue.

"I'm not sure," Minerva countered. "I assume most youkai hunters know what they're supposed to be doing, which is more than I can say for myself."

"From my experience," Seiji said, "that's not exactly a safe assumption to make."

The woman rapped her knuckles on the counter. "That will be enough, Seiji." She turned to Minerva. "I apologize for Seiji's words."

Minerva shook her head, smiling. "No offence taken." Especially since she had been getting more or less the same treatment from Aya since their first meeting. "About those items..."

The woman laid the list onto the counter. "That will be enough, Seiji." She turned to Minerva. "I apologize for Seiji's words."

Minerva shook her head, smiling. "No offence taken." Especially since she had been getting more or less the same treatment from Aya since their first meeting. "About those items..."

"Of course. I'd have to check on that second-hand item first, mind." It was still better than Minerva had expected.

"I'll bring it out from storage." The woman bowed. "And I'd also like to welcome you to Gensokyo... Miss?" The last word was spoken in accented English.

"Minerva Margatroid. That is," Minerva added in Japanese, "given name Minerva, and surname Margatroid."

"Maria Kirisame." The woman must have caught Minerva's confused expression. "Formerly Maria de Silva, before I settled down here."

"Given name Seiji, surname Kirisame," Seiji interjected, as Maria ducked into the back of the shop. "Brother-in-law. I help out around the shop now and again."

While Maria was collecting the items, Minerva browsed the rest of the shop, as Seiji lounged
around the counter, possibly keeping an eye on her. There did not seem to be a unified theme to what was being sold, apart from perhaps the absence of perishables. Odds and ends, knicks and knacks, some of which had been brought in from overseas. On a whim, Minerva picked up a few more sewing materials, as well as a book in English purporting to feature Dolls Of The World. Maybe Alice could glean some inspiration from it.

Maria finally emerged, carrying a few wrapped packages. Seiji promptly darted over to give her a hand. Maria unwrapped one of the packages, revealing an old balance scale with weights; Minerva was pleased to see that the weights had Arabic numerals imprinted, as requested. "Would this be acceptable, Margatroid-san?"

Minerva tested the scales with varying weights, and found that they were accurate, or at least accurate enough for her purposes. "These will do fine, Kirisame-san."

"Please, call me Maria." The shopkeeper rewrapped the scales. "Will you be able to handle all this? I can ask Seiji to deliver it for you..."

"It's all right. But thank you for the offer."

Maria quoted a price Minerva felt was eminently fair. "Please do come again," Maria said. "Although... if I should come across one of the other items on your list, would you like to be contacted?"

"That would be a great help," Minerva agreed. "I'm living at the Hieda family mansion, up on the hill." Both Seiji and Maria gave her an odd look. "Is something the matter?"

"It's nothing," Maria assured her. "Thank you for your patronage."

When Minerva returned to the tea shop, she found Aya alone. "Alice fell asleep while waiting," Aya informed her. "I had the maid carry her back home. Did you find what you were looking for?"

Minerva nodded, as they started back towards the Hieda mansion. "And a few other things besides. Unfortunately, I might have to create some of the ingredients I need myself."

Aya sighed. "Would a small shack around the rear of the mansion be suitable? It's not the best option, but until we can find that secluded downwind spot of yours, free of youkai, it will have to do."

"My gratitude and appreciation, Aya-san."

"Not at all. I would not want to see the mansion accidentally blown up, or filled with noxious fumes. Was there anything else you needed?"

"Possibly," Minerva said, glancing up at the mountains surrounding the village. "Do you know of any caves in the area, Aya-san? Large ones, preferably. And stable."

"There might be one," Aya hazarded. "It's a fair distance from the village, though."

"Then I can wait on your convenience," Minerva said. "The need is not pressing."

Aya nodded. "I don't know if it will fit your criteria, but the cave is over there," she said, tilting her head in the indicated direction. "The road is... I would not say well-travelled, but it is at least travelled, and protected. Youkai attacks will not happen there."

"Protected?"
'There is a shrine in the area. I have been meaning to introduce you to the shrine maiden, Margatroid-san. The meeting may prove enlightening.'

Chapter End Notes

Where the heck would someone even get coffee in Gensokyo?
Minerva managed to notice the increased flurry of activity only when the murmur of distant chatter filtered into her room at the Hieda mansion.

The front entrance of the mansion was barely visible from the window, but Minerva could see a crowd of servants greeting a small delegation of important people. From this distance, she could make out a tall, white-haired man who seemed to be in charge, as well as a younger, nervous-looking couple. No children, however.

"Done," Alice suddenly said, holding up her arithmetic homework for inspection.

Minerva absently scanned through it. "You forgot to carry the two here, Alice," she said, handing the slate back. Alice grumbled something under her breath, but attacked the problem sets with renewed determination, as Minerva turned her attention back to the scene outside.

Aya was there now, greeting the newcomers. There was a lengthy bout of bowing to each other, interrupted by the woman of the couple catching Aya in what looked like an unexpected hug, judging from Aya's stiff posture. Not an unwelcome greeting, in any case, since Aya gingerly returned the woman's affection after a moment. With that done, the group entered the mansion, trailing servants and porters.

What was it Aya had said a few days ago? The rest of the Hieda family would be coming here around this time. The older man looked to be about the age Aya's father would be, but there had been something more formal in how they greeted each other than Minerva would have expected from family. Then again, she did not even need to venture beyond England if she were to seek examples of parents who ran their families more like impersonal showcases of Proper Behaviour than a warm, loving home. Minerva's own family... had not been so cold, now that she had so many years to look back upon them.

Someone was tugging on her sleeve. Minerva looked down to see Alice staring at her with a quizzical expression.

"It's nothing, dear," she said quietly, not quite trusting her voice to remain steady. "Just thinking of some old and forgotten things." She patted the little girl on the head, with a smile. "It doesn't have anything to do with the present."

Alice did not look convinced, but she did not pursue the matter further. Instead, she held up her homework slate again, this time with corrected answers.

After the lesson, Minerva wandered the halls of the Hieda residence in search of the newly-arrived members of the household. Alice had been left in their room with another set of geometry problems, slightly more advanced than Minerva remembered herself handling at that age, but certainly within the girl's capabilities. Minerva expected Alice to quickly tire of angles and trigonometry, procrastinating with far more interesting pastimes involving dolls and dresses; the problems had been set mostly as an excuse to stop Alice from following Minerva around everywhere.

Minerva's quest was resolved relatively quickly, when she overheard conversation through one of
the paper screen doors, signifying her passage from the Westernized, wooden door area of the mansion, into a symbolic Orient. She edged away from the door, straining her ears to eavesdrop on the discussion.

Aya was present, her soft voice clear and recognizable. She sounded calm, almost clinical, in the tones of someone imparting information without bias or opinion. Minerva could hear her name being repeated a few times, each syllable enunciated slowly; presumably Aya was explaining the presence of foreigners in the Hieda mansion.

Feedback in this conversation was provided by a series of grunts and acknowledgements from a male throat. Minerva guessed this to be the elderly gentleman, who did not sound very happy at what Aya was telling him, but seemed resigned to circumstances. The occasional question was voiced, prompting yet more explanations from Aya.

Minerva was so intent on deciphering the quiet discussion inside the room that she did not notice the young woman behind her until the woman patiently glided forth into her field of view.

Minerva recognized her immediately as another one of the returning Hieda family: the female half of the couple, and from her actions earlier, a vivacious soul generous with her displays of affection. She held a tray in her hands, on which were the necessary containers for a serving of tea. Minerva counted three cups.

The woman wore a wide, faintly mischievous smile, which she quickly smoothed into the usual expression of passive stoicism celebrated in their culture as the epitome of elegant breeding.

"Please wait a moment," she whispered to Minerva, as she placed the tray onto the floor in front of the door, and knelt down beside it. She made a quick gesture for Minerva to retreat a few paces, which Minerva obediently did. When the woman seemed satisfied, she slid open the door.

A lengthy, tedious procedure took place, involving much bowing and kneeling, before the woman finally entered the room and shut the door. The conversation inside the room trailed off into awkward silence, and Minerva imagined the elaborate motions of the traditional Japanese tea-serving ritual being carried out behind that door. This required something on the order of an eternity, before the door slid open again, to yet more bowing and kneeling. When the entire performance was over, the woman closed the door, and stood up, apparently unperturbed by her recent exertions of custom.

"We shouldn't disturb them," she murmured, bundling Minerva away, through even more hallways towards what turned out to be a sort of drawing room. Here, she bade Minerva sit, and summoned a handy servant to deliver tea and snacks. Minerva harboured a faint hope that they could at least dispense with the serving ceremony this time.

"So you're the famous youkai hunter, Margatroid-san," the woman said. "We've heard so much about you from Aya. Ah, I'm Miho, from the branch family of the Hieda." A brief hesitation. "Although I suppose we're the main family now. Aya's my cousin, from Father's side, so we've always been close."

Minerva mentally filed away the information received from this brief introduction for further study and speculation. "Charmed, I'm sure. Er, I should be welcoming you... or rather, welcoming you back to your home?"

Miho flapped a hand impatiently. "It's a bit complicated now, yes," she said. "I got most of the story from Aya, although it's going to take a little longer before Father can accept it. I don't mind your staying in this house, though, if it helps. And neither does Ryoutarou too. Probably."
"Thank you," Minerva replied, for lack of anything more cogent. Miho bore a marked physical resemblance to her cousin, now that Minerva could examine her up close, but their personalities diverged. Miho did not so much speak as gush, much as a brook would, words tumbling over each other in a bubbling flow. A marked contrast to Aya's calm, quiet authority; Minerva was not quite sure which one she would have preferred. At least Miho hadn't started on the snide insinuations yet.

Further information was provided after the requisite pleasantries, and allowing for a brief interruption when the tea and snacks arrived, eliciting a happy exclamation from Miho. Ryoutarou turned out to be Miho's husband, only recently wedded, and more than a little bewildered by the baroque intricacies of the family he had married into. Ryoutarou was currently attending the alleged conversation between Aya and the Hieda family patriarch, and Minerva could envision him rigidly staring at a point a few inches beside Aya's head in sheer social terror.

"He's such an intelligent man, really," Miho assured her, through steady consumption of the snacks. "He's just shy, most of the time. But I'm sure he'll open up soon enough, and then you'll be great friends. He's very interested in the world beyond Japan, you know. Father approves of this, and so he's been trying to encourage that in Ryotarou... except sometimes Father can be kind of overbearing. But he means well, really! Father's just not good at expressing himself, and Ryotarou's still so nervous around our family, so it gets really-

Minerva held up a hand in an effort to stem the tide of gossip. "Forgive me for being rude, Miho-san, but I am still unclear about the role that Aya-san plays in the Hieda family. She is... a person of influence?"

Miho stared at her. "Aya is... I'm sorry, I forgot that you've just arrived in Gensokyo. Um. How should I explain it? Aya is the reason why the Hieda family is important, and she is the most important person in the family, but it's more about who she is than who she is, you know?"

Minerva cocked her head to the side. "That one might need a little more elaboration, Miho-san."

"It's just... Aya's my cousin, so it's hard for me to think of her as anything else. It's not really the sort of thing that's easy to explain, Margatroid-san." Miho looked especially uncomfortable. "It's... complicated. Really, really complicated."

Minerva pondered the frequency of assurances that she could never understand certain concepts, without anyone ever explaining what those concepts even were. Then again, Miho's reluctance appeared to be based on something more personal than assumptions on the mental capacity of foreigners. There was something about Aya's position in the hierarchy of the Hieda family, and the society of Gensokyo as a whole, that people did not want to talk about. It was just something they knew, as though they absorbed the knowledge through the air they breathed.

"Margatroid-san?"

Minerva started, jarred out of her thoughts. "My apologies, Miho-san. I was thinking about something unimportant." Except it had been important, even though Minerva could not begin to guess what it was. Something about the air in Gensokyo? Not the air. Something about Gensokyo itself, that would answer the questions she hadn't even known about, and lead her to the truth about this haunted land...

But it was lost now. Minerva would have to try again, and hope the insight did not wriggle out of her grasp next time.

She fixed a polite smile onto her face. "You are not part of the discussion involving, er, my lodging
Miho shook her head. "It's for Father to decide. Well, not really; it's for Aya to decide, and since she's already decided, it's for Father to nod and agree. There's no point in my joining in, not while Aya's all grumpy like that. She's no fun until she cheers up."

Minerva tried to imagine a cheerful Aya. She was not quite certain she succeeded. "What has Aya-san told you about me?"

Miho tapped the biscuit in her fingers thoughtfully. "It's kind of weird," she admitted. "We were taking care of business in the capital when Aya just ran off without warning, and when she came back, she said she had to pick up a foreign youkai hunter from Yokohama as soon as possible. We tried to arrange for someone to help her along the way, and Kamishirasawa-san... have you met him, by the way? Oh, good... Kamishirasawa-san did most of the arrangements in Nagano. Um, the next thing we knew, Aya was telling us that you were staying here, along with... oh, that's right! I'd love to meet little Alice!"

Minerva gave up on her information gathering for now. "I'd be happy to introduce the two of you, but I must warn you that Alice is a tad wary around strangers."

"Oh, don't worry about it," Miho said airily. "We're all living under the same roof, right? We have plenty of time to get to know one another. I know Aya said we shouldn't interfere with whatever it is you're busy with, or whatever youkai hunting you're doing, but it can't hurt to play with Alice when she's lonely, right? Did Aya put you in the Western-styled room?"

"Er, yes..."

"Then let's go! Oh, does Alice speak Japanese? I know Aya said she doesn't talk very much, but maybe she's just shy, right? Anyway, it's not good for children to be so quiet, so..."

Alice took to Miho with a swiftness that kindled odd feelings of possessiveness in Minerva. It did not seem quite fair or natural for the little girl to latch onto someone else other than her self-appointed guardian, but Miho had utterly charmed Alice, and vice versa, within moments of their meeting. Minerva had to stop herself from reaching out to claim her ward. Jealousy was not an attractive trait to display.

True to prediction, Alice's geometry homework was undone; Minerva had allowed herself a knowing smile directed at Alice, which seemed to embarrass the child far more than any scolding would have accomplished. Miho idly browsed through some of the lesson plans Minerva had drawn up, her lips moving silently as she read the unfamiliar languages.

"Isn't this all too much for a child of Alice's age?" she asked. "It's not like you have to teach her everything all at once."

Minerva shrugged. She had endured enough of Miho's bubbly enthusiasm to know that she was far more intelligent than her airy gossip would suggest. Miho was perfectly capable of matching even Aya in erudition; she just chose not to bother with it most of the time. "It helps keep Alice out of trouble," Minerva said. "And she's certainly bright enough. Even so, I suspect the demands on my time will only increase in the immediate future, and I may not be able to spend as much time with Alice as I should." She gave Miho a meaningful look. "If I could find a suitable replacement tutor, however..."

Before Miho could respond to this blatant hint, a quick series of knocks on the door heralded Aya's
entrance. For someone who had effectively been dictating terms, Aya looked as though she had been on the receiving end of a particularly intense interrogation.

She did look nonplussed at Miho's presence, particularly when Miho threw her arms around her cousin for a hug.

"I thought I told you that you need not cross paths with Margatroid-san," she said weakly, after they disengaged.

"Exactly," Miho said. "I didn't need to, but I wanted to. Why'd you try to hide our guests from me, Aya? Including this lovely girl?" She ruffled Alice's hair, causing the little girl to duck away in surprise, hands flying up to pat down the mess.

"If... if that is what you wish, then I suppose I have no objection," Aya said. "Your husband is making arrangements with Uncle right now, regarding the disposition of what was discussed during our trip. Or rather, he is driving a hard bargain with Uncle. I suspect this is possibly not one of Uncle's better days."

"I know," Miho said happily. "Ryotarou can be amazing when he gets going. It's why I married him, after all. Oh, Alice, come here for a minute..."

Minerva looked back and forth between the two. They truly could pass as sisters, with Miho being the elder, but acting younger. Where were Aya's parents, though? Was it another of those topics which were carefully danced around in conversation, being no business of ignorant foreigners?

Aya sank into the chair at Minerva's desk. She glanced down, and shifted herself a few more inches away from the large leatherbound tome on the desk, surrounded by notebooks and scraps of paper, scrawled with notations and sketches.

"It's not going to bite, you know," Minerva pointed out.

"So you say," Aya replied blandly. "There are a few matters to report. Uncle is, of course, willing to let you stay in this house as an honoured guest, although you must forgive him if he seems standoffish. He agrees in principle with your stated goals, but the thought of a Western magician under his roof, with your strange Western and magical ways, is not an easy thing to become accustomed to for a... traditional old man. But there will be no interference, and you will have a patron."

Minerva nodded her thanks.

"We are also building a... I suppose 'shack' is a suitable word, even if it seems overly grandiose for the result. Whatever it is, it will be located behind the mansion, close enough to shuttle back and forth as needed, but far enough away for any unfortunate explosions or fumes to be limited in scope. We will transfer your alchemical equipment to that shack when it is finished in a few more days." Aya held up a delicate finger before Minerva could respond to the verbal jab. "And the Hakurei shrine maiden has consented to a meeting."

"Consented?"

"It is complicated," Aya said, so quickly that it may have been a reflex. "Everything in Gensokyo is complicated. Once again, it is best to see for yourself, rather than speculate through second-hand sources. The meeting will not take place immediately, but the Hakurei shrine maiden has suggested next week as a possibility."

Even second-hand sources would have been better than nothing, Minerva thought sourly. What was it about Gensokyo that made it impossible for people to speak plainly?
The two of them watched Miho and Alice chat animatedly for a moment. Miho did most of the talking, while Alice listened eagerly.

"Little Alice seems to get along well with my cousin," Aya noted.

"Good. Do you know if she will agree to take over Alice's lessons?"

"Quite likely. Miho loves children. Are you seeking a dedicated tutor?"

"A companion," Minerva said. "A babysitter. A nanny. A governess. And yes, a tutor. Someone to take care of Alice when I am not around, and make sure she does not get into trouble. Someone who can replace me if need be."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to start hunting youkai, and I would much rather Alice remain behind while I do so."

Chapter End Notes

Miho and Ryoutarou's existence in this fanfic is due to the necessity of ensuring a Hieda no Akyuu, about a hundred and twenty years later.

Minerva's family is actually minor aristocracy. This is why she has the general blind spot of not really noticing servants unless reminded to.
Minerva did not need to find an excuse to leave Alice behind this time. The little girl seemed to be avoiding everyone, although Minerva did not know if she was merely avoiding adults in particular; without any other children of her age to play with, the point was moot.

She had even tried to avoid Minerva, turning her head away and running off whenever Minerva tried to ask what the matter was. While Alice had never been the most talkative of children, now she seemed even more reticent.

It was not a sullen silence, however. Alice seemed to be preoccupied with some weighty matter, rather than any trivial sulk, struggling with a deeply personal problem that she evidently felt no other could ever understand. At a loss, Minerva finally asked Miho for her insights.

"Loose tooth," Miho reported, after a brief session with Alice. Minerva shut down the pang of jealousy slightly too late, but managed to keep it from her expression. "It'll probably come out soon, and I know a few ways to hurry the process otherwise."

Minerva could not see any trace of mischief in Miho's expression, which boded even more ill for Alice's tooth.

"She'll be all right with me, Margatroid-san, and we definitely have enough servants around anyway. Why don't you do... whatever it is that you said you wanted to do?" Miho gave her a critical look. "Which I still think is a bad idea, even if I don't understand most of what you said."

Minerva had to admit to herself that she agreed, even as she made her way through the little-used forest path towards her destination, early the next morning. Aya had been skeptical when Minerva asked for a secluded place a good distance from the village, with a large body of water nearby.

"Why?" Aya had asked bluntly.

"An experiment," Minerva had replied. "There will be some amount of danger, albeit mostly passive, and I'd rather not have to worry about anyone else's safety while I'm working. I can take care of myself, and I highly doubt the experiment will fail in a spectacularly lethal fashion."

"There will be youkai around."

"I know."

Aya had provided her with a map, which apparently concerned itself with artistic merit more than cartographical accuracy; Minerva had gotten the impression that good maps of the geography of Gensokyo outside the village were relatively rare, what with the lack of anything worth mapping in the vicinity. The danger of the youkai was not as pronounced for anyone who travelled in groups, thus making the usual mapmaking team a safe proposition, but there was simply not enough financial incentive to bother.

At least, until the Japanese government reached this remote location in their aggressive drive to modernize. What would come of the clash between the old values of the land and the new technology and habits imported from the rest of the world?
Minerva finally broke through the treeline, dragging her bulky load behind her on a small wagon, and beheld nothing. It was, in fact, a very impressive sort of nothing; the map had called the area a lake of mist, which fit the general description of what lay before her. The mist shrouded everything beyond a few feet, and became particularly dense towards the middle of the lake, hiding whatever lay beyond it from view. There could have been an entire village on an island in there, lost to sight; any ferrymen prowling across the water must be relying on some preternatural sense of direction.

At least this was far enough from any cities of size for the mist to be relatively clean, unlike the famous fog of London. Minerva hesitated to call it natural, however; there was something distinctly unnatural about this mist, from a meteorological perspective.

Setting the wagon down, Minerva quickly made her way over to the water's edge. Summers here were warmer than Minerva was used to, but it was still cool, almost chilly, at this time in the morning. The lake probably did its part to keep temperatures down, even though the mist made it feel like she was walking through a persistent drizzle.

The water was usable enough; no obvious signs of contamination, either physical or spiritual, which meant there was no human settlement nearby, and the river she saw running through the village did not empty out here. It was a pity that Minerva was probably going to leave this place a little more polluted than it was before, but that was the cost of alchemy.

She measured out fifteen paces from the edge of the lake, and marked the spot with a small cairn of pebbles, before heading back to the wagon. It took some time for her to set up the equipment she had brought to her satisfaction, and yet more before she had the Experiment bubbling along nicely.

This was probably not the best place to hold an alchemical project, Minerva reflected. The exertions of hauling buckets of water from the lake had caused her to raise a sweat, and the humidity from the mist did not help. And yet the air remained cool, despite the season. Minerva glanced upwards, but could not see the sun through the clouds covering the sky. What time was it? Close to lunch, possibly, or even on the wrong side of noon, which explained her sudden hunger.

Minerva had finagled a cold sandwich before she set out that day, which lay wrapped up inside a basket on the wagon, a safe distance from the site of the Experiment. By her calculations, she should have plenty of time to take a break, keeping an eye on the Experiment, but not requiring her attention beyond that.

She picked up an empty bucket, and walked towards the lakeside, intending to fill it to wash her hands of alchemical residue before eating. Once there, however, she realized that this was a perfect opportunity to enjoy the crystal-clear waters of the lake, particularly since nobody else was around. Nothing too immodest, of course; simply a little loosening of clothes and rolling up of sleeves, leaving off the capelet and hat, scrubbing off the sweat and grime and chemicals...

It was thus when she was momentarily occupied that she heard a curious voice: "What're you doing?"

A child, Minerva assumed at first, straightening up slowly and turning to face the newcomer. A child, sounding like a child, with what Minerva recognized, in the manner of one who has read about it but never before encountered it in its natural habitat, as childish speech patterns in Japanese. A child, who had somehow managed to make her way through the forest known to be infested with youkai. A child, in a land where not every creature of myth and superstition looked obviously inhuman.

This... youkai, Minerva decided, for no human child could be here alone... was obscured by the mist, letting it surround her apparently without being aware of it., making her features difficult to
discern. Minerva would have estimated her to be a few years younger than Alice, wearing what looked like a simple blue dress. Further details were filtered oddly through some sort of strange veil layered even over the mist, as though someone clouded a darkened glass.

"If you're lost," the little girl said, "it's because of the fairies." She sounded confident, even though she had approached a strange foreign woman performing some strange alchemy beside a foggy lake. Minerva resisted trying to straighten out her clothes, since any movements might well be interpreted as a hostile action. Or maybe not moving at all was offensive, somehow; should she be greeting this youkai with humility? What was the proper protocol in this situation?

"Fairies?" Minerva finally blurted out. It was the closest translation she could remember to the Japanese term, but was it a close enough equivalent? Was there some Japanese version of the standard formalities? Minerva desperately rifled through her memories for the simplest version of a greeting from a human to one of the Fair Folk: the authorized Vatican-approved forms were too complex, Calvinism did not even acknowledge the existence of fairies, and most of the folk greetings amounted to begging for right of passage.

The indistinct shape of the little girl made a movement, which Minerva realized a moment later was the girl thumping a fist against her chest in a show of bravado. "That's right! I'm the strongest of the fairies! And you should be a little more surprised. I'm the sort of enemy you don't want to mess with!"

"I'd rather not be an enemy," Minerva said. She curtsied, lowering her head deeply. "Well met, little lady, and if your goal was to surprise me, then I am glad to inform you that you have succeeded."

The fairy paused. "What? Ah, what's the matter with the mist today? I can't see anything!"

Minerva frowned. "The mist is not your intent?"

"Of course not! Do you think I'd do something like this to myself? You're pretty stupid, aren't you?"

Minerva began to relax; clearly this fairy was not any sort of threat to her, despite all the bluster. Then again, it would hardly do to use her magic against this harmless youkai; Minerva had been trying to find out about what lay within the land of Gensokyo, and a youkai would be a fitting native guide.

The fairy waved an arm in front of her, briefly dispelling the mist. Minerva caught sight of a very human-like arm, attached to a very human-like little girl, before the mist rushed back in. For some reason, this felt even more unnerving than anything Minerva's imagination could have supplied.

"The mist was never this bad before," the fairy complained. "You're not doing something to it, are you? All those tubes and pots and fire over there." She gestured, and the mist parted once again to reveal an imperious finger pointing towards Minerva's alchemical apparatus.

"I assure you, the mist was like this before I came," Minerva said, trying to fight down a chill. Why? This fairy couldn't harm her, not unless Minerva deliberately let her. And Minerva was confident that even in magic-drained England, she could have dealt summarily with the fairy without any trouble.

... Minerva wasn't scared. She was shivering because she was cold. Something was drastically lowering the ambient temperature, and Minerva had a pretty good idea of what it was.
"You're lying," the fairy said authoritatively. "I'll freeze that contraption of yours, and then I'll freeze you!"

"Now hold it!" Minerva snapped, before she could help herself. The chill must be shortening her temper. "That's a delicate experiment, and you have no right to ruin it! Besides, it doesn't have anything to do with this mist."

"Talking is useless!" the fairy crowed, apparently enjoying Minerva's discomfiture. "If I say you're to blame, then you're to blame! Prepare yourself!"

Minerva sighed with exasperation, her breath puffing in the cold air briefly before the clouds joined the surrounding mist. The air around the gently bubbling Experiment seemed to crystallize, tiny ice particles refracting the light. Was that what caused the odd effect around the fairy? This particular fairy seemed to control the element of ice; Minerva wondered if this was just a fancier way of controlling heat, which was an actual form of energy, even if it was not as mystically impressive.

The little oil-powered flame, which had dwindled down to a tiny point of light as the fairy lowered the temperature, suddenly burst forth with renewed ferocity. The fairy stumbled back with a startled yelp, but quickly recovered, to her credit. "Hey!"

"Sator arepo tenet opera rotas," Minerva said, crossing her arms. "Have you learned your lesson now?"

"W-well, as long as you don't make any more trouble," the fairy said, falling back on her confident belief that she could never be defeated, and this was merely a temporary parley. "What's that you're cooking anyway? It doesn't look very tasty."

The Experiment had not borne the interference well, and the results were now congealing messily into a dark red mass at the bottom of the alembic. Occasionally a blob floated up on some warm current, only to slowly settle back down as it cooled.

"It is not for eating," Minerva said firmly, as she put out the flame. The fairy seemed relieved at this. "What do you usually eat, anyway? Your kind, I mean."

"My kind?"

"I mean fairies."

From the fairy's posture, Minerva may as well have asked her to identify Cromwell's favourite horse. "What are you talking about?" the fairy demanded. "Fairies eat food. You really are stupid, if you didn't know that."

Any chance of getting this fairy to enlighten Minerva on the socio-political situation in Gensokyo from the youkai perspective was rapidly diminishing. "Do you have a leader, then? Someone you all look up to? Or someone who gives you orders?"

"I don't need anybody to tell me what to do!" the fairy said hotly.

So much for information-gathering. "Do you know anything at all?" Minerva said wearily.

"Of course!" the fairy said instantly, still with that useless confidence. "Ask me anything, and I'll know the answer!"

"Very well. Why is a raven like a writing-desk?"
A brief silence, broken only by a gentle gloop from the alchemical apparatus.

"T-that's easy," the fairy said, not quite able to keep the uncertainty from her voice. "In fact, it's so easy that I don't need to tell you the answer."

Despite herself, Minerva hid a smile. There was something oddly endearing about the way the little fairy tried to seem so strong and fearless. "You're right. There's no need to answer." Minerva raised a menacing hand, palm out, towards the fairy, trying to ignore the effect the cold had on her damp clothes. "Now, if there was anything else...?"

"I'll let you off for now," the fairy said hastily. "Don't come here again, or you'll regret it!"

It took a moment to realize that the fairy had left the area, her retreat masked by the mist. Which seemed to be clearing up, albeit not as quickly as Minerva would have found convenient. Had the fairy influenced the mist's behaviour around this place? She didn't seem to be aware of it, but perhaps her very presence resulted in some sort of odd atmospheric reaction.

The fairy hadn't been especially difficult to deal with, Minerva realized. The cold was certainly uncomfortable, and Minerva was shivering slightly even now, but if the fairy was representative of the youkai in Gensokyo, the humans should have been able to handle the problem without too many issues.

Hardly the sort of doomed situation that would require Minerva's skills, commissioned by the mysterious Violet Hearn. Why save humans from the monsters, when the humans could save themselves?

Minerva pondered the risks of underestimating her foes, as she dismantled the Experiment. It was not quite a complete failure, since at least now she knew what parameters to set before starting the next trial, apart from making sure no youkai interfered.

By the time she was done, the late afternoon sun finally managed to peek through the clouds, burning away some of the mist. Minerva still could not see more than a few meters past the shore of the lake, but at least she wasn't groping through a world of blurred silhouettes. She had tried to clean up after herself as best as she could, but she had accidentally spilled some residue, and she felt a little guilty about that bare patch where the grass had sublimated. Well, everything would grow back eventually, and perhaps in a few decades someone would make an interesting discovery, even if the tiny amount that was spilled would not actually be all that valuable.

Fairies. Gensokyo had fairies, and at least some of them controlled the elements. Aya's little guidebook hadn't mentioned that ability, or that they looked like human children. Yet another correction for the next edition, Minerva supposed.

The Gensokyo Chronicles had also stated how fairies preferred to avoid being seen by humans, which suited their habit of playing pranks. And yet that silly fairy had boldly approached Minerva, making a spectacle of herself, just when Minerva had been washing up in consideration of lunch.

... a lunch she hadn't actually had, come to think of it. Minerva grew puzzled, as she approached the wagon. She definitely hadn't had lunch, so why was the basket containing the sandwich opened?

A brief investigation was all it took to transform her confusion into annoyance and grudging admiration, as well as reveal the contents of the basket to be a piece of cloth previously used to wrap a sandwich, and a few scattered crumbs.
Perhaps the fairy hadn't been entirely silly, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I did stretch out the plot in the previous chapters entirely so I can make this joke in the chapter title.

I have no idea if the Scarlet Devil Mansion was in Gensokyo prior to being actually populated in EoSD, so I left it vague. My canon knowledge is very, very sparse.

Intentional Reference Count:

Sator Square, lava lamps, the Mad Hatter's Riddle
"That was reckless and dangerous," Aya chided Minerva. "And you did not even manage to obtain any useful information, at that. You were lucky you only lost your lunch."

Minerva waggled a hand in a gesture of dismissal. "I was never in any real peril. And I have obtained a measure of some... confirmation, if nothing else."

"Confirmation that youkai do exist?"

"Among other things."

Aya was much too refined to sniff derisively, despite managing to convey the impression of having done so anyway. "I could have told you as much. In fact, I did tell you as much."

"It was an experiment," Minerva repeated, with unusual patience.

The Experiment, once Minerva had trundled the whole apparatus back to the Hieda mansion, had been poured into a steel container, filled with water, and then capped and sealed as securely as Minerva could manage. She had then given orders for the container to be buried at the edge of the forest behind the Hieda mansion, and left alone. A makeshift sign had been erected to mark the location. The Hieda household staff had dutifully carried out these instructions, but avoided the area thereafter. Minerva's reputation for being the eccentric Western witch was growing, evidently.

"In any case," Minerva continued, "I admit surprise by your decision to have your servants leave us be. I would have expected them to accompany us everywhere we went."

Aya looked momentarily bemused. "Margatroid-san, I am not so much of an invalid that I cannot pay my respects to the local shrine by myself. After all, I ventured to Yokohama alone to fetch you, did I not?"

"And what would have happened if you collapsed as you did last week?"

"I was in no danger, Margatroid-san. The people of Gensokyo know me, or at least know of me, and a message to the mansion would be dispatched soon enough. Besides, I only require a brief moment to catch my breath."

Minerva had not had an opportunity to personally examine Aya's health, and so she let that lie hang in the air between them for a moment longer.

Aya indicated at the vermilion-painted structure in front of them, which Minerva could not help comparing to some oversized croquet hoop. "Torii," she said. "A shrine gate, signifying the division between Earth and Heaven. As we pass through these gates, we are to reflect on our journey from the temporal, profane world into the sacred, holy realm of the gods."

"A Wicket Gate," Minerva muttered under her breath in English. "But who will open it for us?"

"What was that?"

"Never mind, Aya-san." Minerva glanced at their surroundings. They were, by necessity, taking
their time in ascending the moderately intimidating flight of stone steps, which had been built into the side of what seemed like a small mountain. It was not the sort of trek that she would have wanted to make on a whim, even if it was probably trivial for younger folk with an excess of energy. Aya was breathing easily, which meant whatever health issues she suffered from was not flaring up under this physical exertion; she had obviously come here before, and learned to pace herself. For her part, Minerva felt more discomfort from the late summer heat and the awkward arrangement of spelunking tools she carried than the steep stairs and lengthy journey. The second-hand safety mining lamp kept slapping uncomfortably against her thigh.

Were all Shinto shrines built in such inconvenient locations? Or just this one? The path towards the shrine seemed well-kept, but deserted. Along the way, Minerva and Aya had not encountered anyone else returning to the village from the direction of the shrine. Did the people here have an equivalent of a Church Sunday?

For that matter, when was the last time Minerva had stepped inside a church? Not too long ago, certainly, and there had been none of the dramatics that might have been expected from a witch, a heretic, entering a holy place. To Minerva, churches were merely buildings like any other, nothing more. They served a social function, largely involving getting a certain number of people into a useful configuration to be fed homilies and sermons, some of which may even have been useful.

Which meant that the uneasy feeling in Minerva's gut was not, in itself, a product of this place being religiously significant. There was something else at work here.

"I am simplifying greatly, you understand," Aya continued. "You may think of it as a threshold, which you must cross in order to proceed from the outside to the inside. A boundary between two different spaces. I believe your magic has some sort of limitation in that regard?"

"Some varieties do," Minerva said absently. "There are stories of certain brands of thaumaturgy, or even of entirely magical beings, that cannot pass through the threshold without obtaining prior permission. The one that most people know about, thanks to those rail penny-dreadfuls... what is the word in Japanese? Dead beings who subsist on the blood of others?"

Aya told her. "Vampires," she said in English, before switching back to Japanese. "I know what you speak of. The stories we have are not an exact match, but they are similar enough for the cultural associations to be relevant."

"The exact terminology isn't relevant, anyhow. The principle behind a threshold is to denominate a barrier between one area and another. Between yours and mine. As such, the... flow? The flow is quite often different from one area to another, and the more one relies on the energy, the more one is affected." As Minerva was experiencing right at that moment, in fact. She had uprooted herself from her home and country, and travelled halfway across the known world to this distant land in the east. Little wonder that she had felt out of sorts ever since she set foot in Japan, where the myths and magic were alien and unfamiliar. Even the area around the shrine felt awkward, different.

And why was that? Was this shrine built here for social convenience, allowing worshippers to gather when desired? Or was its location chosen long before that? Was there something here that necessitated the presence of a shrine? There were several possible candidates, of varying plausibility.

Don't get ahead of yourself, Minerva. It was a classic mistake to speculate before proof, since one invariably started twisting the evidence to fit the hypothesis.

They had almost reached the top of the stone steps by now, an exercise that had taken them most of
the morning, despite having set out at the break of dawn. Minerva was not sure what she had expected at their destination; a grand cathedral of worship was obviously not a possibility, considering the remote locale, but when they crested the lip of the stairs, Minerva had to quash a faint tinge of disappointment at the mundane appearance of the shrine, quite out of place from the effort required to reach it in the first place.

It was not a large shrine, although clearly it was of some importance, being set on a plateau partway up the side of a mountain. Someone saw fit to construct a shrine here, far from the rest of human habitation, along with the stone steps and the gateways on the path leading to it. Someone thought this place significant enough to have the shrine's maintainers take up residence here, regardless of the inconvenience to both congregation and clergy.

One such resident was placidly sweeping the path in front of the main building, using a broom made of bamboo and straw in the typical country style. The young woman was dressed in what Minerva vaguely recalled was the standard clothing of a low-level Shinto shrine maiden, based on her hurried research into the obscure world of Japanese religious traditions, as yet poorly-documented by Anglophone writers. White and red, with the red ribbon adorning up her long black hair providing what might have been a hint of individuality, or perhaps just a uniform-approved accessory.

The shrine maiden briefly turned her attention to her visitors, in the manner of a frequent daydreamer noting the ever-shifting shapes of the clouds in the sky: what lay before her eyes may have changed, but the change was worthy of no more than a moment's consideration, before the mind returned to weightier matters. It may well have been the first time since coming to Japan that Minerva felt no more unusual than her surroundings, a shift in status she wasn't sure she appreciated. The shrine maiden let her gaze rest on them for a moment, before returning to her duties in sweeping the grounds.

Aya glided forward, apparently unaffected by the heat of the afternoon. She continued past the shrine maiden without acknowledging her presence, an act that the shrine maiden returned with an equal lack of interest.

Aya's immediate destination was a small pavilion off to the side, which Minerva noticed was effectively a basin filled with water, sheltered by a roof to keep out the less subtle elements. Using an accompanying long-handled wooden dipper, Aya washed her hands, mouth, and the ladle's handle itself, with the stilted movements characteristic of a traditional ritual. Ablutions completed, she proceeded to the entrance of the main shrine building, where she stopped in front of what Minerva assumed to be a sort of altar. The entrance of the shrine was bracketed by a final torii gate, built into the architecture itself, under which a large wooden box took pride of place.

Aya turned to regard Minerva, her expression wordlessly instructing the Englishwoman to follow suit. A thousand protests leapt to Minerva's lips, all of which she bit back. Aya clearly did not care about the theological aspects of a witch from a Christian country coming to worship at a Shinto shrine. This was, yet again, another intricate social dance around the delicate, inflexible web of etiquette in Gensokyo.

She hurried past the shrine maiden, who continued to pretend obliviousness to their presence. Minerva tried to replicate the ritual of cleansing that Aya had performed: left hand, right hand, mouth, ladle. As a magician, Minerva had a good memory for details, and she was fairly certain that she had done everything correctly. The lack of any sort of magical surge confirmed her expectations that there were no inadvertent mystical traps lying in wait, apart from the general sense of uneasiness permeating the shrine environs.
Minerva stepped up beside Aya, and mimicked her pose, placing her hands together. After a minute or so, Aya frowned, as she finally realized that Minerva was not about to bow her head. Evidently deciding to let the matter pass, Aya clapped her hands twice, and did something complicated with her sleeves that resulted in several coins clattering through the slats on the wooden box. Minerva suppressed a smile as she remembered the collection plate at the end of services; every religion with any degree of organization required funds, no matter where in the world they were.

"Thank you," said the shrine maiden, standing close behind them.

Minerva spun around, managing to bring her startled reaction under control with some effort. She could not remember the last time someone had been able to sneak up so close to her without warning. Was she simply out of sorts from her inability to acclimatize herself to Gensokyo's magical flows? Was the shrine maiden adept at masking her presence, whether from natural talent or training?

"Hakurei," Aya greeted her. Minerva noted the lack of honorific.

"Hieda," the shrine maiden said affably. Now that Aya and Minerva had done the Correct Thing in acting out the role of worshippers at the shrine, they had been deemed worthy of attention, appearing back into the shrine maiden's field of vision. Having proven their existence to the shrine maiden, she granted them her full attention, playing the part of host to unexpected but welcome guests. "It is a pleasure to meet you again. I received your messages."

"Likewise," Aya said. Not truly sincere in that sentiment, but without the undercurrent of sarcasm and scorn that Minerva was used to. "Forgive the late introductions. This is-"

"Minerva Margatroid-san, yes," the shrine maiden said, turning to Minerva with a smile. "The greatest magician in the world."

Minerva took less than a second to sort out her thoughts. "You flatter me, Hakurei-san. I'm afraid the reality may disappoint, however; I am but a humble scholar." First, Aya was attempting to recover from her surprise: whatever she had told this Hakurei shrine maiden, that particular epithet had not been part of it, nor any reputation that might imply the title.

Second, the last time Minerva had been described as anything like that had been by Violet Hearn.

"I think the reality may be safe enough," Hakurei said cryptically. She brightened up. "Would you like some tea?" she asked, leaning her broom against a convenient pillar. "You must be tired from your journey here. I'm afraid I don't have much to offer, though."

Minerva cleared her throat. "I must admit that I was hoping to be able to survey the, er, caves that I was informed were in the area..."

Hakurei looked blankly at her. "Caves... oh, yes, the caves. They are not far from here, but they may be a little strenuous for..." She looked at Aya.

Aya shrugged genteelly, moving further into the shade of the main building. "I will remain here with Hakurei, Margatroid-san. I doubt you will want me underfoot while you search the caves for... whatever you are searching for." The twist in her tone made it clear that she knew exactly what Minerva meant to seek out, and while she did not quite approve, she did accept the necessity.

"There will be a fair amount of what may resemble dirt," Minerva said dryly. "Fortunately, I only need a small sample." The advantages of alchemical transmutation, coupled with the inconveniences of field work. City-born and city-bred, Minerva was still experienced enough with
working her experiments in the rural countryside, but she could never be said to enjoy doing so.

"The caves are further up the mountain," Hakurei said. "I've not explored them myself, but I hear that they are quite extensive."

"Natural?"

"I've no idea."

Minerva sighed. "I'd best be about it, then. Hakurei-san, would you be so kind as to direct me to the caves?"

Hakurei's smile grew marginally sunnier. "I may be able to assist you further. I managed to find a map of the caves in the warehouse." She indicated another building, off to the side of the main shrine. "It even has directions to the known entrances. The closest one has a trail leading towards it, since it seems to be a popular destination for explorers."

From behind Hakurei, Aya mouthed the words "youkai hunters" at Minerva.

Minerva nodded thoughtfully. "Aya-san, would you mind waiting here until Hakurei-san returns? With the map, I should be able to find my way back here on my own. Although I would appreciate it if someone were to come look for me should I fail to return by sunset."

"Of course, Margatroid-san," Aya said. "It has been a while since I talked to Hakurei, in any case."

"Please wait one moment," Hakurei said. "I'll go fetch the map. Now, where did I put it..."

Minerva was thankful that she had brought along her notebook on this expedition.

The entrance to the caves had indeed been quite close to the shrine, less than an hour's travel away, even considering the rough trail that had been stamped out of the mountain wilderness by countless but infrequent adventurers. The map that Hakurei had given her was surprisingly clear and accurate, considering it had been drawn up by some amateur explorer long past. The notations were in some archaic script that Hakurei had helpfully explained; Minerva dutifully pencilled in the English translations on the map.

Some of the ancient scribbles had defeated even the shrine maiden, however. These tended to be concentrated along a certain path through the cave system, and Hakurei had warned Minerva that they may have indicated some sort of danger.

Which was why, as soon as Hakurei started off back to her shrine, Minerva had waited a few more minutes to be sure, before embarking on that very path.

Her initial collection was completed quickly enough; bats were very much present here, although not as many as Minerva had hoped. Their sparse numbers would have been odd in any other similar habitat, but as Minerva raised her lamp, surveying the surrounding cave walls, it was clear that this cave system was at least partly artificial.

Had this been a mining concern, sometime in the history of Gensokyo? The village was probably large enough to support a small industry of such, although Minerva had her doubts about the area's natural resources. The cave tunnels were wide enough for her to walk through without any difficulty, and left more than enough room for her to scrawl a few important runes in chalk onto several handy flat surfaces.
There was yet another odd feeling in here, pressing against Minerva's magic-honed senses. There was the impression of a vast slumbering beast just beyond the rocky walls, its slow heartbeats just beyond the edge of sensation. And yet, when Minerva tried to focus on that impression, it vanished into a mere flight of imagination, leaving her alone in the hot and stuffy tunnel.

Minerva continued onwards, wiping the sweat from her brow. There was something around here that she could almost identify, something that played just beyond her memories. And even as Minerva tried to pin it down, she was distracted by the incessant feeling that there was something else not quite right, something that was counter to expectations, something that yielded a clue in its nature out of place.

When she encountered the dead end, she also found her answers.

The map indicated that the caves went on for quite a while yet, even though the unknown cartographer had not been able to fully explore the depths of the system. However, a wall of rock barred Minerva's progress, evidence of some more recent cave-in.

Not, in itself, an unusual phenomenon, especially in unsupported cave tunnels like this, a fact which reminded Minerva that she should probably not stretch her luck any further by remaining in unsupported cave tunnels like this. What had caught Minerva's interest were the scraps of paper, now mostly in unreadable tatters, pasted across the rock wall almost haphazardly. When Minerva ran a hand over them, she could feel the traces of power remaining after countless years; she guessed more than a couple of centuries, but could not estimate a more exact date. The cave-in had been as artificial as the rest of the caves.

As Minerva searched along the wall, she found the other thing she had been looking for. With the lack of air circulation in the cave tunnels, a faint breeze from beyond the cave-in was easy enough to notice, especially when it had a distinctly noxious smell.

She brought her safety mining lamp close to the source of the breeze, and watched the flame colour change. This also resulted in a thoroughly unexpected discovery, which meant that by the time Minerva staggered back out of the caves in a daze, Aya and the shrine maiden were waiting irritably outside.

"I take it you found something interesting," Aya said. "Or you would have returned much earlier."

"I don't think it's a good idea to head back to the village in this state," Hakurei said dubiously. "I'll prepare a bath and bedding for you, and you can have a good rest tonight."

"An excellent idea," Minerva agreed, taking the opportunity to suck in several deep lungfuls of fresh air before nodding apologetically at Aya. "I did find something quite interesting, yes. I'm... not entirely sure what it means, however. I will need more study."

Aya pursed her lips, but did not press the issue further that day.

The bath and dinner passed in a dull haze, although Minerva did not recall anything about these events that warranted mention. She did remember noting the oddity of Hakurei living alone in the shrine, but pushed that fact aside for now. She contributed a few minor comments at dinner without much engagement from most of her mind, which was probably why Aya and Hakurei kept the conversation to small talk anyway.

Even after Minerva had settled into the bedding laid out on the floor of what she assumed was the guest room, she lay awake, staring blankly up at the ceiling, her vision filled with the patterns and lines that had sprung into focus when the light from the mining lamp had been fed with the gas
from beyond the rock fall. It would indeed take much more study before she could discern the nature of the designs: were they meant to seal, protect, or trap? From which direction had the spellcasters expected the threat to come from?

Who had created those spells?

Minerva tilted her head. Aya had fallen asleep almost immediately, with the same iron-willed determination that she did everything else. Piled up somewhere in the far corner were their belongings, which included one tiny vial, sealed tight, containing a sample of whatever atmosphere had leaked past the cave-in.

There had been more than enough time since Minerva's return from the caves for her to have identified at least some of the individual scents that made up the mysterious breeze. There wasn't much she could do about it without further research, however.

Especially when her dreams that night, when she finally fell asleep, kept returning to the obvious conclusion for the unsettling presence of magic-infused brimstone.

Chapter End Notes

This is the first chapter of this fanfic I wrote entirely on Google Docs, now Google Drive. Very useful for writing on different devices like my tablet or a work computer, but kind of irritating when it goes down or my Internet connection burps.

I don't know anything about Shinto except what I could skim from Wikipedia. I know even less about the Hakurei Shrine's Taoist-influenced version.

PC-98 Mystic Square information entirely obtained from TouhouWiki. Because frankly I suck at actually playing the games, and prefer the fanon anyway.

Intentional Reference Count:

Pilgrim's Progress, Sherlock Holmes (refraining from creating theories before data)
Tuning out the hammering of the rain outside, Minerva raised the teacup to her lips, using the opportunity to observe the shrine maiden.

Hakurei was, quite simply, bland. She was pretty, no doubt, albeit based on Minerva's rather British notions, which may not have the same effect here in Japan. For someone used to doing manual labour in the rural countryside of an old-fashioned nation, Hakurei kept herself well, with only a close inspection revealing the lines and calluses from her work.

And yet, there was something about the way she acted and spoke which caused her to fade beyond notice. One would be able to hold a conversation with her, and what she said could be remembered without difficulty afterwards, but her words gave no indication that any distinct personality lay behind that ever-present smile. It was as though the general population had been gathered, the outliers excluded, and the remaining individual personalities extracted, distilled, and averaged out into a uniform level, with the results molded into this platonic Example of a Common Person. A minor actor in a play, tasked with delivering a single line, their message far more important than who they were.

Minerva sipped the scaldingly hot tea. She had only know Hakurei for a day or so, which was hardly enough time to discern any hidden depths. Nevertheless, this may be the first time Minerva had failed to notice the very presence of hidden depths to discern.

"The Hakurei family have been caretakers of this shrine for as long as anyone remembers," Hakurei was saying, in response to Minerva's polite queries. "That's why people call it the Hakurei shrine."

A classic non-answer. Minerva wrestled with the temptation of asking direct questions, regardless of how rude they may seem. Hakurei was a shrine maiden maintaining this shrine alone, which, in Minerva's estimation, was about akin to a lay sister proclaiming jurisdiction over a convent sans Mother Superior. Certain circumstances could plausibly explain the situation, but Hakurei was steadfastly not providing any account of these circumstances.

Minerva tried again. "What, precisely, are your duties as a shrine maiden here, Hakurei-san?"

"Well, let's see..." Hakurei pondered this question with far more gravity than Minerva had assumed it warranted. "I keep the shrine grounds clean, and maintain the buildings as best as I can. I help visitors with their inquiries and requests, if they are within my humble abilities to fulfil. I perform the necessary rites during important dates, in order to please the gods. I-"

"Er, that is sufficient, Hakurei-san," Minerva quickly interrupted. Hakurei’s listing had been delivered in the matter-of-fact tones of someone would not have minded continuing to recite from her mental script for as long as it took. Given that Hakurei had not mentioned anything beyond the standard duties of a shrine maiden as described in Minerva's rudimentary research, there was little point in letting her continue without cutting straight to the heart of the matter. "What I meant to ask, Hakurei-san, was whether you have any... unusual duties."

Hakurei tilted her head in what seemed like genuine incomprehension. "Unusual?"

"Involving youkai."
"You are approaching this issue from incorrect premises, Margatroid-san," Aya said, looking up from her perusal of Minerva's notebook. Minerva had shown them the sketches she had made in her notebook of the mysterious designs drawn over the cave-in rock fall, in the faint hope that either the shrine maiden or the historian would be able to identify some clue within. Hakurei had professed ignorance, but Aya mentioned a strange sense of familiarity with some of the patterns, which she was currently trying to pin down.

Hakurei folded her hands on her lap, head bowed, signifying that she was temporarily withdrawing from the conversation. Presumably she was willing to let Aya explore the limits of Minerva's ignorance.

"If my premises are incorrect, then I must re-examine them," Minerva said. "The chief alteration I would make as a new hypothesis is that dealing with youkai is, in fact, part of a Shinto shrine maiden's usual duties."

Aya nodded. "The truth is much more complex, of course. And a shrine maiden would not usually directly deal with issues involving youkai. But several of the rituals a shrine may hold do have the effect, whether primary or otherwise, of ensuring the supremacy of the gods against those that oppose them, including youkai."

"Something resembling how a sermon may assist in the eradication of sin, then. A pastor's duty may not be directly related to driving out demons, but in the course of his works, the demons may find their surroundings far more inimical."

"Just so. Therefore, when Hakurei performs the rite every year to welcome Amaterasu-oomikami-

"I beg your pardon?"

"Amaterasu-oomikami," Aya repeated. "Or 'great goddess Amaterasu', if you prefer. The principal sun goddess of the Shinto faith, and one of the most powerful in the... what is your word for a collection of deities? The pantheon. There are many stories surrounding her, which I will not recite here. If you truly wish to know more, there is a copy of the Kojiki in the mansion." The dry irony in her voice was unmistakable.

Minerva frowned. "The Kojiki is the collection of history tales that your ancestor..."

"Hieda no Are, yes. I see you know the story of my family." Aya waved a hand in a gesture of dismissal. "But I digress. When Hakurei, or any shrine maiden anywhere in Japan, welcomes Amaterasu-oomikami into the new year, an aspect of the ritual is to suppress the rise of Amatsu-mikaboshi... that is, one of the gods of evil, as well as a god of the stars. The star you call Polaris, incidentally. Should Amatsu-mikaboshi gain dominance, the coming year will be marked by the spread of evil across the land, which would mean heightened youkai activity, among other things."

"There are other rituals that I have been called on to perform," Hakurei added. "The kagura..." She glanced at Aya, who had taken on the role of explanatory interlocutor.

"A dance to call down the gods to join them in celebration," Aya said. "Also involving Amaterasu-oomikami, as well as Ame-no-uzume, goddess of revelry and the dawn. Simply put, it is a ritual to lure the goddess Amaterasu out from a cave she had been hiding in, in order to ensure the rising of the sun. Since many youkai gain strength during the night, the dawn is a significant protection from youkai attacks."

Minerva nodded. "Thank you for explaining this to me. I am reminded of... I apologize, but I am not certain what a proper translation would be. Folklore? Folk beliefs? But with a very immediate
importance and urgency, considering the reality of youkai here in Gensokyo." And of the Fair Folk in Europe, and who knew what else in the Americas and the rest of the world. Yet those had not been seen in many ages, compared to the constant threat the people of Gensokyo faced.

Saving humans from monsters...

"A useful simplification," Aya conceded, "even if there are several inconsistencies that may undermine any extrapolations from that assumption."

"I'll be careful," Minerva said evenly. "Have there been any youkai incursions up here at the shrine?"

Hakurei hesitated slightly. "There have not been any unwelcome youkai sightings here, no. The sacred boundaries around the shrine are meant to keep them out. You have seen the torii gates, for instance? The same principle applies to the rest of the shrine."

Minerva nodded amiably, while making a mental note of the unusual slipperiness in Hakurei's words. "But you appear to be living here alone, which, from what I understand, is not a safe prospect in Gensokyo."

"Oh, the shrine receives visitors quite often, and youkai seldom attack groups of people. In fact, the cherry trees behind the shrine are famous in Gensokyo as the best place to have flower-viewing parties in the spring, so it gets quite crowded around those times." Hakurei counted off items on her fingers. "And then there's the summer festival, the autumn festival, the new year's celebrations, the... well, it can be very busy at times."

"Hm." Minerva revised her initial estimation of Hakurei. The shrine maiden was not so much a tabula rasa where a personality should be, but more of a featureless barrier, shielding its contents through both impenetrability and banality. Neither chinks in the armour nor handholds for leverage could be found, and Minerva did not feel up to the task of verbally sparring with Hakurei. Although in this case, the analogy of tilting at an immovable object may have been more apt.

"Margatroid-san," Aya said distantly, "have you ever studied the use of Shinto or Taoist charms and seals before?"

"I'm sorry?" Minerva said, her train of thought broken.

"Your notebook." Aya held up the item in question, open to a few pages before the sketches of the cave designs. "I noticed that you have been working out some form of what seems like talisman-based magic, based on my limited understanding of the annotations."

Minerva relaxed. "Oh, yes. The credit for that idea should go to one of my acquaintances; a fellow Englishman, although I believe he has spent more than a few years in the Orient from time to time." A brilliant magician, if highly eccentric, and utterly infuriating to work with. "He had shared his preliminary notes with me, and I have been trying to work out his methodology based on those first principles."

Minerva had expected this brief digression to pass without further comment, but Hakurei had leaned closer to them, eyes bright with curiosity. "Could you please describe this system?" Hakurei asked. "You don't have to go into too much detail, but it sounds like something useful to know."

Mystified, Minerva complied. Aya seemed just as confused about Hakurei's sudden interest in magical theory. "The version in my notes has several changes from the original, since I was concerned more with the issue as a theoretical exercise than any intention to adapt it for practical
use. The core of the system is a way to store and cast specific spells, albeit to a varying degree of specificity, without requiring an unworkable amount of on-the-spot preparation. This allows the use of magic of increasing complexity, through a simple invocation of the storage medium."

Minerva retrieved her notebook from Aya, and opened it to the relevant pages. "The original conception involved the creation and binding of semi-autonomous spirits, which I deemed to be far too excessive for most purposes. I think he wished to maintain a stable of partially independent... familiars? Is that the correct word? Djinn?"

"Shikigami," Aya supplied. "Spirits summoned to serve the onmyouji... that is, the summoner. They are not created as such, however, but merely bound."

It was probably not a surprise that certain magical concepts would have evolved in parallel throughout the world. "Something resembling that, then. In any case, that approach may be discarded as being too extravagant to our needs, but the structural framework of the cards... you can see the designs here, although this is just one method of doing it... is useful for storing a spell that may be reused at will, rather than expending itself after the first casting. Think of it not as a bullet or cannonball, but the pistol or cannon itself."

"With an infinite supply of ammunition?" Aya asked.

"Not... quite," Minerva said. "Even prepared beforehand, the cards will draw upon the energy of the caster, and the danger of overuse is much more pronounced; in normal circumstances, the time needed for casting a spell of complexity will allow for either the replenishment of energy, or more than enough warnings that the magician is incapable of performing the task at hand."

"What of outside sources of power?" Hakurei said. "From the gods, maybe?"

Minerva stared at her, puzzled.

"What Hakurei is referring to," Aya said, "are the Shinto talismans I mentioned earlier. They are not usually considered magic, any more than your Christian prayers. The ofuda... that is, a 'great note', has the name of a god and the name of the issuing shrine or representative inscribed upon it. These ofuda are used as charms of protection, be it against general harm or more specific ills."

As with the tattered remnants of paper found in the cave. "Mm. Then we return to the original case of the independent spirits bound to the cards," Minerva said. "It is certainly an option, but, as I said, not one that is necessary for this system. For one, it requires a skillset that not every practitioner may have, at the necessary level."

"The gods are not bound-"

"It doesn't matter," Minerva snapped. "The point of this entire exercise is to reduce the reliance on the capricious whims of outside forces, be they spirits or fae, gods or youkai." She caught the expressions of the others, and took a deep, calming breath. "I apologize for my outburst."

Aya and Hakurei adopted the thoroughly Oriental look of those who had just deleted the past few seconds of conversation from their personal realities, in order to maintain a harmonious and peaceful exchange of views. "Would it be too much of a bother to ask for a copy of your notes?" Hakurei asked.

Minerva quickly considered the possibilities. Hakurei was a shrine maiden at a Shinto shrine, which did not inevitably imply some sort of mystical prowess, any more than a given priest would be able to turn water into wine, at least without the aid of a distillery. However, this being
Gensokyo, it would also not be unreasonable for Hakurei to possess supernatural powers as real as the youkai she no doubt had to devise countermeasures against, if only passively.

What would she need the notes for the card system for? Aya had brought up the Shinto talisman business, and Minerva could see how easily the cards could be reworked to include those aspects, and many more. Wasn't that why she had been working on the card system in the first place? Every change she had made had been to establish the foundation and architecture for a general system of magic, rather than the highly specific implementation that the original had been intended for.

Was Hakurei seeking a more powerful option for her own particular brand of magic?

"I will send you a copy as soon as I am able," Minerva said, "if you'll teach me all you can about Gensokyo and the youkai."

"Agreed," Hakurei said instantly. She stood, and bowed politely. "Thank you for your kind acceptance of my unreasonable request, Margatroid-san. Please, there is no need to stand; I was about to fetch something, and will return soon." Another bow, before she departed. Minerva could hear her humming, some local tune that faded into the distance.

"That was-" Aya caught herself. "I apologize, Margatroid-san, but I question the wisdom of that decision."

"I mean no offense, Aya-san, but I require some sort of idea about the mystical lay of the region," Minerva said, in quick, low tones. "Hakurei-san is the best person so far to give me that information. I am indebted to you, and your family's collection of tomes, for the historical aspects of my research, but it is understandably lacking in supernatural accounts beyond the Gensokyo Chronicles. Information about the youkai is well and good, but a survey of the natural... or rather, supernatural resources of this land would be invaluable."

"And if Hakurei fails to give it to you?"

"If she does not have the mystical powers I suspect she does, then there is no loss in giving her a copy of my notes on the card system. It will not be difficult to remove any potential hazards from the system: the notes Hakurei-san receives will be a harmless game, at most, unless she is able to engineer a breakthrough beyond my own understanding of the system, in which case the lecture I provided just now would have been more than sufficient. Besides, I expect that most of her time would be spent organizing my notes into something more coherent; I've not had the time or luxury to do so myself as yet."

"You know that is not what I mean, Margatroid-san."

Minerva shrugged. "I don't expect Hakurei-san to betray me over something like this. It is a gamble, but... she doesn't seem the type. Either she can use the card system, in which case she can help me with the youkai problem, or she cannot, in which case there is no loss. There would be no reason for her to use the knowledge for ill, since I doubt anything she can do with it will be more terrible than her present abilities. Or, for that matter, the youkai."

"Conceded," Aya said slowly. "Nevertheless..."

"You do not trust her. Why?"

Before Aya could reply, the humming returned, preceding Hakurei. She was holding several loosely-stitched books, which she laid on the table.

"I found these in the warehouse," Hakurei said. "They are journals by the previous Hakurei shrine
keepers, although I'm not sure how far back they go. The words are a little, um, ancient..."

"I can help with those," Aya said.

Minerva picked up a book at random. It had a symbol embossed on its cover that even Minerva recognized. "Yin and yang. Duality and balance."

"An important duty of the Hakurei shrine," Hakurei said. "Maintaining the balance in Gensokyo." Her smile remained serene, fixed. "Such as it is."

"I see," Minerva said, clearly not.

"Please, feel free to borrow these as long as you want," Hakurei said. "There are probably more journals in storage, but I haven't been able to find them yet. Maybe one of them will have some answers about those drawings you found in the cave." She glanced at Minerva's notebook. "If I discover any, I'll let you know."

"We may hope." Aya stood, and bowed. "Thank you for your hospitality, Hakurei. The rain has stopped for now, so it is about time for us to return."

"Please don't mention it," Hakurei responded politely. "I'll see you to the bottom of the steps. Do come visit again."

The servants at the Hieda mansion were not very good at hiding their relief at the return of their mistress. Aya pretended not to notice, and after a few curious stares, Minerva took her cue.

Alice had a present for Minerva, which she displayed proudly in her hand.

"It came out this morning," Miho informed Minerva. Judging from Alice's good cheer, Minerva assumed that the tooth had fallen out naturally, rather than having been induced to do so. "Alice has been telling me about this... what was it again?"

"Tooth fairy," Alice said.

Minerva looked at Aya.

"I am not aware of any such youkai present in Gensokyo," Aya said. "Yet, at any rate."

"Yes, I imagine financial transactions would be a specialized trait among them." Did Minerva have any shillings left? She'd have to check. Then again, yen would likely be more useful to Alice; Minerva wondered what the going exchange rate was. "Remember to keep it under your pillow, Alice, dear. And no peeking!"

Alice took on an air of injured pride at the merest suggestion that she would sully her honour by attempting to ambush any prospective tooth fairies.

"In the meantime, I've got to- yes, what is it?" Minerva said, turning to the servant who had been hovering nervously at the edges. The servant quailed; Minerva supposed he was new, judging from his age, and not quite over the whole mystique of the Foreign Sorceress.

"A delivery for you, it seems," Aya said. "More equipment?"

The deliveryman turned out to be Seiji, who grinned broadly as Minerva approached. "Maria managed to get one of these for a bargain," he said, indicated the wrapped bundles being carted in by the mansion's servants. "It's... what is it called again? Lots of planets and stars and such, going
"An orrery," Minerva said. "Thank you. I hadn't expected to find a working one here; it is a rare find. How should payment be arranged?"

"We'll put it on your tab. It's not as though you're difficult to find."

"Just so." Minerva inspected the bill of receipt. "Please relay my thanks to Kirisame-san. I'll drop by to settle accounts as soon as I can."

"No hurry. Maria's still looking for a couple more of your items, like the, er, whatever that's called..." Seiji blinked. "Oh, hi there. What's your name?"

Alice retreated further behind Minerva's legs, glaring at Seiji.

Seiji's smile was rueful. "I guess she doesn't like me much."

"Come now, Alice, don't be rude," Minerva chided. "This is Seiji, who has been a great help. Say hallo, Alice."

Alice made a sound that was partway between a mumbled greeting and a hiss.

"I suppose that's the best I can ask for," Seiji said. "Okay, Alice-chan, how about this: the next time I come to visit, I'll show you something amazing. How's that?"

Minerva stifled a chuckle at Alice's exasperated look. "I must warn you, Seiji-san, that magic tricks are somewhat passe for little Alice."

"But of course, Miss Magician." Seiji sketched a parody of a courtly bow. "Do you need help with that, um, what was it called again? Orrery? Some assembly may be required."

"No, thank you, I can manage," Minerva said. "Your offer is appreciated, however. I'll see you at the store, Seiji-san."

Aya regarded the disassembled orrery with poorly-disguised dismay. "I take it you will require more space for the storage and use of your equipment?"

"Well..."

Aya waved a hand wearily. "Fine. Please do not block the passageways more than you have to."

"Don't be so stiff, Aya," Miho said. "This looks like something that will be Highly Educational for Alice, and we must always make allowances for the education of children. Right, Alice? Oh, let me help you with that... see, this piece should go here, at the base..."

"I'm certainly learning something new every day," Minerva said helpfully.

"As do we all," Aya sighed.

Chapter End Notes

Written entirely to meander about the fannish ideas I had about how the Clow Cards from *Card Captor Sakura* could be considered sort of spellcards. I'm a huge fan of
CCS, and it's my favourite anime and fandom.

Primary mistake of the chapter is in picturing an orrery as being far larger than it actually is. It's usually small enough to be a desktop toy, but for some reason I imagined a big spinning clockwork version. Hopefully I can pass it off as being just an oversized model for greater specificity.

Since I don't think it's ever going to come up, this Hakurei shrine maiden's given name is Kanna.

Exchange rate for shillings to yen in the late 19th century, as far as I can tell, is about two to three shillings to one yen.

Intentional Reference Count:

Touhou side-manga *Strange and Bright Nature Deity*, IKEA
It was not particularly ladylike to fan oneself with a sheaf of notepaper, which was why Minerva took care to do so surreptitiously.

"Forgive me for speaking on a topic so devoid of interest and consequence as the weather," she muttered, "but is this sort of climate normal for Gensokyo? First the overbearing warmth of summer, followed by downpours, which then result in fog, upon which the cycle continues once again."

"The weather has been slightly unusual this past month or so," Aya admitted, handing her a proper fan, "but it is still within the realms of meteorological plausibility. In any case, autumn should be here in full force soon enough, even if it seems rather late this year. You might even be able to experience winter here in Gensokyo, Margatroid-san."

Minerva had travelled to enough regions with geographical features resembling Gensokyo's to know that the locals tended not to bother measuring snowfall using units as puny as inches. "I suspect my business here will take rather longer than that to resolve. Are there any special features of Gensokyo's winter that I should take note of?"

"Apart from a whole host of winter youkai?" Aya shrugged. "There are the usual hazards of winter in a rural mountainous area, but we have survived millennia of the same. It is not a difficult thing to overcome, as long as you do not do silly things like venture far outside the village alone."

"Lose many explorers that way?"

"A few," Aya said. "Youkai hunters who have more pride than sense. Unfortunate souls who wander a little too far, and are lost in the darkness. We forbid our children from leaving the village for a reason."

There didn't seem to be anything Minerva could say in response, so she changed the subject. "Do the mansion's servants have to follow us everywhere we go? We're just going to meet Miho-san and Alice at the school, aren't we?"

Aya glanced back at the two servants who had been trailing them from a respectful distance, as though alerted to their presence for the very first time. From what Minerva could gather, this unusual discretion was a special arrangement based on Minerva's presence; normally the servants would walk beside, or at least a few steps behind, the lady of the house, viz Aya. Presumably whoever had given the orders to lengthen the leash was worried about the contagion of Minerva's heretical Western philosophies.

Minerva recognized the servant couple, in any case. And a couple they were, if the rather determined female half of the pair had anything to say about it. The girl had approached Minerva one evening, asking for charms or potions to attract the attention of the more obtuse variety of young man. She had seemed disappointed when Minerva had gently declined to brew something up; as far as Minerva knew, there was no such thing as a true, effective love potion, and even if it existed, Minerva would not have known where to start.

Minerva gave her some advice, largely to do with the benefits of being direct, and a few perfume
recommendations. The young man currently had a startled, wary expression, as though he suspected some subtle prank being played on him, but could not quite fathom what.

The servants seemed more preoccupied with their own little world than Aya and Minerva's conversation, anyway. "It is not entirely my decision, but the inconvenience is trivial," Aya said, dismissing the servants from her immediate sphere of notice. "I enjoy walks through the village like this, and there have hardly been any... incidents. Certainly none worthy of note."

Minerva reflected that any incident involving Aya's health worthy of note would probably happen only once. It would only need to happen once. "But they do come to your aid should you have any, shall we say, shortness of breath? Rendering immediate assistance?"

"Well... yes." Aya rallied. "But it is still something of a bother to both myself and the servants. I try to leave them at the mansion, but sometimes..."

"You'd need some way of calling attention to yourself when necessary, then," Minerva mused. "Shouting won't do, since you might not be able to summon the wind for it. A whistle? No, that runs into the same problem. A bell, then. A little silver bell that you can ring when you are in peril."

Aya stared at Minerva.

"It can be a very ladylike bell," Minerva said encouragingly. "Not too large. Handy for keeping in your purse."

"And if I ring it, I'm sure you will come flying to my rescue."

"On a white horse."

"A tempting, productive, and might I say heroic offer," Aya said. "But here is the schoolhouse, and it appears lessons are not yet over."

The schoolhouse was, in fact, an ancient annex of what seemed like a part of the local town hall equivalent, where the tiny civil service of the village held office. Some effort had been spent to spruce up the building with whitewash and paint, and Minerva could see the clear delineation between the work done by bored but professional workers on the administrative side, and by enthusiastic volunteers on the school side.

"Miho-san is teaching the younger children, isn't she?" Minerva asked, looking around for signs of authority figures to avoid, lest they be caught and forced to take tea with the smallest of talk. "Aya-san?"

Aya was staring at the administrative building, where the usual number of people were conducting the everyday business of running a large village without undue complications. Overall traffic was sparse, and was composed largely of messengers and errand boys, as well as the occasional civil servant venturing forth in search of an early lunch.

"Aya-san?" Minerva repeated.

"I apologize," Aya said distantly, as she started a beeline towards whatever had caught her interest. "There seems to be someone I must speak to, regarding a certain business that I had thought settled."

Minerva caught up with her after a few paces. "Would it be a bother if I joined you?"
Aya glanced at her. "I suppose not. I'll explain the situation to you as soon as I am able, later."

Aya's target turned out to be a middle-aged man, rail-thin and balding, with the lined face of a constant worrier. He had apparently nipped outside for a quick cigarette during a break in his duties, despite the heat that required him to mop the sweat off his brow frequently. Both his perspiration and lines of worry increased as he spotted Aya bearing down on him. He seemed to contemplate escape for a very brief moment, before resigning himself to his fate.

"Nakamuraya-san," Aya said without preamble. "I see you've finished your work in Tokyo."

"Er, yes," Nakamuraya said guiltily. "I just came back in last week."

"Which is strange, since you said you were going to be there for much longer."

"Things, er, things were expedited," Nakamuraya said. "Certain arrangements were made, and they helped greatly with my work. I am very grateful to those who agreed to assist me."

"What arrangements are these?"

"Oh, you know, this and that..."

"Which you have not yet elaborated to my satisfaction, even after you returned to the village last week. If I did not know any better, Nakamuraya-san, I would even say that you seem to have been avoiding me."

"Anyway," Nakamuraya said desperately, "this must be the, um, the magician."

Minerva took this cue to curtsey. "Minerva Margatroid, at your service. I am but a humble scholar of the arts arcane."

"There is no need to be modest, Margatroid-san," Aya said relentlessly. "Nakamuraya-san knows exactly who you are, and what you are. Don't you, Nakamuraya-san?"

Nakamuraya squirmed. "Well, not to the precise extent of... which is to say, it is a complicated matter, and I hardly think this is the right place to-"

Minerva kept her polite social smile on her face. "Do tell, Nakamuraya-san."

"I was... informed that a great magician would be coming to Japan, and to this village," Nakamuraya said. "I was in Tokyo on other business at the time, and felt it would be proper to present an official welcome and escort to our poor land. However, Hieda-sama had, er, pre-empted me by a few days..."

Thus far the hypothetical conspiracy did not sound all that menacing. Minerva had a fairly short list of Nakamuraya's possible informants, but she was not yet certain why it had been imperative that Aya had gotten to Minerva first, rather than Nakamuraya. Would it have made any difference? In any other situation, these maneuverings would have made sense in terms of whoever managed to gain Minerva's ear first and influence her opinions, but Aya had resisted telling Minerva anything but the most basic of information about Gensokyo. Was leaving Minerva with an open mind truly so important?

No, that was implausibly inefficient for all the parties involved. Discard that hypothesis, and create another.

"The assistance you received must be efficacious indeed, if you managed to complete it so soon,
and go out of your way to pick up a prospective youkai hunter," Aya was saying. "One would think that the true priorities had been reversed."

"N-no, not at all," Nakamuraya said, mopping his brow. "The business was concluded satisfactorily, and the results will be forthcoming, if all goes well... I mean, all will go well, of course. There's nothing to worry about."

"You are strangely confident."

"Arrangements, yes, arrangements have been made." Nakamuraya spoke quickly, a condemned man confessing all he could before the noose was tightened around his neck. "And in the end Kuzunoha-san wasn't interested in travelling here, said that there were things to take care of in the capital, but now we have Margatroid-san the magician, don't we?"

"Libri vermis," Minerva corrected. "A mere scholar. But yes, I am presently engaged in finding a solution to your village's problems with unwelcome intrusions of the supernatural variety."

"Yet everything you have done," Aya said, "has been at the behest of..."

"I had no choice, Hieda-sama," Nakamuraya pleaded. "I was just following instructions. I, I understand your disapproval, truly I do, and I wish there was some other way, but these things happen. There's no helping it."

Before Aya could press further, the rapidly growing sounds of chatter drew their attention, as classes were dismissed. Nakamuraya took this opportunity to flee, mumbling about unfinished work at his desk.

"Aya!" This was from Miho, who was waving cheerfully towards them from the midst of a small clump of children. "Over here!"

Aya's disappointment at Nakamuraya's escape smoothed over into her usual quiet fondness for her cousin. "Good afternoon, Miho. How did lessons go?"

As Aya and Minerva approached, Alice detached herself from Miho's side to scuttle towards Minerva's skirts. Minerva absently patted the child's head.

"Quite well, actually!" Miho was saying. "I might see if I can get a full-time position here. Kamishirasawa-san is looking for more volunteer teachers to... ah, where are my manners? Everyone, this is Hieda no Aya-san, a very important person. And this is Margatroid-san, a guest who will be living with us in the village for a while. Say hallo!"

There was a general toccata of greetings from the handful of students clustered around Miho. Minerva guessed them to be between six to eight; Alice was already viewing them with the smug superiority of her extra years.

The other students of the school were dispersed throughout the area, with the older children gravitating to their little cliques, beyond the supervision of their teachers. Minerva noticed more than a few of them hurriedly averting their own stares at the strange foreign sorceress surveying their school.

There were less than forty students all told, with the oldest looking not more than sixteen.

"It is still a vast improvement from just a few years ago," Aya remarked, interrupting her aura of Very Important Person gravitas to read Minerva's thoughts. "Normally the parents would prefer work in the fields, or apprenticeships, over formal education, as soon as the child learns their way
around livestock or tools. Little by little, but all the more sure for that, we are changing."

In between dealing with the shy but persistent demands of her charges, Miho quickly outlined the curriculum of the school: mornings were taken up by lessons for all ages. Come noon, the younger children would go down to the village for lunch, accompanied by their teachers, before returning for afternoon classes. The older students were dismissed at lunch; optional classes were available should they wish, which about half of them did. The rest returned home to learn their respective crafts or help out around the house.

Alice was thus in a peculiar situation: by age, she should return with the younger students, but by her education level, she fit far better with the more advanced classes. Enduring the afternoon's simple lessons would probably bore her to distraction.

"It's all a work in progress," Miho admitted. "We'll probably straighten out all the details after a few more years."

"You have decided to continue teaching here?" Minerva asked.

"If Ryoutarou lets me, but there shouldn't be any problems there." A broad grin. "It'll give me plenty of practice with children, after all."

"What about you, Alice?" Aya said. "Are you interested in enrolling in Kamishirasawa-san's school?"

Alice indicated, with a wiggle of her hand, that the answer was yet unknown, and she would need a few more days and classes to decide.

"Fair enough," Minerva said. "At least there should be no objection to a shopping trip for stationery?" None were raised, and Alice seemed tolerant of the idea. "Aya-san, Miho-san, if you'll excuse us?"

Aya nodded. "We shall meet you back at the mansion."

As she departed, Minerva gave a small wave to the two servants loitering in the background, prompting them to come to some sort of attention. Since Aya would be staying at the schoolhouse with Miho, their responsibilities lay here. Minerva could not help her relief at being free from the polite, unobtrusive, and yet nigh-constant surveillance, even if the target of their watchfulness was not Minerva herself.

Minerva and Alice picked up some food on the way to the shops, to serve as their walking lunch. Chicken skewers, slathered in a dark sticky savoury sauce, putting Minerva in mind of the usual fairground foods, strong of taste and dangerous to moderation. Alice was perfectly content with this meal, attacking it with vigour now that she was temporarily assured not to lose any more milk teeth.

Their purchases included yet more notepaper, pencils, and a Japanese dictionary; Alice's weak subject at the moment was that language. Books to practice her reading comprehension skills on would presumably be available in the Hieda mansion, but Minerva also added a couple of collections of children's short stories as supplementary material.

The shopping trip turned general from there, after Alice had shown an interest in some soft fabrics, suitable for making doll clothes. This led to a congenial discussion with the shopkeeper on needlework, the cautious purchase of some short lengths of lace, directions to other stores of interest, and an afternoon spent most agreeably.
Almost without realizing it, they found themselves at Kirisame's store. The oddities and curios that were stocked within fascinated Alice, who flitted among the shelves, her attention caught by one trinket after another.

"Be careful with that," Minerva instructed. "If you break anything, you'll have to pay for it out of your own pocket."

"It's all right, Margatroid-san," Maria said indulgently. "I'm sure the girl..."

"Alice. She's under my care, at least for now."

"A lovely name. I'm sure Alice will be careful."

Alice nodded quickly, and clasped her hands behind her back to show willing.

"Was there anything in particular you were looking for?" Maria asked, diplomatically avoiding the subject of Alice's precise status with regards to Minerva. "I've managed to track down a few more of the items you wanted, but it will take some time before they arrive here. The disruption of the trade shipments to the village was not kind to business."

"Disruption?"

Maria shrugged. "It started about a few months or so back. Something about new bureaucratic rules on goods travelling through the country. I never could get a straight answer from the village business association, but I think it had much to do with taxes, or smuggling. Possibly both. Whatever the reason, the shipments haven't recovered."

Before Minerva's arrival to Gensokyo, but not by much. A coincidence?

Minerva shifted away from the counter, as more people entered the shop. "Well, I'll not keep you from your business," she said amiably. "I will browse around to see if anything catches my eye."

Kirisame's store was spacious but inconsistently lit; Minerva secreted herself in a shadowed corner, ostensibly inspecting a line of luck charms, but keeping an eye on Alice's movements, as well as the other customers. Most of these were not particularly notable, being men and women of the village looking for something or other for their homes or themselves. Conversation pieces, from all over the world.

One of them, a young lad of twelve or thirteen, was surely no customer. In fact, he slouched through the store in the manner of disaffected adolescents everywhere, but roused himself to give a quiet, warm greeting when he reached Maria. Maria, for her part, returned the affection, and the boy proceeded into the back of the shop with the easy familiarity of...

"Her son," said a voice beside Minerva in English.

Minerva set down the small silver handbell she had been holding with a sort of steely resignation. "I hope you realize that you have probably wasted both your time and mine with these charades, Miss Hearn."

Violet Hearn smiled easily, shifting her folded parasol to the crook of her arm. "Hardly a waste. I admit I was moderately alarmed when you failed to arrive at the capital as instructed." There was the slightest hint of emphasis on the last few words. "However, you have made your way to Gensokyo without undue delay, and so matters are proceeding as originally planned."

"Were you waiting for me long? Or did you send a representative in your stead?"
"The latter. I'm afraid Miss Aya got wind of my schemes, and arranged to intercept you before my representative could react. The difference is trivial, and perhaps it is better this way. You have a great ally with the Hieda family, Miss Margatroid."

Minerva turned to face Violet. "And you? What are you, Miss Hearn? Are you my benefactor, my ally, my rival, my foe, my puppeteer?"

"I am, as I always have been, my own counsel," Violet said, picking up a porcelain figurine of a cat. Some quirk of the manufacture had given it two tails; Minerva was not certain if this was an error or deliberate. "But know that from the beginning, even to the end, I will do anything to save this land. In that, if nothing else, I am firm of purpose."

"I have met your monsters," Minerva said. "Your youkai. It was only a fairy, simple and weak, but not something the humans here need assistance with. Even now, they don't seem to act as though they are under threat of destruction. What do they truly fear?"

Violet sighed, and replaced the figurine on the shelf. Minerva had the impression that she had failed some kind of minor test. "Fear takes on many forms, Miss Margatroid. Yes, the people of Gensokyo are cheerful, honest, and not given to wild panic. And yet have you not already heard of their warnings and advice? Do not venture too far out of the village. Never travel singly. Always have a friend walking beside you. Should you meet something not quite the same as yourself, be polite and respectful. Be wary of giving offense, however inadvertent. There is nothing to fear, if you follow the rules, but ask yourself, Miss Margatroid: why are these rules there?"

Minerva was silent for a moment. "And you still require me to save the humans from monsters?"

"That is, indeed, what I require you to focus your efforts on doing," Violet agreed. "I will endeavour to provide assistance when I can, now that I am back in Gensokyo."

"A gracious offer, but, alas, suspect."

"I pray that you will accept my help in the spirit it was given," Violet said without hint of offense. "Although I understand that Miss Aya will most likely not approve of my interference. She is a cautious one, and rightly so. I will leave you your research, and its conclusions, so that you may be certain that what you know is correct and true. For now, I shall simply point you in a useful direction, and say that it may be productive to explore the dark forest not far from the village."

"To what end."

"There may be interesting discoveries found there," Violet said. "To whit, certain mushrooms which are native to Gensokyo, and Gensokyo only. Examining them and their properties may reveal further insights into the nature of this land; I believe you have already initiated your own experiments in this regard, and I hope this will hasten the process."

Minerva considered this. "I will keep it in mind, and thank you for the information, Miss Hearn."

"You are most welcome. However, do beware of the forest's mushrooms; they are of Gensokyo, and all that implies. Do not bring along your young ward, for instance," Violet said, glancing significantly at Alice.

"I had not considered doing so," Minerva said stiffly.

Violet bowed her head. "My apologies if I have given offense, Miss Margatroid. I wish you all the best in your task, both the immediate and the greater."
"A task that, for some reason, you could not accomplish yourself," Minerva noted.

Violet bobbed in a brief shadow of a curtsey. "But I am not the greatest magician in the world, am I? Do excuse me, Miss Margatroid, and good day." With that, she swept out of the store, humming a nameless tune to herself.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is Latin for "from the chair", ie a pronouncement from the high chair that is a throne, to be followed or accepted without question.

The exchange about fog and rain was an attempt to set up a clue that might eventually lead to some reference to Ame-no-sagiri (the fog after rain), made famous in *Persona 4*. I don't think it's going to work out now, but I might still use it in future.

Maria's son created for the purpose of explaining the continuation of the Kirisame name in present-day Gensokyo.

Since I don't think it will matter or come up in future, Violet's representative in Tokyo was actually Ran.

"Libri vermis": "Book worm". I'm not the first or only one to make this joke, since there was a mission in *City of Heroes* that had an enemy by that name.

*Intentional Reference Count:*

"Nakamuraya!" (the inspiration for the "SHAMEIMARU" meme), Chen, *Super Mario RPG*
Minerva was beginning to get very tired of carefully inspecting every mushroom she found, for the forest she was exploring had an astounding number of mushrooms, of every size and shape. Some of these she recognized as specimens found elsewhere in the world, and thus not particularly interesting; some were otherwise familiar, but had some unusual property or other that might or might not have been significant. The latter went into a small sack Minerva carried, securely bound to the belt at her waist.

She was considering in her own mind whether the pleasure of simply sweeping everything she encountered into her sack would be worth the bother of having to pick it all apart later, when suddenly a white rabbit ran close by her.

There was nothing so very remarkable in that; nor did Minerva think it so very much out of the way to hear the rabbit mutter some litany of complaint under its breath. Much later, it would have occurred to Minerva that she ought to have wondered about this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural.

But when the rabbit actually took a silver pocket-watch out of its pink dress, and looked at it, and hurried on, Minerva shot to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a pocket-watch or a dress of any colour to take it out of.

The youkai would certainly have noticed Minerva by now; she was not making any effort to conceal herself, even as the forest surrounding her was full of nooks and shadows and hiding-places that interfered with lines of sight and senses of direction. And yet, the youkai seemed more concerned with keeping some appointment, for which it might very well be late. The good Reverend Dodgson had never seemed so prophetic.

Minerva scrambled towards the path the youkai had taken, half expecting to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole. Of course, Minerva was already in the Wonderland of Gensokyo; where would such a hole lead? Back to the mundane world of arithmetic and grammar lessons for little Alice, but Minerva was too large and too grown-up to fit into any rabbit-hole a young child might have fallen into.

The youkai could be seen in glimpses and hints, at the very periphery of Minerva's vision, for every time she turned, the youkai was no longer there. It was as quick and agile as its lagomorphic roots would suggest, and Minerva cursed as she became entangled in some tenacious underbrush. Every delay, however minor, would have been opportunity enough for the youkai to make a clean escape, but it seemed content to toy with the outlander witch who had trespassed onto its territory.

In her apprenticeship as a witch, Minerva had learned the basics of woodland tracking. She had been an indifferent student at best, city-born and city-bred, relying more on simple spells and charms to solve any immediate problems in this area of expertise. None of these spells would be useful in the heat of the chase, and Minerva was loathe to let the youkai go, now that she had seen it. She could imagine Aya's needle-sharp jibes even now...

The kerchief wrapped around her nose and mouth to filter the spores from the forest's mushrooms hampered her exertions; she pulled it off, trusting that the speed of her passage would hopefully protect her from the more inconvenient aspects of the fungoid infestation. The air was almost hazy
with spores, giving it a thick, unpleasant smell that Minerva could not easily place; it put her in mind of too many old but unforgotten things, from the choking smoke of London's factories to the crowded stench of the Billingsgate fish market.

At least the youkai was making its presence known. Pink was not a useful colour to wear in the dark forest, and the youkai made full use of its visibility to dart in and out of Minerva's vision, even as she blundered through the undergrowth, clumsy and noisy and increasingly put-upon.

With her frustration mounting, it took just a bit too long for Minerva to realize that her foot, expecting solid ground, had encountered empty air instead.

Fortunately, the pit was not too deep. It seemed hastily-dug, and Minerva sustained no injuries, save to her pride. A child's trap, and the youkai had led her straight into it.

The floor of the pit had been liberally carpeted with mushrooms, and Minerva's fall had raised impressive clouds of spores. Minerva sucked in great lungfuls in surprise, hacking and coughing as she climbed to her feet again. The magic of Gensokyo had imbued these mushrooms with far more potency than the usual psilocybin, and judging from the way her vision swam, Minerva had ingested rather too much at once. She crouched, wheezing, waiting for her balance to return.

The youkai was nowhere to be seen. Minerva laid even odds on whether it had finally bored of the game of hide-and-seek, or if it was busily constructing new traps for the funny foreigner to fall into.

Taking stock of her surroundings, Minerva found that she had arrived not far from an unexpectedly sunlit clearing, in which a decrepit-looking house stood in the midst of uncut grass.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Minerva murmured, stepping cautiously towards the house. It looked as though it had been transplanted directly from the English countryside; hardly the sort of thing one would expect to see in the middle of a gloomy forest in Gensokyo, Japan.

Where had this house come from? Why was it here? Was this the abandoned dwelling of one of Gensokyo's former youkai hunters? Why would it have been built in the middle of a forest?

Minerva stopped just short of the house, spotting some markings on the ground. The grass had been bent here, in a wide pattern that extended all around. Minerva was put in mind of those mysterious drawings on crop fields that caused many a stir back in England, even after they had been revealed to be the work of capricious weather and imaginative pranksters. True sorcerors usually had far better locales to practice their arts than the middle of a cornfield.

So: Minerva had lost a youkai, but found a house. Exchanging one mystery for another worked out to be an equitable trade.

The interior of the house was brighter than it seemed from the outside, albeit still dimly-lit. Most of the illumination came from the beam of sunlight shining cheerily through a large hole that had been punched through the roof and the upper floor, as though by a giant fist.

Minerva picked her way through the aged debris cluttering the floor, casting the occasional nervous glance upwards at every ominous creak; it would be particularly ignoble for her adventures in the Orient to be cut short by the collapse of an architectural anomaly. Fine particles danced in the light, and Minerva caught the scent of something sharp mingling with the ever-present spores. Wood smoke, perhaps, or rusting iron? The oxidization of some substance newly exposed to air, if Minerva's experiences with alchemy held true.
Up the decaying staircase, which creaked with every step. The upper level of the house held several rooms, each barren of furniture, interest, or youkai. Bedrooms, guest rooms, servant’s quarters, and lumber rooms, no doubt.

A window frame had been knocked loose, and the lighter colour of the wood around the damage indicated it had been done recently. Minerva peered outside, down at the patterns in the grass that girded the house. Taking out her notebook, she spent a few moments sketching the salient points, annotating when she could. Something had happened on this location not long ago, that much was certain; the patterns on the grass had not yet succumbed to the elements. New patterns, old house, new damage to the window. Clues accumulated, but hypotheses formed much more slowly.

Pondering this latest development, Minerva stuffed her notebook back into her coat pocket. She took a few steps back, and promptly fell through the floor.

It may have been unfair to blame the youkai for this, Minerva reflected, when she next regained consciousness. Time and rotting wood would have had the same effects, waiting for someone suitably unwary to place their weight on that exact weak spot.

How much time had passed? Minerva appeared to be in the cellar of the house, illuminated only by the faint glow of, unsurprisingly, more fungus. The bioluminescence lent an eldritch glow to the air, casting unnatural shadows that crept along the edges of consciousness. Matters were not improved by the revelation, when Minerva finally roused herself to climb out of the hole she had made, of a sea of staring eyes.

Minerva had finally gone mad, in this land of fantasy and illusion. It was a small comfort to know that she had picked an eminently appropriate place to do so.

In fact, there were several advantages to this situation. Minerva brightened, when she considered that she would probably meet an untimely and instructive end to whatever terrors still lurked in the dark. Not only would this save everyone a lengthy and expensive repatriation to England and Bedlam, it would also serve as an important object lesson to any other would-be youkai hunters.

Best be up and about it, then. Minerva curtsied towards the eyes, felt that this was somehow insufficient, and turned it into a dramatic bow, swooping low. When she came back up, the eyes had disappeared.

Minerva was in the cellar, but it was not the same cellar she had just emerged from. It looked very much like it, and may have passed for it in an uncertain light, but this one was clean and free of fungal influence. An oil lamp in the corner cast its feeble illumination across a bare wooden floor, free of any blemishes from someone falling two storeys. The ceiling appeared to be quite pristine, and missing any obvious holes.

Minerva rotated slowly, surveying her surroundings. Egress could be achieved through a small doorway in an inconspicuous corner, leading to a stairwell lit by more oil lamps, rather better than the empty cellar.

The stairs led to a corridor in the Oriental style, complete with those impractical paper sliding doors Minerva had associated with that architecture. The European manor was clearly somewhere else, along with Minerva's good sense. Minerva wished them the benefit of each other's company.

She slid open one of the sliding doors, only to be confronted by another set. Opening this as well revealed yet another, and another, and another. Each antechamber was lit by identical lamps; no other furniture could be discerned.
"What manner of fool would build his home in such a pointless and infuriating manner?" Minerva said aloud. Her voice echoed oddly down the endless corridors, the paper dividing the rooms softly rustling their assent.

More paper doors were opened to reveal even more, and Minerva was no closer to her ultimate destination, wherever that may have been. Occasionally the path branched; every door only presented its copy beyond, and Minerva found herself wandering at random.

Somewhere else, Minerva must be lost in her own mind, and her newfound insanity was what allowed her to perceive the illusion of Progress, for that must be what the endless rooms and corridors represented. Japanese style, to signify her Predicament, being trapped halfway across the world from both civilization and reason.

As derangements went, this was less than satisfactory.

"In another moment down went Alice after it," Minerva sang, "never once considering how in the world she was to get out again." What else had happened, down that rabbit-hole? Snatches of rhyme and dialogue floated past Minerva's consciousness. It would make the tedium of opening the endless doors far less disagreeable, at least. "Do cats eat bats? Do bats eat cats? Do cats eat bats? Do bats eat-"

Minerva froze, her hand on the next door. Had that been a meow? No, it had sounded like a startled feline yelp. The hypothetical cat must have been surprised by Minerva's presence here. If Minerva had to guess, she would have placed the cat not more than one more door away.

She listened intently, but no sounds of little paws scampering away was evident. The cat must still be frozen in astonishment, waiting for the scary noisy human to depart.

Even a cat would be a tolerable companion, in this maze of doors. Minerva boldly threw open the door, and was immediately struck by a wall of heat and noise.

Before she could retreat, a wave of bodies pushed her forward into their midst, sending her hither and thither like a piece of jetsam on a roiling sea. Minerva caught impressions of revelry, laughter, sweat, alcohol, torches, and a constant booming drumbeat that thrummed out no rhythm she was familiar with. An opan pavilion of some sort was being paraded in the near distance. The entire procession seemed to be taking place in a large cavern of some sort, which seemed to be the site of an enormous subterranean city.

Someone pressed an object into her hand; Minerva clutched it grimly, hugging it to herself lest it be snatched out of her grasp by the motion of the crowd. When she was finally ejected into a pocket of calm, she turned it over in her hands. It was an irregular shape wrapped in a sort of parchment. She carefully unwrapped it, absently folding the parchment over and putting it in a pocket.

The package turned out to be a mask, bright red, depicting a fierce warrior with an extraordinarily long nose.

Everyone was wearing such a mask. And as Minerva stared, the pocket of calm she had found herself in gradually rippled outwards, silencing the revelers, who all turned to stare back with varying degrees of inebriation. Eight hundred bright red noses pointed accusingly at the intruder in their midst.

The man on the pavilion stood. From the luxurious state of his robes, he must be a very important person. Basso syllables rumbled forth, extending vowels to the point of unintelligibility, at least for Minerva's textbook-learned Japanese. This continued for some time.
Finally, the man stopped, and seemed to wait for some sort of response.

Minerva glanced down at the mask in her hand. "I don't know what you're so stuffy about," she said in English, "but I assume this Caucus-Race is over."

The crowd erupted in outraged howls about half a second before Minerva hurled the mask at the man on the pavilion with unerring aim. Then she ducked and ran into the nearest house, barreling through the open doorway, slamming the door shut behind her, and-

Silence. Minerva stood, breathing heavily, in the maze of doors once more.

There were no signs of an angry mob surging forth to burn the witch. Carefully, Minerva cracked open the door she had just come through, and saw only another antechamber beyond.

If that had been a hallucination, it had been a very convincing one. Minerva could still smell the rice wine and smoke, a lingering memory. And in her pocket, the piece of parchment that had been wrapped around the mask.

On the off chance that the parchment contained some message, Minerva unfolded it and smoothed it out. In the light of the oil lamps, images began to play across the page in a shadowy dance.

Minerva blinked. Moving pictures on a static piece of parchment was certainly something new. Evidently taking leave of her senses had made her imagination much more interesting.

Minerva rubbed at the parchment, and the pictures rippled at her touch. She flicked at a likely spot, and the image coalesced into a sketch of what looked like a pocket-watch. Where had Minerva seen such a pocket-watch before?

The parchment abruptly blanked out. No amount of shaking or rubbing was able to resummon the images from before.

Curiouser and curiouser.

Since neither cat nor mob were likely to make another appearance, Minerva stowed the parchment, and steadily began making her way through the maze once more.

"And what comes after?" she said aloud. "A wise old Caterpillar, no doubt, perched on a mushroom and asking-"

"Who are you?"

Minerva's head snapped up, and she stared at the large black raven that had perched on the next doorway. "I beg your pardon?"

"Who," the raven repeated, "are you?"

Minerva curtsied. "Minerva Margatroid, if it pleases you, Sir Raven. Or even if it doesn't please you; I can't help being who I am, I'm afraid."

The raven clicked its beak twice, and took wing. Minerva watched it fly back the way she had come.

"The caterpillar would have been more useful," she complained. "At least it would have told me which side of the mushroom would make me bigger. Maybe all of this would make more sense from a different point of view."
The response floated back, making the paper surroundings rustle oddly. "Who are you?"

"Who are you?" Minerva countered. The paper responded, its rustlings forming the edges of words that remained out of hearing.

Disgruntled, Minerva stepped through the doorway, and found herself in a land of winter.

Or so it seemed at first. Gravel crunched underfoot, and Minerva stared around herself in surprise at what looked like a tree-lined path that extended to infinity.

Which was impossible, so Minerva revised her estimates; it was just a very, very long path, perhaps several hundred miles long, more than enough for the human eye and mind to accept as close to infinity. From the cherry trees on either side of the path, it was still sometime in summer, but the air had a chill that seeped to the bone.

A faint haze, almost like morning mist, hung in the air, failing to hide the bright glow of several points of light floating towards Minerva. Since this did not seem to be close to a marsh, Minerva doubted that these were the result of gas igniting. True fairy fire, then; quite suitable for Gensokyo.

The lights surrounded Minerva, staying just out of reach. Whenever Minerva tried to touch one, she always found that the lights were further away than they seemed, forever beyond her grasp.

The trees whispered in the breeze. The fairy fire danced along, and Minerva could hear the words beyond hearing, a jaunty little tune sung without music, set to the rhythm of her footfalls on the gravel.

O how could it have come to this
After all is done and said
Now we've got a silly English witch
Lost in the land of the dead

She thinks she's a youkai hunter now
Some kind of mystical detective
Won't anyone tell her please
That clearly her mind's gone defective

"Oh, be quiet," Minerva muttered. The singers seemed to find this hilarious, and bobbed along even more excitedly.

Japan! Japan!
Oh, what could she have been thinking
To travel so very far from home
On this ship quite obviously sinking

How doth the little magician
Know when she is done?
For you are old, Miss Minerva
And you're spoiling all the fun

An especially bold fairy fire darted before Minerva, and revealed itself to be a single eye, hanging placidly in space. Minerva found herself quite unsurprised at this, as the eye droned solo.

There once was a witch named Minerva
Who thought everyone would love her
We'll soon let her know
This isn't her show
And she'll finally get what she deserve-r

The rest of the lights joined in the whispered chorus.

She has her magic, her book, her name
Even that little girl-child so dear
But sadly, in the end she'll lose it all
There's nothing left for her, we fear

She knows very well by now
Pride goeth before a fall
And yet she still claims to be
The greatest magician of all

But stay! A word of pity
For the witch so very brave
To come all this way only to die
In a forgotten, lonely grave...

The wisps faded away with the mist, as Minerva stopped before a tree much larger than the others. It was girded by a gigantic, truly ancient rope, as thick as her waist, with half-rotted and illegible paper charms hung on it, spaced out at regular intervals. From the size of the tree, Minerva should have spotted it long before arriving; the fact that she had not done so was, once again, unsurprising.

At the foot of the tree stood an elegant coffin, upright. Beside the coffin, a grave had been neatly dug out, complete with a granite headstone in the shape of a cross. On the headstone perched a large black raven, preening its feathers.

Minerva approached the coffin, and read the discreet brass plate attached on the lid. There was no name; only a location, and a date.

East Hampshire, August 1867

There was what seemed to be the faintest of ticking sounds emerging from the coffin.

"Sir Raven," Minerva said.

The raven swivelled an eyeball towards her.

"Say 'nevermore'."

The raven gagged in disgust, and flew off into the distant skies.

Minerva paced around the coffin. It was really very well-made, of a sturdy dark wood. Unlike most coffins, however, this one did not seem to obey the laws of reality; when Minerva opened it up, she could see an expanse of forest stretching out inside.

A doorway in particularly poor taste, apparently.

Minerva stepped inside the coffin, and closed the lid behind her.

This was obviously not that fateful day in 1867, no matter what that brass plate said. The forest was one of the Oriental style, with long, thin stalks of bamboo serving the role of proper trees; therefore, Minerva deduced that she was still in Japan. Guided by the incessant ticking sound,
Minerva set off, knowing not where her destination lay.

The coffin-entrance was nowhere to be found now. All that surrounded her was bamboo. Clearly she had to find what she was looking for, or wander around this forest lost until she starved to death or met an especially ferocious youkai. These incentives quickened her pace.

The ticking finally stopped, just as Minerva pushed through a bamboo thicket to witness a rabbit youkai in a pink dress in the final stages of setting up a pitfall trap.

Even now that Minerva had gotten a good look at her, she could not give a more detailed description much later. It was as though the image of a young girl in a pink dress was superimposed over the image of a rabbit, in the manner of one of those stereoscopic optical illusions that were in vogue in Europe. Seen one way, she was a girl. Shift your perspective ever so slightly, and she was a rabbit. Rabbit and girl occupied the same space, and which she was depended on how you looked at her.

The rabbit youkai had frozen in shock at being discovered in the midst of trap-making, which was all that allowed Minerva to leap forward to tackle the youkai in time.

The youkai recovered almost instantly, lashing out with a powerful kick that slammed into Minerva's gut, knocking the wind out of her. Minerva's flailing hands grabbed onto something, and she yanked hard.

Something snapped, and suddenly the youkai was free, as Minerva fell back with her unexpected prize. But there was no time to see what it was, as she fell into the pitfall the youkai had just dug, except she was falling much farther than the pit's depth would have allowed. The world shrank to a narrow circle of light as a hundred thousand eyes blinked open around her, every one whispering a song.

Poor Minerva, lost to rhyme
And reason, base and sublime
Hasn't got a clue
What she should do
Tick-tock, you're running out of time...

Much later, Minerva finally realized, staring up at the full moon as she lay on her back at the edge of the forest, that she had not, in fact, gone mad. She was still quite sane, and as such she still had responsibilities, such as figuring out a way to become some sort of moderately competent youkai hunter, as she had been tasked to do. This was a job that needed doing, regardless of the throbbing headache pounding through Minerva's skull.

The events of the past several hours seemed as unreal as a fever-dream, and Minerva would have dismissed it all as a mushroom-induced instance of such, if it had not been for the silver pocketwatch clutched in her hand, quietly ticking away.

When Minerva finally reached the Hieda mansion, Miho was waiting for her, worry written clear on her face. "Where have you been, Margatroid-san?" she cried. "We thought you had been taken by the youkai! What happened to you? What have you been doing?"

"Exploring the area," Minerva said, "meeting the locals, and partaking of their fine traditions. May I come in now? I find myself in dire need of a bath."

Chapter End Notes
Chapter title from the song "White Rabbit", originally performed by Jefferson Airplane, but which I first heard via Blue Man Group. I saved this for a suitably psychedelic dream sequence.

No, I've never been high (due to being in Singapore, where they jail you for that sort of thing, and hang you for peddling it), nor do I wish to (personal preference). I've never even been drunk, despite trying quite hard a few times.

I don't actually know how canonical or not the whole "Sakuya's pocketwatch is called the Luna Dial" thing is, or if Sakuya uses her pocketwatch to time-stop, or even if Sakuya has a pocketwatch, but I thought it would be incredibly interesting if so. Hence this chapter.

This chapter was completely rewritten after first posting. I'm pretty bad at psychedelic dream sequences, which, along with other factors, is why the next chapter was delayed for almost a year.

Intentional Reference Count:

Alice in Wonderland (obviously), Tewi Inaba, Mayohiga, Touhou Tengu, Lunarian Paper, The Raven by Edgar Allen Poe (also referenced in American Gods), Hakugyokurou, Fanny Adams, Quicksilver (The Baroque Cycle), Luna Dial
"It's just a pocket-watch, isn't it?" Miho asked, watching the silver glint in the sunlight. She turned the watch over in her hands, inspecting the casing. "Does it open up? I don't see any keyhole to wind it up."

"Mm."

"I mean, everything that you've described sounds a little unbelievable. No offense, of course. But since you brought this back, that means something did happen to you, right? You don't just find pocket-watches in the middle of the forest. At least none in this condition. Is this real silver, do you think? It doesn't seem to have tarnished from age."

"Mm."

Miho peered worriedly. "Margatroid-san? Are you feeling all right? Should I call for the doctor?"

"Hm? Oh, er, yes, I'm quite fine," Minerva said, startled out of her thoughts. A short, distracted silence occurred as her memory, running excellently without supervision, supplied the one-sided conversation of the past few minutes. "I haven't a clue about the make of the watch, I'm afraid. Metallurgy is not my metier."

"What, really?" Miho waved her hands in a vaguely mystical motion. "I thought alchemists were all about that thing, you know, about turning lead into gold."

"That... well, it is certainly possible," Minerva conceded. "I know of a very few methods, in theory, although I've never had the chance to put them into practice myself. All of them are highly inefficient, however, and hardly worth the effort and expense. You'll notice how many purported alchemists of the old stars-and-moons stripe are always going around trying to raise funds, which puts into question their ability to create their own income."

"Stars and moons... like the costume in your luggage?" Miho said brightly.

"It's, uh, expected of me," Minerva said. "Or at least of people like me." Witches, wizards, magicians, and other charlatans.

"So you can't tell if this watch is silver..."

Minerva nodded. "Not without causing noticeable damage to it, at any rate. And I am reluctant to do so, lest the owner demands its return."

"Wasn't the owner a youkai?"

"Yes. Do think about that." Minerva settled back in her chair. Japanese tradition seemed to have something against the concept of chairs, which had posed a minor problem when Minerva had announced her intention to convalesce on whatever was the equivalent of the veranda here.

Two monstrously sturdy chairs had thus been brought out of dusty storage and dragged to the indicated location, accompanied by an equally hideous garden table. Miho perched at the edge of
her chair, practically vibrating with excitement at this unusual arrangement, while Minerva had gradually sunk deeper into torpor, letting Miho's chatter flow cleanly over her.

The gathered Hieda family had been astonished, albeit in their own separate ways, at Minerva's survival in the dark forest outside the village. Her tale of strange lands and experiences had been dismissed as Just Another Incident that happened to foolhardy travellers who strayed where they should not have.

The description of that strange chilly land with the giant tree had caused significant consternation, however. The servants had immediately fled, and the Hieda patriarch's ever-present frown had grown even more disapproving. Order had only been restored after Aya reluctantly performed some ritual that involved a white kimono, copious amounts of salt, and, after the first embarrassing attempt, a small stepladder for Aya.

Minerva could easily guess the purpose of the ritual, and had formally apologized for introducing spiritual impurities into the home of her hosts. This had won her a grudging nod from the elder Hieda, and a visit from the local village doctor to treat her lungs, still reeling from excessive spore inhalation.

"Eye of newt?" Minerva had said weakly, as the doctor puttered off to grind up a mysterious powder.

"We tend to eschew the use of unproven ingredients in our medicine," Aya had replied. With curiosity: "Does eye of newt and toe of frog and all the rest actually work?"

"Not to my knowledge," Minerva admitted. "Or at least no more than their component ingredients, easily obtainable elsewhere in greater quantities. Newt's eyes tend not to be sufficiently large."

The resulting concoction, mixed with water, had been predictably foul. A week's further dosage had been prescribed, along with plenty of rest. Later, Minerva had managed to task a convenient servant with fetching a list of ingredients for the potion. Anything that tasted so bad had to be doing something impressive to her system.

Alice had been concerned over Minerva's health, fetching pillows and hot water and generally fretting noisily enough for Minerva to gently order her out of the room while she got some rest. Minerva did have to admit that the impromptu puppet-shows Alice held at her bedside were entertaining.

"How did Alice come up with that little story? The one about the love triangle involving two brothers and a fickle woman?" Minerva wondered aloud. She was gratified by Miho's guilty flinch.

"Ah, well, the children like to tell stories," Miho attempted. "Alice doesn't say much, but she listens very well. And children do pick up on what their parents gossip about, even if they don't quite understand... I hope Alice changed the names at least."

"Unless the village has two brothers named Teapot and Writing-Ink feuding for the love of Lady Overcoat, I would assume so. Where is Alice, by the way?"

"Pesterling Aya about something or other, last I saw her," Miho said. "I couldn't tell what it was, except... yes? What is it?"

This last was to a maidservant nervously hovering at the edge of the invisible boundary that had surrounded Minerva since her return. Minerva had gleaned the impression that the salt-ritual had not been sufficient to cleanse her body and soul of whatever impurities it had picked up during her
sojourn into the house of doors, but nobody dared to ask the foreign witch to undergo the full performance.

The maidservant ducked her head in a quick bow, and whispered something to Miho. Miho nodded, and rose. "Margatroid-san, there are more deliveries for you- actually, it's probably best that you stay here and get some more rest."

"No, it's all right," Minerva said, rising as well. "I might forget the use of my legs if I indulge further in sloth. Besides, I'd appreciate some stimulation to prevent rotting of the mind, as well as body."

The deliveryman was Seiji, once again. The little gathering had gained two more members in Aya and Alice, who had wandered over to see what the fuss was about.

"I see you're still alive," Seiji said cheerfully as he unburdened himself of packages.

"And upright, ambulatory, and in possession of my faculties," Minerva returned. "What had the betting pool been?"

"Ah, that would be telling. I did make a pretty profit, however. On your safe return, of course."

"Of course. With your permission, Aya-san... that one goes to my room, that one to the shed outside, and this..." Minerva unfolded the wrapping. "Oh, yes. This is a present for you, Aya-san."

Aya gingerly accepted the offering. "A hand-bell," she said flatly.

"I did mention it the last time, did I not?"

"You did." Aya gave the bell a tentative tinkle. The sound rang clear and true. "My thanks. I'm sure it will be useful, in some strange, unasked-for circumstance that would seem highly improbable at any other time."

"Such things happen a lot," Miho opined.

"And this is an improbable land," Minerva agreed. "Is that all, Seiji-san?"

"That's all for the day, yes," Seiji said. "There's just one more... ah, Alice-chan?"

Alice had retreated behind Aya when Seiji arrived. Upon being directly addressed, she hissed in alarm, and darted towards Minerva.

"Look, Alice-chan," Seiji said, crouching down, "I promised you I'd show you something nice, right? Here, look at this."

The gathered group duly considered the item in Seiji's hand.

"It's a very nice block of wood," Miho said encouragingly.

"No, that's not- well, okay, maybe it is. But that's not all it is," Seiji said. "Is there somewhere I can work with..."

"I'll be heading back to my work now," Aya sighed. "Please do stay for some tea while you're here, Kirisame-san. I'm sure Margatroid-san and Miho will be happy to have you here."

"You can join us outside," Minerva said. "We've set up a nice little tea party out on the, er..."
"Over here," Miho said, steering Seiji and Alice to where the garden table had been set up. "There's a great view of the courtyard, which is really terrific, and it's been the pride of the estate for many generations...

Minerva caught up with Aya as the latter headed back to her study, still pondering the hand-bell. "Aya-san, did you manage to..."

"It was simple enough, yes," Aya said. "The term you want is 'tengu'. They're quite well-known in our mythology, and you might have seen a depiction of them yourself while browsing our library."

"Tengu... er..."

"Literally 'heavenly dog'. I'll write down the characters for you later. They are not always derived from canines, but are more often avian in appearance. The extended nose is an interpretation of a beak, for example. They are seen nowadays more as protectors and guardians, rather than actively malevolent, but they are fiercely... how would you say it? Territorial? They do not take trespassers lightly."

"What of the festival they were holding?"

Aya shrugged. "I have no basis for speculation. Many festivals are held for all sorts of reasons, including simply as a celebration of life. Your description was vague enough that it could have been anything, from the birth of an important heir to a ceremony for the gods."

"So I might have stumbled into some sort of version of Sunday service? It's a little rowdy for prayer, isn't it?"

"We do not sit quietly in a chapel to worship, Margatroid-san. When we wish to thank our gods, we dance."

When Minerva rejoined Miho and the others, Alice had evidently lost her wariness towards Seiji. Instead, the two of them were seated close together on the wooden step facing the courtyard. Alice was watching intently as Seiji expertly used a bewildering array of tools to carve out what seemed like a wooden doll's head.

"It's impressive, isn't it?" Miho said. "I'm going to get more tea. I'll be right back."

Minerva leaned in closer to the workshop in session. "I didn't know you could do that, Seiji-san. You don't look like you're capable of such skill."

Seiji paused in his woodwork long enough to direct a pained look at Minerva. "What did you think I was, anyway?"

"Well, I assumed you loitered around Maria-san's store until she sends you on errands..."

"I'm a carpenter," Seiji retorted, with mock outrage. "A really good one, see? I do all sorts of work, but I specialize in the little stuff. The fiddly bits that nobody else can do. I just help out at the store because, well..." He sobered. "Maria needs all the help she can get."

"Um." Heedless of her own dignity, Minerva clambered down to sit beside Alice. The little girl barely noticed her presence, focusing instead on the doll-carving. "Do you make dolls often?"

"Sure," Seiji replied. "Lots of them. Plenty of ways too. I've got a kiln behind my workshop; the old master said it was a gift from someone-or-other, and left it to me. So I can do porcelain too; learned the trick from someone who'd been to the West. Ah, but I've never been good at sewing, so you'll
have to ask Maria for that."

"Is there a high demand for dolls in Gensokyo?"

"Hm, not higher than the rest of Japan, I'd think. You wouldn't believe the kind of orders I get when the Hina-matsuri comes about. People trying to outdo each other in ostentation..."

"I'm sorry, Hina-matsuri?"

"A day for girls," Miho interjected, setting the tea tray beside them. Minerva reflected that at least the Japanese kept their floors clean enough to eat off of, should the need arise. "It's on the third day of the third month, and it's full of dolls, all different kinds. Some are put on display, some are for performances, and some are... nagashi-bina? Curse dolls?"

"You don't stick pins in them, do you?" Minerva said in alarm. Alice glanced up with interest at this change of topic.

"No, no, it's more, um, making dolls out of paper to carry curses and bad fortune away. Or set them on fire to burn up, sometimes."

"Oh. Yes, I can see how that could work." Another familiar variation on sympathetic magic; wherever humans created objects in their image, there would be rituals to take advantage of that resemblance.

Seiji set his tools down. "That's about all I can do for now, Alice-chan. No, don't touch it yet! Wouldn't want you to get splinters. Sandpaper and paint's back at my workshop. But you do get the basic idea, don't you? The trick is looking at the wood, and seeing the doll inside."

Alice nodded eagerly.

"I can give the doll to you once it's finished," Seiji added slyly. "It might take a while, but since the basic work is done, it should be pretty soon. What do you think?"

"Rank bribery is hardly the act of a gentleman, Seiji-san," Minerva observed.

"Good thing I'm just a humble tradesman, isn't it?" Seiji said, grinning as he packed his tools away. "I get to enjoy the occasional drink and wager and, of course, the temptation of more impressionable minds."

Alice eyed him with suspicion.

Minerva stood. "Would you mind terribly if we accompanied you on your trip back to the village, Seiji-san? I believe I've earned the right to stretch my legs a little. I'm sure the doctor won't mind."

"Are you sure, Margatroid-san?" Miho said. "I can ask for someone to follow you if you'd like."

"It's all right, Miho-san. I'm sure Seiji is, at least in this respect, trustworthy and reliable. Isn't that right, Seiji-san?"

"Absolutely," Seiji said.

"So that's settled, then," Minerva said, driving over Miho's next objection. "What about you, Alice? Would you like to come along as well?"

Still glaring at Seiji, Alice hopped to her feet, and sidled over to Minerva's side.
Miho smiled tightly. "I'll tell Aya about your trip, just in case. Be careful, Margatroid-san. Don't push yourself too much."

"I shall remember that, Miho-san. Thank you for your concern."

With a final worried glance, Miho departed, tea tray and all. Minerva supposed there was some obscurely Japanese reason the servants were not allowed to handle the cleanup, apart from their lingering caution over Minerva's spiritual cleanliness.

Minerva took Alice's hand in hers. "By the way, Seiji-san, could I have a look at the doll?" It was indeed quite well-made, for something carved in less than a few hours. Minerva handed it back. "Your bribe has been evaluated and found adequate. Even so, I fear that should you take too long to come up with suitable terms, the prize may be forfeit."

Seiji shrugged. "I'll think of something."

Maria looked as though she had been about to say something when Minerva entered, but thought better of it.

"Yes, I'm still alive," Minerva said wearily. "Does the whole town know about my little excursion?"

"It's not precisely a secret," Maria admitted. "If you don't mind my saying so, I hear there was even some sort of wager about, uh... something I didn't quite get the details of."

"So I've heard," Minerva said. Seiji had the grace to look slightly embarrassed. "What else has been going around?"

"Apart from the usual about being a youkai hunter from a faraway land, not much. There were rumours about how you scaled the mountain itself and single-handedly defeated its youkai, or that you were secretly casting a magic spell to strengthen yourself at the cost of the village, or that you fled back to your home country... it's nothing that hasn't been heard before."

About other youkai hunters, Minerva assumed.

Seiji cleared his throat. "Hey, mind if I take Alice-chan to the workshop? I want to show her the dolls in progress."

Minerva nodded consent, and Maria smiled. "Just be careful, Seiji."

"Where is Seiji-san's workshop, by the way?" Minerva asked, once the two left.

"It's not far from here." Maria gave quick directions. "The roads are usually well-travelled, so Alice should be in no danger. And despite how he acts, Seiji's actually quite responsible."

"Oh?"

Maria smiled. "I keep wondering when he'll settle down. Find someone who'll suit him, and take care of him. Seiji's... well, I wouldn't say he's not interested in women, but he never stays with anyone long enough to form a connection."

"So he's not spoken for at the moment?" Minerva asked, then wondered why she asked.

"Usually he makes an excuse and leaves," Maria sighed. "And someone like him... he's a common target for gossip, I'm afraid, and very little of it true. Sometimes I think he's deliberately trying to
cultivate that reputation of being a flighty person, just so he won't get pinned down by anyone."

"I admit I imagined that he would have had to fend the ladies off with a cudgel."

A quiet chuckle. "That nearly happened, early on. But, well..." Maria's smile faded. "I don't think he ever got over his brother's... my husband's..."

Minerva reached out to clasp the other woman's hands, unsure of the etiquette in these situations. "I'm sorry," she said.

"No, it's all right. It was a long time ago. My husband... just went out on a delivery one day. And he never came home. We... all of us, here in Gensokyo... we understood. We understand."

Saving humans from monsters, Minerva remembered. Why had Violet Hearn tried to fool her with that lie? Was it a lie at all? Or was Minerva trying to fool herself?

"Seiji took it especially hard," Maria continued. "But we recovered, bit by bit. So it's all right now."

Minerva awkwardly patted Maria's hands. "I'm glad."

"I do worry about Seiji, though," Maria said, returning the topic to a less painful nature. "Although I don't think I expected him to be so close to Alice. From what I hear, she's a little shy, isn't she?"

Minerva imagined little blonde Alice would have stood out in the middle of the other Japanese children. "Alice is... not very sociable, but she does have great enthusiasm for anything that matches her interests. Dolls are one of them, and Seiji-san's promised to show her as many as she wants. She has wisdom beyond her years, so I don't worry about her as much as I probably should."

"You can trust Seiji with Alice's safety, if it helps. He's surprisingly good with children."

"So he is," Minerva mused, before realizing what she had said. She covered her confusion with a Japanese-style bow. "Oh, uh, I've just remembered to thank you for all your help, Maria-san. Providing me with all the supplies I need... I hope I haven't been too much of a bother."

Maria accepted the thanks with a smile. "Not at all, Margatroid-san. It's good to see someone dedicated to their work. If I can be of any more assistance, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Yes, er... I hope my work is not going to be uncomfortable to discuss..."

"This is Gensokyo," Maria reminded her. "We understand."

Minerva's reply was interrupted by the return of Seiji and Alice, having just concluded what sounded like especially delicate negotiations. "Margatroid-san," Seiji said mournfully, "I hope you know just how dangerous Alice-chan here can be."

Alice strutted back to Minerva's side, smug triumph plain across her face.

"As I perceive your continued possession of the shirt on your back, I hope your losses were not too dire," Minerva said. "What did she haggle you down to?"

"Uh... the terms of exchange are secret and confidential," Seiji said. "Did you know Alice-chan can do this sort of... sulky pout that just batters down any resistance? You need to keep an eye on that little girl, Margatroid-san."

"Apparently I do," Minerva said, looking down in surprise. Alice adopted an expression of
"Although... there is one condition she insisted on, that requires the backing of a third party," Seiji said. "Alice-chan wants to come visit the workshop when she can, so she can see how the dolls are made."

"I wouldn't mind keeping an eye on Alice after school," Maria offered. "You can pick her up here when she's finished."

An unexpected request. Maria and Seiji were certainly close enough friends by now to entrust Alice's care to, and Alice herself seemed to want this. There were many risks for a child as young as Alice wandering about, much less in a village in Gensokyo, Japan. But with Maria and Seiji as guardians, surely everything would be fine, right?

Minerva hemmed and hawed for a moment, before making the mistake of looking at Alice's face.

"Ha, yes," Seiji said. "That's the expression I was talking about, Margatroid-san."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is French for "Ingres's violin", named after painter Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, and meaning a second skill beyond the one a person is usually known for. I first heard of the term in an episode of QI.

"When we wish to thank our gods, we dance." is a from a comment made by a poster on the RPG.net thread for Touhou (I think it was Shadowjack?), from an apocryphal story about a Westerner discussing religious rites with a Shinto priest.

Intentional Reference Count:

Macbeth, Hina Kagiyama, Alice's nails-in-straw-poppets habits
The excavation of the Experiment was carried out in the early light of dawn, by a team of three manservants drafted for this procedure. Minerva took full advantage of her status as an honoured guest from faraway lands to hover near the edges of the works, making an anxious nuisance of herself.

"Please calm down, Margatroid-san," Aya called out from the comfort of her vantage point much closer to the house. A blanket had been spread over the dewy grass, and the accoutrements of a noblewoman's picnic arranged painstakingly around it. Aya was perched, Japanese-style, on an expensive-looking cushion, as much a part of the arranged display as the parasol over her head. "Fretting will not hasten the result."


Aya took a sip of tea. This involved an unnecessarily lengthy procedure involving much rotation of the cup, and a general ritual expenditure of effort that Minerva was convinced was not worth the tiny mouthful of tea introduced into the body. "If you would care to join me here for breakfast, I promise the experiment shall not be disturbed until you see fit. You might even find the time passing much more agreeably."

Minerva settled reluctantly beside Aya. Her time in Japan had taught her how to sit like the Japanese did, folding her legs under herself, but it usually took only a minute or so before Minerva began to experience the twinges of discomfort, and about ten before the pain became unbearable.

Alice, of course, had taken to the style without any problems. Minerva was not certain she wanted to know whether her own difficulties were due to her Englishness or her age.

"What are you attempting to discover with this experiment?" Aya asked. "I don't believe you've ever given me a proper answer."

"It's not the sort of question that has a proper answer," Minerva said. She fidgeted, then decided that as a foreigner, she could be forgiven for sitting more informally than might have been considered polite. "I don't believe I can even begin to formulate a hypothesis without first seeing what comes out of that hole over there." At Aya's carefully blank look, Minerva relented. "At best, I can say I am trying to understand the sort of land I am in."

"Hm." Another sip. "Does this have anything to do with your efforts at the alchemy shed?"

"Well, no. That was just preparation. In the event of unexpected situations."

"I believe I detected sulphur..."

"My apologies. Sulphur is an essential part of many chemical and alchemical recipes." Whether in its elemental form, as part of a compound, or in its mythological guise of brimstone.

"Your lungs have recovered from your excursion into the forest?" Was that genuine concern in Aya's voice?
"Quite recovered, thank you. And I've taken extra precautions in my work, particularly when handling the more, er, infamous ingredients."

"I appreciate the care you have taken, Margatroid-san. Vapours of mercury do not have a reassuring reputation."

A controlled commotion was brewing at the site of the dig; evidently the servants had struck their objective. The three men crouched into a tight huddle, gesturing furtively with their hands in what Minerva recognized as a game. This took no more than a few seconds, after which the apparent loser muttered a curse under his breath, and hopped down into the hole to retrieve the container for the Experiment.

Minerva tottered to her feet, quickly making her way over to inspect the prize. There had not been anywhere near enough time for visible wear to mark the surface, and Minerva had earlier assured Aya that the container could be reused without worry. Judging from the cautious movements of the servants, however, it would appear the container would be discarded as a toxic hazard, the precious steel notwithstanding.

The servants backed away by a respectful distance, ready to begin refilling the hole once the foreign magician was done with whatever she was doing. With a grunt of effort, Minerva popped open the lid, and peered inside.

"I thought there would have been more of it," Aya said, having joined Minerva to look.

Much of the water had vanished, leaving about a third of it in the container, including the displacement of a brick of something metallic, a bit larger than a man's fist. Minerva reached in to scoop it out; the servants shuffled back several more steps.

"What is it?" Aya said, staring at the formless lump. It gleamed wetly crimson in the morning light.

"I haven't a clue." Minerva weighed it absently in her hands; it was rather heavier than it seemed, reminding her of nothing so much as blood-red gold.

"Margatroid-san..."

"It should be quite safe to handle, as long as no excessive vigour is used. If I were back in Europe, I would have called it orihalcum. Of course, if I were back in European lands, it would have looked different."

"Margatroid-san, did you just recreate an ancient, mythical, and very possibly entirely nonexistent metal on my property?"

"Come now, Aya-san, the alchemical process to create orihalcum is an open secret among the Esoteric Order. It just so happens to be rather exorbitant in materials, and so few alchemists bother." Minerva tilted the lump in her hands. "This, however, intrigues me."

"You mentioned interference by a youkai when you were creating this Experiment."

"That may have been a factor. And yet... I should explore this further, Aya-san. But it is a good sign."

"How so?"

"This metal is like orihalcum, even as it is unlike. There is a satisfactory degree of compatibility
with my own methods, which... well, it is too early to say. Would you join me for a moment, Aya-san?"

Aya signalled the servants to refill the hole and discreetly dispose of the container, as they walked back towards the house. "This... not-orihalcum. It is supposed to represent this land in some way?"

"That is a passable interpretation, yes. I was not even certain this experiment would succeed; I could not achieve a result in the Americas, for example, even though I had seen demonstrations by others. There is a certain level of skill required to create this metal, and I had feared I would have been found wanting." Which would have required another approach to the problem of saving Gensokyo, if Minerva's magic was ineffective in the large-scale.

"And yet you are confident that it resembles your orihalcum enough to be of use?" Aya gingerly reached out to touch the metal, before withdrawing quickly, as though in fear of being bitten. "I admit I am not as certain of its safety as you appear to be."

"Aya-san, this... whatever it is, is a mere substance," Minerva explained patiently. "It is a lump aggregate of metal, a gross sample of a given alloy, and provided the usual safety precautions are taken, it should be as safe as a slug of iron or copper. And like iron, it is what is made of it that matters, be it swords or ploughshares."

"Safety precautions?"

"Try not to ingest it. It will probably not be fatal, but it is still likely to be very uncomfortable."

"Noted. What are you going to use it for?"

"I will need to determine its exact properties first," Minerva said. "For the time being, however, I have a few ideas. Is there a reasonably reputable blacksmith in the village? Particularly a specialist in fine details."

"I shall make enquiries. Will there be anything else?"

"Hm." Minerva flicked a finger lightly at the lump of metal. "Alchemists are a notoriously close-mouthed and secretive lot, even when strictly unnecessary. Always worried about knowledge falling into undesirable hands, recording their memoirs in code and secret signals... and yet the means to create orihalcum are well-known. It seems all that is required are sufficient skill or sufficient persistence."

"Your point, Margatroid-san?"

"Aya-san, could it be possible that this metal, which can only be made in this land, in this country... might it not have been made before, and passed into legend? After all, that was how orihalcum itself was rediscovered." Or at least a metal that fit the description of Platonic orihalcum, whether or not it had truly been first discovered in Atlantis.

Aya inspected the proffered lump. "There is... I seem to recall something familiar, a description about a red metal..."

"Anything you can think of would be of great help, Aya-san."

"Mm... no, I'm sorry. I must have read about it outside of the Hieda library." Aya's tone was oddly certain, as though pronouncing a truth.

"Are you sure? You might have forgotten..."
"That would be impossible, Margatroid-san," Aya said mysteriously. "In any case, do remember that the library collected by my family is not an Alexandria. Our primary purpose is to compile the Gensokyo Chronicles, in order to enumerate and classify the youkai of the land. Obviously we began to branch out into other subjects as soon as the first records were archived in the days of my predecessors, but they are of a lower priority."

Minerva frowned. "Perhaps I can have a look for myself."

"It might take too long, particularly without a guide. I am not an expert in the more mystical aspects of Gensokyo, Margatroid-san. You may wish to consult with someone who is."

"The best translation I know," Hakurei said, "is 'crimson-coloured metal'."

Minerva sighed. "Accurate, and yet not especially helpful."

"It is said," Hakurei continued, "that certain objects of legend were made of this metal. The Imperial Regalia, for example. I think Hieda might be able to tell you about the sword of Kusanagi. It's really a very interesting tale..."

"Focus, Hakurei-san."

Hakurei sifted through the assorted bamboo scrolls and tattered books strewn about the floor. "Ah, here's one. The crimson-coloured metal was given to us by the gods... it doesn't say which gods, but that sort of thing usually doesn't matter."

"Yes, I've noticed you can't go more than a few paces in Japan without stumbling over some minor deity or other. How many are there? Eight million?"

"It is a metaphorical number," Hakurei said. "Meaning infinite, or myriad. There is a god in every object, and whether it is a stone or a waterfall or an idea or a long-passed ancestor, they are all gods."

Minerva frowned. "It sounds more as though you're referring to a sort of spiritual essence rather than divinity, Hakurei-san."

Hakurei tilted her head in puzzlement. "Are they not the same?"

Minerva bent her efforts back towards attempting to determine just what the slab of red metal, deposited between the two women like the residue of a guilty hound, was supposed to be. "This... crimson metal. It can be worked with? Smithed, molded, cast?"

"I'm not sure. Most of the examples we know through our histories have, er, come pre-smithed. The accounts generally agree that the metal has special properties." Hakurei referred to another book. "Unbreakable, eternal, unchanging..."

"I'll just hand it over to the first blacksmith I meet, and see what he makes of it," Minerva said.

"That is, of course, your prerogative." Hakurei sketched a bow from her sitting position. "If you would like, I can compile a summary of the legends and attributed properties associated with the crimson-coloured metal. It should be ready by the time you return from your visit to the caves."

It probably did not require a formidable intellect to guess Minerva's next objective, given the spelunking tools and mining lantern she had brought once again to the Hakurei shrine. "My thanks, Hakurei-san," Minerva said, rising to her feet. "I shall endeavour not to tarry too long this time."
If nothing else, Minerva achieved her destination rather more quickly than before, now that she was freed from the necessity of gathering ingredients. The rock cave-in was still as impenetrable as before, save for the hole through which the brimstone wind escaped.

This was, in a sense, the basic activity of alchemy, which carried over to a certain extent to the less mystical science of chemistry. When presented with an unknown substance, it often proved instructive to squirt every other substance at it, and record the findings. Something of interest may very well happen, assuming one had not blown oneself up by being at the wrong end of a vigorous reaction.

Fortunately, the reaction of the crimson metal to this area of heightened magical energy was quite benign, and even somewhat intriguing. Minerva dimmed the mining lamp to confirm the results, before turning the illumination back up to write it all down in her notebook.

This was repeated several times, under slightly different circumstances, all providing a wealth of data that filled Minerva's notebook with diagrams, equations, annotations, and speculation. Minerva sat down on a convenient rock as she scribbled furiously.

After an indeterminate amount of time with only the scratching of pencil on paper echoing in the silent cave, Minerva cleared her throat. "If you are going to stand there like a gaudy decoration," she said in English, "the least you could do is stay out of my light."

"My apologies," Violet Hearn said, shuffling a few feet to the side. "I had not intended to disturb your research. Pray, continue."

Minerva did so, finishing off the last of her observations with care. "I don't suppose you have any insights into our latest mystery metal?"

Violet fastidiously picked up the brick of crimson metal, turning it this way and that in the eldritch light. "I have not seen such a large and pure sample in a very long time. You are to be commended, Miss Margatroid."

"Thank you. It is high praise indeed, from someone so well-informed, so un-looked-for, and so implausibly present."

"Most of what you require by way of information should be available from your current sources," Violet said. "It is not a volatile substance, and may be worked as you wish. It is magnetically neutral, but it may have curious interactions with... other sources of energy."

"It must not be like iron, then," Minerva noted, "if beings like yourself can handle it without worry."

"There are a great many types of 'beings like myself', Miss Margatroid," Violet said, replacing the crimson metal. "Youkai are as numerous and varied as the Japanese gods."

"Do many of them try to pass as human too?"

Violet tapped her lips in thought. "That is a question with a complex answer. It is not so much that we try to pass off as human as that we are compelled to do so, I believe."

"Compelled? By whom?"

"By humans, of course."

"The same humans you wish for me to save, against the monsters?" Minerva said.
"Well, yes."

"Why not ask me to save monsters from humans, then?" Minerva waved a hand, indicating the rest of the world beyond the cave. "You should know as well as I do that regardless of the fate of a single village, there is no place for youkai, faeries, and creatures of myth, in this world of reason. That was why you sought me out in England, was it not?"

Violet laughed. It was a spontaneous, genuine expression of mirth, and Violet had to lean on her folded parasol for support as she wheezed, unladylike, wiping tears from her eyes. This nettled Minerva more than any practiced dismissal would have.

"Oh... my goodness, that is something I must remember," Violet said, when she had caught her breath. "Saving monsters from humans... that is a brilliant suggestion, Miss Margatroid. Simply scintillating. I must remember that for the next time."

"You may not be as fortunate the next time," Minerva said frostily. "I came to Japan for my own reasons. I doubt any other magicians will be as amenable to your manipulations."

"You misunderstand me, Miss Margatroid," Violet said. "I do intend to keep my word. I asked you to save humans from monsters, and that is what I aim to help you do."

Minerva folded her arms sceptically.

Violet sighed. "Youkai have a certain... relationship with humans," she said. "Almost symbiotic, when one thinks about it. It has defined our roles, even longer than time and memory. Youkai are defined by humans, and humans are defined by youkai."

"Symbiotic," Minerva said, "or parasitical?"

"Which came first, Miss Margatroid: gods, or humans? Will there be humans without gods to mold them? Will there be gods without humans to believe in them? Did gods create humans, or is it the other way around?"

"Oh no, I won't be trapped in a metaphysical discussion," Minerva said. "But wouldn't it be disadvantageous for you and yours, should I succeed in... saving humans from monsters?"

"Is that why you mistrust me so? Miss Margatroid, I have no intention of fading away into an obscure footnote in a later edition of the Gensokyo Chronicles, in a dusty old college for dusty old scholars. Even you would have to admit it is far too baroque a means of suicide."

"I don't believe you're listed in the Gensokyo Chronicles, Miss Hearn. Or whatever your true name is."

"Yes, I am sorely tempted to have words with young Miss Hieda. She knows of me, but she thinks I am a conflation of myths. That, or a pretender taking advantage of such myths. I do think I have a respectable entry in the, er, expanded version, however." Violet shrugged. "The name I am known there is as real as 'Violet Hearn' is. Or 'Minerva Margatroid', for that matter."

Minerva grumbled something under her breath. "A palpable hit."

"In any case, I would like to give some advice on your next paths of research-"

"The last time I took your advice," Minerva interrupted, "I found myself lost in a house of doors."
There was singing. I am not inclined to receive any further advice from you, Miss Hearn."

"Yes, I apologize for that... mishap." Violet said, uncharacteristically contrite. "I had not foreseen... never mind, it would take too long to explain. But I meant well."

"You meant to have me dance to your fiddle," Minerva accused. "Shaping my actions to the conclusion you desire."

"You decided to come to Gensokyo," Violet pointed out. "Of your own accord."

"As I told you, I have my own reasons-"

"Let me rephrase: you have come to Gensokyo. You are still in Gensokyo. Why are you still in Gensokyo?"

Minerva was silent.

"Please take your time in considering your answer," Violet continued amiably. "I should depart, however; there are some matters I must arrange." She paused. "There is one other thing..."

"Oh?"

"Take care of little Alice," Violet said. "It would... prevent certain problems."

"Is that a threat, Miss Hearn?"

"Merely a reminder, Miss Margatroid. I would not wish any harm on that child, any more than you." Violet bobbed her head politely. "Good day to you."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is the best I can find for the legendary metal hihi'irokane, as mentioned in Curiosities of Lotus Asia. Apparently it has remained in popular culture by being one of the rarer, higher-level stuff video game RPG equipment gets made of.

Again, all mythological information was obtained entirely from skimming Wikipedia and the first couple of Google pages per search.

Intentional Reference Count:

Curiosities of Lotus Asia, Yaoyorozu no kami, The Wizardry Consulted
After dropping in on the village smith with the slab of crimson metal and imparting intimidatingly detailed instructions on what to do with it, Minerva put the matter out of her mind to concentrate on other, more immediate studies.

This did not last more than a few days.

"I hope you hadn't planned on keeping your project a secret in any way," Seiji said conversationally, leading Alice back to the Kirisame store, where Minerva had been waiting. "Old Morichika's a good person and a better blacksmith, but he has this thing about gossiping to anyone who cares to listen, and plenty more who don't."

Maria gave Minerva a curious glance.

Minerva sighed. "I'll explain later, Maria-san. Seiji-san, please tell me this hasn't spread to the whole village yet."

"Who knows? Oh, Alice-chan wants some cloth, I think."

Thus prompted, Alice held up her completed doll for inspection. It was a young girl, appearing much the same as Alice's age, dressed in a makeshift cloak, awaiting the proper attire yet to be sewn. A red ribbon had been tied into its blonde hair.

"Very nice," Minerva said. "Although... this is the doll you were making?"

"The very same," Seiji confirmed.

"Even though it seems different in almost every respect..."

"We had to replace a few pieces," Seiji said. "Here and there. Mostly to make it better. But even if no actual part from the last time now exists in this instant within this doll, it is still the same one, yes?"

And the sword of my ancestors is still the same sword, even if blade and hilt and scabbard had all been replaced from time to time. "The essential doll-ness is the same, I see," Minerva said. "Well done, Alice."

Satisfied, Alice scampered over to Maria to begin negotiations. "And what would our little dollmaker like for her doll?" Maria said with a chuckle. "We have a wide variety of fabric and colours to please every lady, big and small."

Alice considered this. "Red?" she suggested.

"Red dress-cloth... I think I have just the thing. If you'd follow me, Alice; it should be somewhere around here..."

"To answer your question, Margatroid-san," Seiji continued, as the shopkeeper and her customer wandered away to the far reaches of the store's shelves, "it is not so much that the village knows, but more that most of us do not actually care. No offense, of course."
Minerva raised an eyebrow.

"How should I put it? Margatroid-san, you do have a reputation for being, well, what you are."

"A foreign witch from faraway lands with odd appearance and odder habits," Minerva supplied.

"Er, yes. Not in so many words, of course..."

Minerva relented. "Don't worry about it, Seiji-san. I take it my commission to the smith was seen as just another strange request in an endless series of such?"

"More or less," Seiji admitted.

"So how come you've paid attention?"

"The thing is, well, I was approached to help out a little. I don't usually work with metal, but I can do some stuff with... look, what I'm trying to say is, that red stuff you handed to Morichika is kind of creepy."

"Creepy?"

"Ah, it's difficult to explain." Seiji fidgeted with embarrassment. "When I'm working with something... wood, usually, but other materials as well... there's a sort of feeling that I'm just doing what the wood wants to do, right? Like with that doll. Carving out the doll that was in that wood-block, when it was in there in the first place and I'm just doing what the material tells me to do."

"And the crimson metal behaves the same way?" Minerva guessed.

"As I said, I don't usually work with metal, Margatroid-san. But that red metal feels like the easiest material I've ever worked with sometimes. Like it's anticipating what I'm trying to shape it into." Seiji shook his head. "Maybe I'm imagining it all. Where did you get that stuff, anyway?"

"Foreign witchcraft," Minerva replied. The crimson metal was apparently quite malleable for something with a reputation of being unchanging and unchangeable. "It's best if you don't know the details. But it's important that the commission be finished, preferably soon."

"Why? What's it for? More foreign witchcraft, in your own words?"

"I am not certain," Minerva held up a hand to forestall any protests. "It is an experiment, Seiji-san, an experiment on a grand scale. I have an inkling of an idea as to its probable results, but until I obtain more information, I simply do not know. Hence my days spent studying."

Seiji let out a breath, and leaned against the counter. "I have to admit, Margatroid-san, you're different from the others."

"The others?" Minerva said, then answered her own question: "Other youkai hunters."

"Gensokyo has... a sort of tradition for them," Seiji said. "They come from all over. Until recently, most of the Westerners who came have been, er, religious types. Hiding from the edicts from the capital, of course, but we've never followed those too strictly."

Minerva recalled some reading she had done about the Japanese government's uneasy, and often hostile, relationship to Christianity. Not that the Jesuits let it stop them, apparently. "What happened to them?"

"All this is mostly from stories, you understand," Seiji said. "But, well, pretty much anything could
happen. A lot of youkai hunters came and left. Some did get killed by the youkai, although not as many as you might think. But some settled down in Gensokyo. Quite a fair number, I hear."

Seiji seemed to be building up to some conclusion that justified his rambling conversation. Minerva wasn't sure if she was listening out of curiosity about the ending, or if she had come to the same conclusion herself and was just stalling for time. "I must warn you that I haven't had a lot of success myself. I could be one of the failed youkai hunters who'd... leave, eventually."

"Um. But there's something about... I can't describe it well, I'm afraid... there's something about the way you've been going about this youkai hunting business." Seiji took a deep breath. "I can't pretend to understand most, or even any of it. All this magic and stuff. But I just have this feeling, deep down, that whatever you're doing, it's going to work."

Outside the store, the bustle of a village going about its day could be clearly heard. Inside the store itself, Maria and Alice were still in the midst of picking out the perfect material for the doll's dress, their conversation lively. A hundred thousand other sounds flickered through the air, from every source.

None of which broke the awkward silence Minerva could not help imagine hanging between Seiji and herself.

She cleared her throat for want of anything more cogent. "Thank you for your confidence, Seiji-san. I promise not to let you down."

Seiji seemed to emerge from his reverie. "Um. Are you attending the festival, Margatroid-san?"

Before Minerva could reply, Maria and Alice returned with a handful of bolts of cloth and spools of thread. "That would be wonderful," Maria said, giving Seiji a significant glance that he pretended not to notice. "I think you'd enjoy the festival, Margatroid-san."

Minerva blinked. "It sounds delightful. It would probably be even more so if I knew what sort of festival it is."

"It's a sort of annual harvest celebration," Maria said. "The town council set the date for next week. Although it's not about the harvest itself, but more..."

"More about harvests in general," Seiji said, "and how we can have them in the first place. The festival pays tribute to the goddess of autumn and plenty, or something along those lines. Most of us just see it as an excuse to eat too much, drink too much, and spend too much money on knick-knacks. Which, if I may be immodest, I'll be helping to sell at the stall the Kirisame store is setting up."

"It'll be your first festival with us," Maria encouraged. "In Gensokyo, I mean. A chance to experience our traditions."

Minerva reflected on a Portuguese immigrant considering this tiny valley in the midst of Japan as her own home. But in prior conversations, Maria had revealed that she grew up in Japan, having arrived with her parents. Could Minerva acclimatize to such an extent? She still remembered England, and Hampshire and London and...

... her gaze fell onto Alice, following the discussion of festivals and parties with avid interest.

"Why not?" Minerva said with a smile. "I'm sure it would be lovely."
Minerva had offered to help Alice with the doll's dress, but the little girl had insisted on doing it herself. The doll was Alice's own, and she was determined to keep it that way.

The conversation with Seiji nagged at Minerva's mind, and she attacked her studies with a newfound ferocity. Aya eventually found Minerva in her rooms, surrounded by the aftermath of a cyclone of paper.

"Please don't step on anything that looks important," Minerva said without turning around. She continued rummaging through her luggage, tossing sheafs of notes carelessly behind her.

Aya picked up a piece of paper that had landed near her feet. "I assume this would be a part of the basic principles of Taoism your gentleman colleague had shared with you."

This gave Minerva reason for a puzzled pause. "Taoism?"

Aya flipped the paper around. "These are examples of trigrams from the I Ching, are they not?"

"Oh! No, they're... well, I suppose they are. But I was not using them for divination." Minerva stood, and picked her way over to Aya. "I scribbled them down more as a reminder to myself of the possibilities inherent in the binary system."

"Binary...? Ah, I see. Each unbroken line represents the positive, and each broken one the negative."

"Or the other way round," Minerva agreed. "I cannot claim any credit for the idea, of course; Leibniz had demonstrated the very same thing almost two centuries ago, even as he dismissed the mystical trappings. The important thing was that these symbols could be used for calculations no matter what form of arithmetic one had previously learned. Rather than, say, ten arbitrary symbols, all of which must be assigned, described, and explained, the binary system requires only two: a thing that is, and a thing that is not."

Aya studied the paper, silently translating jargon. "This will assist in your work?"

Minerva absently started stacking documents into small, neat piles. "Much of magic is mathematics," she said, "in the same way much of our understanding of the world is based on mathematics. Any system that advances efficiency in calculation should be considered, and not soon discarded."

"Only calculations, then? I would have thought you might want to experiment with fusing East and West in your magical studies."

Minerva shrugged. "I never did find the time to explore the divinatory meanings of the symbols. Seeing as I am as far into the Orient as I am likely to ever be, it might be a useful idea to start doing so now." She glanced around the room, strewn with papers. "I'll make a note of it, if you'd like. It could hardly make the clutter any worse."

"By all means," Aya said. She made her way to the desk, and sat daintily on the edge of the chair. "What are you searching for at the moment, Margatroid-san?"

Minerva gave the papers in her hands a desultory shuffle. "Answers, I suppose. Particularly on the issue of free will and predestination."

"A weighty issue. Have you solved it yet?"

"All the greatest minds in the world have been grappling with that question for as long as man..."
"learned to think," Minerva responded.

"Is that all? You should have no difficulty, then."

"Yes, give me a few days, and I shall have the necessary proofs ready for inspection." Minerva waved a hand irritably. "I feel like a puppet, feeling my strings pulled by a fairground performer who cares not how ragged my joints are getting. I’d break the strings, but I might fall lifeless on the stage and cause much embarrassment all round."

"I can understand that far better than you’d believe," Aya said mysteriously, but without much sympathy. "What prompted this peculiar bout of self-introspection?"

"Nothing, and everything."

"Oh, well, that explains it all."

"Aya-san, I have been in Gensokyo for well on three months now, and I still do not know why. Saving Gensokyo from the youkai is... an excuse. A statement that answers the immediate question, without penetrating the underlying matter."

"You are troubled by why you, specifically, are here in Gensokyo, and not, say, on a steamship on its way back to England," Aya stated. "And, being a Westerner, you believe that there has to be some kind of deeper meaning to your presence here in this land."

"Yes, yes, rem acu tetigisti," Minerva said. "I cannot accept that my role has been written out in advance, and that I am merely dancing to the puppeteer's twitchings while pretending I have a choice in the matter. And yet all the evidence points that way. If I have to suffer these strings, I would prefer to understand why."

"I doubt even you would be able to come up with a satisfactory answer, Margatroid-san," Aya said. "You are here, in Gensokyo. That alone should suffice for the immediate future. Have you ever considered what your presence in Gensokyo means?"

"In what manner?"

Aya pursed her lips. Minerva could easily imagine a lesser mortal throwing up their hands in a dramatic display of frustration at a particularly slow and unreliable pupil. "Margatroid-san, you are here. In Gensokyo. In Japan. After travelling across the world from your home country of Britain, a journey which you undertook without a single thought on how it was even possible. And you are not the first to do so. Can you not see the significance of this?"

"That civilization has spread across the world? Progress is inevitable, Aya-san. This is not so strange."

Aya sighed. "Not from your perspective, I suppose."

Minerva returned to her search. "To answer your first question, Aya-san, I am trying to locate my notes on the Philosophical Mercury."

"Elaborate."

"My conversation with Hakurei-san was instructive. Your Japanese Shinto religion has a tenet about how everything in existence has its own... spirit, of sorts. Its own personal god."

"A simplification, but I see your meaning. How is this relevant, though?"
Minerva picked up a pebble from a collection of similarly interesting examples, and tossed it at Aya, who caught it one-handed. "Why did you catch the stone, Aya-san?"

"You threw it at me."

"And it described a parabolic arc across the space between us, in accordance with the principles laid down by Newton and Descartes and other luminaries of history. The pebble does not need to know how to travel between us based on the forces I imparted upon it; it just has to be."

Aya turned the pebble over in her hand. "You are saying that there is no place for a god to inhabit this stone, if it merely obeys physical laws."

"A Spinozan point, but not the one I was making. The alchemists of times past believed that it is in the nature of a stone, or a planet, to obey these physical laws. It would be contrary to its nature for the pebble to hang in mid-air between us after being thrown, or to fly out the window in a contrary direction. And the same nature which allows the stone to behave as we predict is the same, in concept, with the one which allows you to catch the stone."

"Because it is in my nature to intercept rocks before they make contact with the more fragile parts of my person? It seems a stretch, Margatroid-san."

"I think so as well," Minerva agreed, "particularly given my own convictions on predestination. Whither free will, if all we can do is act according to our predetermined natures? And yet I find that there is a curious consonance between the workings of living, thinking beings, and the unthinking actions and properties of inanimate nature." A block of wood, which had hidden a doll. Had that doll-nature been part of the wood, or had it been Seiji's imagination and skill which put it there? "I believe the alchemical notion of the Philosophical Mercury and the Shinto belief in a god in all things are merely different views of shadows in Plato's cave, cast by the same truth."

"Fascinating," Aya said. "But I still think even that is implausible."

"I won't insist on the interpretation," Minerva said, "if only because I haven't worked out the details. And that I cannot do, without the notes I made on the subject. That's all beside the point, anyway; I am not a philosopher concerned with the rigour of my logic. I do not need this hypothesis to prove true in every aspect, but only true enough for my purpose."

"Which is?"

"The Philosophical Mercury, or the Shinto kami, or whatever its true form may be, has significant potential," Minerva said. "Significant in both senses of capacity and importance. You asked me once where I would find the method to save Gensokyo; I say now that this creative, motive energy, this spark, may be the key. If I could only harness it, I may be able to work some real magic."

Aya tossed the pebble back at Minerva, who replaced it among the others. "Then I wish you well in your endeavour. You may find Hakurei a more useful companion from here on; the role of a shrine maiden involves a great deal of supplication from the gods, after all. Perhaps she may be able to teach you how to trick them to follow your orders instead."

"Your advice is taken under consideration, although I have not had much success with religious representatives thus far," Minerva said. "I hope you do not mind if I continue to remain in close contact with my patron and... friend."

Aya allowed herself a small smile. "By all means. Though I cannot tell how fate may dictate our future, let us make the most of the present that we have."
"You believe that we have no power to change our own destiny?"

"We are all puppets dancing on our strings, Margatroid-san. Some of us may be able to cut our strings, but for most who do, the performance is over."

"Perhaps. Did you know the Philosophical Mercury has the property, or so it has been reported, of animation? Given a suitable set of circumstances, or a sufficient approximation of worthiness, the Philosophical Mercury may be able to imbue it with thought, consciousness, and life."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that, with a will and a little bit of magic, a puppet without strings can still dance on its own stage."

Chapter End Notes

I'm terrible at writing romances, never having been in one myself ever. Forever alone~

I am also terrible at writing proper seasonal variations, since I live in a tropical country. I keep having to ask other people what autumn is actually like, and when winter usually happens.

"rem acu tetigisti": "You have hit the nail on the head".

Intentional Reference Count:

"Are you sure you won't reconsider?"

"Quite sure," Minerva repeated. "Thank you for the offer, all the same."

Miho pouted. "It would look so pretty on you, though..."

Minerva had heard that the Japanese kimono, while largely bespoke, was created in such a manner as to allow easy modifications to fit different people. She wasn't sure whether this extended to the full head's height she had over Miho, but maybe there were artisans in Japan who spent their lives doing nothing but perfecting this very matter.

Nevertheless, she remained firm.

"Please don't worry about such trifles, Miho-san. I assure you I will enjoy the festival as easily in my own clothes as in traditional Japanese garb. If this experience is diminished by the sartorial misfit, well, there are always other festivals, are there not?"

Miho seemed unconvinced by this line of reasoning, but they had reached the front gates of the mansion by now, where horses and carriage were waiting in the dim light before dawn. Miho's husband was helping the servants pile the last of the luggage onto the roof, somehow contriving to reduce a creaking, swaying mountain of boxes and cases into a neat, compact stack, easily lashed down with secure rope.

"Rather than myself," Minerva continued, "how long will you be at, er... Nagano, was it?"

"Oh, yes, Ryoutarou and I will be there for, um, two weeks? Taking care of some business, but it's a lovely place to visit! You really should come along one day, Margatroid-san, if you've got the time, of course. I mean, it might be a little out of the way, but Lake Suwa is absolutely beautiful. Oh, but you really should stay here in Gensokyo for all the festivals and traditions, and we have a lot of them, and I hope Aya will be able to explain all of it, since there's such a fascinating-"

"All right, Miho-san, that will be enough," Minerva interrupted with a laugh. "Off with you, and have a safe journey."

"Pass along my goodbyes to Aya for me later, would you? She's always so stubborn at waking up early in the morning."

Minerva eventually did so, as she sat with Aya for breakfast a few hours later. Aya muttered something indistinct in response, as she waited for her brain to fizzle its way to true consciousness.

"Where's Alice?" Aya asked, when she finally achieved human sapience.

"Still asleep," Minerva replied. "She stayed up all night working on that doll's dress. I am glad to report that her efforts have not been in vain, and the doll is now suitably attired to face whatever the world may bring."

"Ah? And as for Alice herself?"
"Beg pardon?"

"Does Alice have any suitable clothing for the festival?" Aya clarified. "And please don't force your own views about outlandish fashions onto her, Margatroid-san. I have it on good authority that the child has been rather speculatively eyeing some of the examples Miho had brought out for the two of you."

"It is not about my views on fashion, Aya-san," Minerva said. "I do not have any particular grievance against the concept of the kimono, or the yukata, or whatever you might call it. You, for one, have been wearing a fine example of such on every occasion I have seen you, and it is a tremendously refined expression of taste and class. If little Alice wishes to wear a kimono, it is not my place to object, and indeed I would welcome such a decision, for I am certain she will be just as adorable in that attire as she is in any other. No, my sole cause for hesitation before letting that garb adorn my person is entirely practical: I simply will not be able to move in a kimono, Aya-san."

"You expect some event that will require swift action?"

"It does no harm to be prepared." Minerva held up a hand. "I do not claim that there will be an incident at the festival. I expect this evening to proceed with no more discomfort than the well-deserved consequences of over-imbibing. Nevertheless, I would feel ill at ease in clothing I have not had a chance to be familiar with. As I told Miho-san, there are always other festivals."

"Hm." Aya refrained from further comment until she had finished her breakfast. "At the least, I trust you will have no objections to waking little Alice and measuring out her kimono?"

"Certainly none on my end. Alice's opinion is another matter."

The little girl was duly rousted from her bed, but voiced no clear objection, as far as Minerva could interpret her sleepy mumbles. Alice remained in a soporific trance as a cheerful matron of a maidservant bustled about with the prospective kimono, which Minerva understood had once been Miho's own, a long time past. It was a simple affair; rather than the riot of colours most Japanese women wore while somehow making it seem tasteful and understated, this one consisted of a pink checkered grid overlaying yet more pink, and a waist sash of a deeper pink.

"Miho's favourite colour," Aya sighed, in response to Minerva's raised eyebrow. "She does not lack imagination as such, but she does tend to gravitate towards the simplest solution to a problem. As long as it is pink, she does not much dwell on the details of pattern, style, and occasionally taste." She shuddered discreetly. "There was that umbrella she was so fond of, when we were children. Hideous thing, as purple as an eggplant. I'm not sure what happened to it since, and I am not certain I wish to know."

Minerva gleaned from the proceedings that only minor adjustments would need to be made, and the kimono would be ready well in time for the festival. Alice seemed content with the pink on pink kimono, or perhaps she was still too drowsy to consider the consequences. Indeed, by the time Alice had finished preparing for the day and broken her fast, she wore the bemused expression of one who was reconsidering a choice barely remembered, and who would probably have changed her mind if she knew what her original mind had been.

The three of them, plus the requisite two servants trailing discreetly at a distance, ventured forth towards the village, which had taken on a sizzling anticipatory atmosphere. Preparations for the festival were well underway, facilitated by pithy commands shouted across great distances. A holiday spirit hung in the air, and not even the ominously heavy clouds overhead could dampen the general enthusiasm.
Immigrants Minerva and Alice peered up at the skies worriedly, but Aya was unperturbed. "The festival will happen, rain or shine," she informed them. "If it should be unfeasible, it can always be delayed. But this festival is of some importance to the village, having been held for as long as memory."

"A day where the village can gather to celebrate," Minerva mused. "An excuse to celebrate, rather. And, of course, there is the ever-present call of Tradition."

"Just so."

"Is it all fairground foods and drinks of a suspiciously homebrewed nature? Ale and cider and beer, with massive kegs containing something unidentifiable that purports to be made of apples."

Minerva paused. "Well, mostly apples. But Japanese drink rice wine, don't you?"

"Among others," Aya allowed. "Most of it is, as you rightly suppose, of varying alcoholic strength, tending towards strong and building up from there. In any case, there are also carnival activities to provide entertainment, along with the main events."

They had reached the main square, where a squat wooden tower was being set up by workmen who had presumably been doing this every year, and thus developed the uncanny telepathy of efficiency common to such groups. Minerva craned her neck, but could not see Seiji in their midst.

Alice skipped ahead a few steps, curious. She had insisted on bringing along her newly-finished doll, now bedecked in a red dress tied with lace and ribbons. The doll was as yet unnamed, but Alice had assured Minerva that she was giving the matter serious consideration.

"Don't get too far away, Alice," Minerva called out after her. "And do stay out of the way of the... whatever it is. What is it, Aya-san?"

"The central attraction," Aya said. "Or it will be, at any rate. There is a sort of... odori. A dance, performed by whoever is willing to join in, and open to all. The steps are well-known, and passed down from generation to generation. It is not difficult to learn."

Alice, returning from her explorations, overheard the last of the conversation. Concentrating, she pirouetted in place, ending with a questioning glance at Aya.

"Not quite," Aya said, suppressing a chuckle. "You will have an opportunity to observe and learn the dance yourself tonight, Alice. You may join in at any time you wish, once it is underway."

"Will you be dancing as well, Aya-san?" Minerva asked.

"Perhaps. One or two rounds, should the mood strike me. But I will most likely be observing another dance, down that direction." Aya indicated a broad street with a wave of her hand. "A stage will be set up there, and the Hakurei shrine maiden will be performing a kagura for the gods."

"Another of her duties as a shrine maiden, I take it?"

"Yes. This festival is meant to celebrate and honour the goddess responsible for a bountiful harvest, after all. In times past, the kagura would be held at the Hakurei shrine, but convenience being what it is, a Hakurei shrine maiden several generations ago consented to perform it here in the village instead. And so it has been, since then."

The conversation was shifted to the teahouse facing the main square, where they could observe the festival preparations in the shade. Tea and snacks materialized with no visible currency exchanging hands; Minerva wondered if the name of the Hieda family was considered lofty enough for actual
direct payment for trifles to be considered gauche.

"Ow!" Alice exclaimed, snatching her fingers back from the steaming sweet potatoes presented in a basket.

"Careful there, Alice," Minerva said, rather too late. "No harm done, I hope?"

Alice shook her head, glaring at the sweet potatoes and sucking on her scalded finger. With more care this time, she managed to extract one that was not so hot, and peeled back the skin, puffing at the revealed flesh to cool it down.

"Sweet potatoes are a seasonal specialty," Aya said. "Roasting them in dried autumn leaves is a tradition. They are often considered to be a sign of the season, and representative of the bounty of the harvest. Ergo, representative as well of the harvest goddess."

"Does this goddess have a name?" Minerva wondered.

Aya shrugged. "She is known as Autumn. Or, I should say, they are known as Autumn."

"They?"

"The two goddesses of Autumn, each with their own jurisdictions and responsibilities. The Autumn goddess of the harvest is the more well-known one, and the one we celebrate with festivals and offerings. The other goddess is of the changing leaves, when the trees turn to red and yellow and brown. And thus are we reminded of the beauty of Autumn alongside the bounty."

Minerva took a sip of her tea. "It feels somehow appropriate that, having come to the other side of the world, the seasons will take on different, almost opposite themes. Of course, summer and winter all fall on their proper months, unlike Perth. Yet it seems backwards for autumn to be a season of plenty, and spring to be associated with death and demise."

"You misunderstand, Margatroid-san," Aya said. "Spring, when the cherry trees bloom, signify the transitory nature of the world, as all things must pass eventually. And yet while we remember the ephemeral impermanence of the world, we may still appreciate and enjoy the beauty while it is present."

"Memento mori? A rather gloomy outlook."

"It has nuances," Aya said dryly. "Remind me to tell you of the poet Saigyou some day."

"I think I may have come across that name in one of the books Hakurei-san lent me... my goodness, Alice, how many sweet potatoes has it been?"

Alice swallowed her latest mouthful guiltily, and mumbled a sound that resembled something along the lines of "three".

"I would suggest refraining from consuming any more tubers for now," Minerva said. "You wouldn't want to get sick and miss the festival, would you?" Relenting: "If you'd like, we can buy some to take back to the mansion for later."

This arrangement was met with general agreement, and the proprietor of the establishment presented Minerva with a bag of sweet potatoes that was probably moderately pricey. Once again, no vulgar currency exchanged hands, and Aya murmured genteel pleasantries before sweeping out of the teahouse.
Minerva glanced behind long enough to confirm that the servants were still there. This particular pair were two of a kind, male and impassive and quite possibly stamped out of granite. Minerva wondered if the servants drew lots every time Aya decided to venture outside the mansion, and whether escort duty fell to the winners or losers.

"Have you considered participating in the festivities?" Aya asked suddenly.

"I thought I was," Minerva said, puzzled.

"Not as a celebrant. You could perform some feats of magic to entertain the crowds. There are no formal rules for stalls and booths, although it is largely a matter of who gets the prime locations first." Aya nodded to the stalls already being set up. "The crowd tends to channel down this street. The more profitable places are left, out of respect and tradition, to those businesses which have set up their stalls in those places for many years. Competition for any vacancies is fierce, but as a foreign magician, you may have the advantage of being exotic and rare."

Minerva scanned the stalls, but did not recognize the characters for the Kirisame store. "I might consider it for the future, but I'm afraid I haven't prepared much by way of performance materials for today."

"Fireworks?" Alice suggested.

Minerva laughed. "A reasonable suggestion, Alice, but I doubt that I, a Western magician, will be able to teach the specialists of the Orient anything they do not already know. Although..."

"I am aware of your recent exertions at the alchemy shed," Aya said. "Is gunpowder related to the mysterious plan to save Gensokyo that you have been brewing?"

"Er, not exactly." Minerva shifted the bag of sweet potatoes in her arms, redistributing the weight. "To be perfectly honest, I am waiting for certain results to make themselves known. I doubt they will be done any time soon, which leaves me, as it were, cooling my heels. My sudden productivity may be related to my habit of working on unrelated matters when trying to resolve especially tricky problems."

"Such as?"

Minerva looked up. "Such as a way to scale that monstrosity."

Aya followed her gaze. "Margatroid-san, what sort of plan have you come up with that, as an integral step, requires you to climb up Youkai Mountain?"

"Pourquoi non? I don't have to reach the summit, although it would be useful," Minerva said. "Obviously I cannot provide details I do not know myself."

"Youkai Mountain is, as its name would suggest, a haven for youkai. Not one person who ventured up its reaches has ever returned. This largely includes youkai hunters, for we natives of Gensokyo know far better than to try."

"What, not one? Not even a single step?"

"You might, with a very great deal of effort and not insignificant amounts of luck, be able to reach the lower slopes of the mountain," Aya allowed grudgingly. "The odds of survival past that point drop drastically. The youkai there do not welcome visitors, and they suffer trespassers not at all."

Minerva regarded Youkai Mountain once more, as it towered sullenly over the village. "Unless an
alternative is found in time for the plan to work, I may have no choice but to make the attempt anyway."

Aya shook her head in disbelief. "Your plan, whatever it may be, sounds more ridiculous by the moment."

"But I do have a plan, though it contains a few tangled knots. I find myself tempted to utilize a Gordian solution at times."

"And while you are busily waving the sword of Alexander around, please take care not to accidentally disembowel any unfortunate bystanders."

"I'll keep that in mind, Aya-san."

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Alice, true to prediction, was as adorable in her pink kimono as could be. She was unaccustomed to the sandals that went with the outfit, however, and she had to hold Minerva's hand while she found her balance.

"Are you taking that doll along with you, Alice?" Minerva asked. "You know it would be just as safe here in the mansion, and you would not have to risk soiling its clothes... all right, but that doll is your responsibility, you understand?"

Somehow, through some great force of will, Alice managed not to roll her eyes in exasperation.

The evening sun cast long shadows through the village, tinting everything the same palette as the leaves on the trees. There was already a substantial crowd, and several stall-holders had taken advantage of this to sell their wares early.

Minerva checked the time on the silver pocketwatch secreted in an inner pocket. "Aya-san said she'd be joining us later. Shall we be off, then?"

The crowd seemed to have doubled by the time Minerva and Alice reached the village proper. The heat was just on this side of uncomfortable, particularly with the heavy clouds overhead lending a muggy humidity. The occasional gust of wind brought with it a touch of biting frost; evidently the weather intended its victims to sweat and shiver at the same time.

As such, Minerva's first purchases from the festival stalls were a pair of cheap, disposable fans, made of bamboo with garishly-dyed cloth stretched across the frame. Alice made certain to steady herself before releasing Minerva's hand, but felt the trade for the fan to be worth the risks of stumbling over her own footwear.

A steady thrumming drumbeat emanated from the stage set up in the main square. The sound brought back memories of the other festival Minerva had inadvertantly attended, and where she had escaped the wrath of the tengu. At least this time, not many people were wearing masks; it would have interfered with their consumption of the food and drink being hawked, and most of the masks were hooked at a jaunty angle over an ear.

Thus reminded, Minerva cast about for a stall selling the chicken skewers she was fond of, and found one easily. This prompted a lengthy and complicated interlude involving Alice and her reluctance to relinquish either fan or doll, leaving neither hand free for the food.

"Stick the fan at the back of your obi," Seiji suggested. "The sash around your waist, with the knot at the back. You'll forget the heat easily enough when you're enjoying your food."
Minerva turned to face him. Seiji had apparently been enjoying the byplay between Minerva's fussing and Alice's obstinacy for a few minutes, judging from the wide grin. He did not seem to have dressed up for this occasion, clad in what seemed to be his usual clothing, but Minerva may have been missing the subtle sartorial cues.

"Good evening," she greeted him pleasantly, handing Alice's share of skewered chicken to the little girl. Alice attacked the food vigorously. "Isn't it still a little early in the day?"

Seiji blinked. "Oh, you mean the smell of sake... not mine, more's the pity. I was with the group of old men over there." He waved a hand vaguely. "They gossip like housewives and drink like fish. I am pleased to report that news of your exploits as a topic of discussion have maintained parity, if not accuracy."

"One step at a time, I suppose. Where is your stall, by the way? I didn't see it when I came down to the village this morning."

"Ah, we were a little late in setting up. Maria had to sort out some new wares... anyway, it's over this way."

The Kirisame stall was secreted in a moderately-travelled area, far enough from the press of the main crowds for the noise level to become tolerable once more, but still close enough for a sizable clutch to have formed around the stall. Most of these were children.

Minerva craned her neck to see the main attraction, displayed in pride of place on the counter-top. This was a contraption made of five identical steel balls individually suspended on a wooden frame. Each ball was attached to the frame by two wires of equal length at an isosceles angle, restricting its movement to a single plane. One ball at the edge had been raised, and loosed, allowing it swing back down and hit the others with a clack. This caused the ball at the other end to swing up instead, before swinging back and repeating the process in reverse. The three balls in the middle remained apparently motionless, creating a pleasing symmetry in the clacking rhythm that mesmerized the gathered audience.

"One of our newer acquisitions," Seiji said. "Although I don't see the point in it, myself; it doesn't do anything but click and clack, back and forth. It's strangely fun to watch, of course."

"I've seen illustrations of its like before," Minerva said. "In one of those great big gothical German textbooks. It's not magic, but deals instead in the physical laws of the world. As a model for demonstration, it does its job admirably, as these children can attest." She nodded amicably to the stall-keeper. "Good evening, Maria-san."

"Good evening, Margatroid-san," Maria said. Unlike Seiji, Maria was dressed up for the occasion, with a blue and purple vine design on her kimono. "Welcome to our village's humble harvest festival. I hope it has been an enjoyable experience."

"Exceedingly so," Minerva said. "How is your son? I don't see him around here."

"He's doing well, thank you for asking. He's with his friends; he doesn't need his mother hanging over his shoulder all the time, after all." Maria bobbed her head in greeting. "And hallo to you too, Alice."

Alice returned the headbob with enough grace to meet the minimum standards of politeness, before focusing her attention back on the counter-top toy.

"Will you be all right, Maria?" Seiji asked. "I was thinking, er... that is..."
Maria granted him a cheerful smile. "Go have fun with Margatroid-san. I'll be just fine here. And Margatroid-san, do make full use of Seiji as a guide."

"I will, thank you." Minerva glanced down. "Alice?"

Without looking at her, Alice made little shooing motions with her free hand.

"Fair enough. Guide away, Seiji-san."

Seiji performed this job with respectable competence, Minerva later decided, even if he was surprisingly too shy to continue his wooing, awkwardly begun since... when was it? Seiji had only laid out his trick on the conversational whist-table the previous week, but how long had he been intending to play this hand?

A bout of cheering interrupted her thoughts. A strange, colourful serpent of fabric and wood was winding its way through the mass of revellers, accompanied by yet more musical percussion. Drums, cymbals, and gongs seemed to figure immensely in the folk music of the Orient; Minerva was about to make a comment to this effect, but remembered just in time that her own part of the world had been guilty of bagpipes.

"The dragon god," Seiji explained. "Or a representation of it, anyway. It's one of the things we look forward to during festivals; the performers handling the dragon train for months, just for today."

Minerva watched the dragon undulate sinuously through the crowd, courtesy of the dragon dancers holding the wooden frame and cloth up on bamboo poles. "In Britain dragons are usually a different sort," she said vaguely. "I thought this festival was supposed to be for the harvest goddess? Obviously I don't expect strict monotheism, but would the harvest goddess be jealous of this dragon god taking over her own event?"

"It's... a little more complicated than that," Seiji said diplomatically. "The dragon is our most important god. It is the reason our village can exist, and be prosperous. We thank the harvest goddess for a bountiful harvest, but it is the dragon that gives us the sun and rain and fertile fields to have a harvest in the first place."

Gods and youkai, Minerva pondered. One was worshipped, and the other feared. From Hakurei's descriptions, the gods, while varying in power, were all considered a part of nature, rather than outside it in some abstract celestial domain. Did humans create gods, or did gods create humans? And how did this apply to youkai, based on Violet's meanderings?

She was aware of Seiji asking her a question. "I'm sorry, my mind was wandering. What was it you said?"

"It's all right, Margatroid-san," Seiji said easily. "I was just asking whether there was some place in particular you wanted to visit."

Minerva paused for a moment, paralysed by indecision. There were too many things she wanted to see in this festival, but few of them enough to stand out. The festival whirled around her, a kaleidoscope of faces and colours and lights and smoke and heat and noise.

A word floated up through her consciousness. "The kagura," she blurted out.

"Oh, the shrine maiden's dance?" Seiji cast his eyes about. "I think... that way."

Fortunately, they managed to arrive at the stage area before the dance was underway. Hakurei was
visible in the distance as a figure in white and red, holding various implements of the Shinto religion as Minerva understood it.

Seiji led her to one of the benches arrayed in front of the stage, excused himself, and vanished. When he rematerialized, he was holding refreshments in the form of a squat jug and two tiny cups in an ingenious wooden holder.

"With my compliments," he said, sketching a Western bow. "The sake here is excellent, but I must warn you that it is not lightly drunk by the uninitiated. If you'd like, I can get you something less potent."

Minerva wordlessly poured out a measure of sake into one of the cups, and tossed it back in one gulp. The liquid burned clear and sweet down her throat, warming her pleasantly.

"... not the way I'd choose to enjoy good sake, but I have to applaud your daring," Seiji said, sitting down beside her and pouring himself a cup. "We respect those who can hold their liquor here. Particularly this one, which is strong enough to knock out oni, or so we like to claim."

As she sipped her more sedate second cup, Minerva recalled the entry in the Gensokyo Chronicles about oni, and how their strength was matched only by their propensity for carousing. Then again, overblown boasts about home-brewed alcohol was as common as home-brewing.

The seats were filling up, although Minerva noticed a clear space around herself and Seiji. She managed to catch a fair number of hastily-averted stares, conspicuous by how the starers were attempting to be inconspicuous.

There was no sign of Aya yet, even as the music began, and Hakurei entered stage right.

The shrine maiden's movements had the measured, deliberate hallmarks of ritual, even as she traced a path across the stage that would not have been out of place at any prestigious concert-hall in Europe Minerva could name. The dance felt as choreographed as ballet, but flowed with a primal energy that exuded life and celebration; a performance as befits a dance for the gods.

Hakurei spun, and the bells in her hands chimed; the long ribbons flickered in the air, describing motions that echoed down the ages, from the first dance by the goddess of the dawn and revelry, Ame-no-Uzume. The torches set up around the stage lent their firelight to the scene, casting shadows that joined in the dance. There was nothing else that mattered; there was only the dance, now and forever.

Minerva stood abruptly, and then wished that she hadn't. The alcohol had been insidious, and she stumbled away from the stage and the dance, not stopping until she found a dark, quiet place. She took several deep breaths, trying to clear her head of the sake and the kagura.

She vaguely remembered the sake jar emptying out, most of it having gone into Minerva's cup. She remembered Seiji staring at her in surprise, before laughing quietly. She remembered, much later, Seiji carefully standing, collecting the empty jar and cups, and whispering something about going back to check. Going back where? Going back to the Kirisame stall, of course. To check on how Maria was doing.

Maybe Minerva should check back as well.

Minerva turned, took a step forward, and almost walked into Aya, if Aya hadn't retreated from what was undoubtedly Minerva's alcoholic reek.

"I'll be fine in just a while," Minerva said irritably. "It wasn't that much sake."
"Even a drop is enough," Aya said. "For a drop turns into two, and a cup turns into two, and four, and eight. I am sure I do not need to lecture you on the perils of drink."

"You are safe on that account, Aya-san. What kept you?" For the sun had obviously set some time earlier, and the clouds above hung low enough to reflect the torchlight from the rest of the festival grounds.

"Paperwork," Aya said. "Urgent enough to demand my immediate attention, and yet not important enough to affect anything of note."

"The curse of bureaucracy," Minerva agreed. "I hope you've enjoyed the festival in some way, at least?"

"I should be asking you that question, Margatroid-san. But yes, it was a pleasure to see the kagura once again this year. Hakurei carries out her duties with great skill, on top of significant talent."

"I might visit her later to congratulate her," Minerva mused. "For now, I'm heading back to the Kirisame stall. What of yourself?"

"There are still a few people I have to talk to," Aya said. "I shall meet you there soon."

Seiji had spelled Maria at the stall, which was fortunate for him, as the crowd had thinned significantly by then. "You're still walking in a straight line," he observed. "Very impressive."

"While it would be highly impolite for a well-bred English lady to refer in any way to her alcohol tolerance, the truth is that I am quite good at it," Minerva returned. "How is business?"

"Decent enough. The real profit is in the socializing, though; drinking with the other tradesmen now, means better prices if we need anything in the future."

"But you didn't drink with them," Minerva pointed out. "You drank with me."

Seiji looked embarrassed. "Well, yes. Still..."

Still a profit, in some account-book somewhere, possibly in Seiji's heart. "I've noticed people starting to go home," Minerva said. "They couldn't be preparing for an early day tomorrow, could they?"

Seiji accepted the change of subject with some relief. "Most of us take the day off tomorrow," he said. "It's not a good idea to work through the morning after serious drinking, although there are always some people who try." He brightened up at a new arrival. "Ah, welcome to our humble stand, Hieda-san."

"Kirisame-san," Aya said. "Thank you for taking care of Margatroid-san."

"No, please, it was my pleasure. Please don't think too much of it."

Minerva could guess that there was probably a lot more painstaking etiquette to wade through in other times, but the exchange here was abbreviated by a ragged cheer among the festival-goers still upright and conscious. The cheer swelled to a solid roar of appreciation, as a streak of fire shot up into the night sky, before exploding into a thousand glittering shards.

The first firework barely had time to fade away before its sequel joined it in the heavens. The parade of pyrotechnics went off every four seconds like clockwork, each display at least as dazzling as the one before. Seiji was hollering something unintelligible, a cry that was taken up by
the surrounding crowd. Even Aya had a smile of satisfaction on her face.

The final firework launched a full thirty seconds after the previous one, and three minutes after the first. It burst into a dazzling flower, its myriad petals dissolving into lingering motes of light that hung in the aether, a reminder of beauty past.

On cue, it began to rain.

The cheers faded into mutterings about the weather, lively and amused. Minerva caught the tail end of a few witticisms on how the resident deities had clearly seen fit to allow the festival to reach its appointed end before the skies opened up.

"Ah, that's going to be a pain," Seiji said, peering up at the clouds. The rain had not yet progressed beyond a faint drizzle, with a few unexpectedly large clumps of water splashing into the ground, but the rumblings of thunder in the distance promised a more substantial deluge.

"It would be wise to heed that signal and retire, Margatroid-san," Aya said. "We should... Margatroid-san?"

Minerva was looking around, her euphoria draining rapidly into a low, flat dread. All around her, revellers were retreating into shelter, or too soused to care about the elements and being dragged away by friends less inebriated. She quickly tracked the various movements of the people around the vicinity, searching but not finding.

"Where's Alice?" she asked.

Chapter End Notes

"Sake" is actually just the Japanese word for alcoholic drinks. The sake we know as sake is "nihonshu". I figured that would be needlessly obscure, though.

Sake/.nihonshu production has more in common with beer (fermentation of grains) than wine (fermentation of fruits). I didn't notice my own error in calling it "rice wine" until too late.

Information about the kagura, and Japanese festivals in general, obtained from Wikipedia. The dragon dance, on the other hand, is part of my own cultural heritage.

"Memento mori": "Remember that you will die".

"Pourquoi non?": "Why not?"

Intentional Reference Count:

Moriya Shrine, Persona 4, Kogasa Tatara, scumble, Shizuha and Minoriko Aki, Saigyou Hoshi, the Gordian Knot, Newton's Cradle, "Oni-Killer" sake
Search parties were organized. These search parties organized more search parties, which spawned yet more, and each group of seekers stumbled over one another and got into everyone else's way, like raindrops on a puddle forming ripples that intersected and interfered with each other, obscuring what used to be clear.

But they meant well. Everyone meant well, even if they were searching only because the Hieda family name was not to be trifled with.

Aya had installed herself in the teahouse overlooking the main square, now converted into an impromptu base of operations for the search. Every few minutes, another breathless runner gasped out a report, mostly to the theme of a negative result. Nobody knew where Alice had gone, and nobody knew how she had gone.

In the time since the discovery of Alice's disappearance, Minerva had run through the full gamut of human emotion, each one amplified to a piercing intensity. Panic, fear, desperation, hope, fury, despair, and infinite others besides; now, she was drained, spent. Everything had been burned away, leaving only cold, empty calculation.

She collared Aya's servants, who had officially been accompanying their mistress to the festival. Minerva recognized the pair as the young couple in love, or something very much like it. They had no doubt thought their assignment this night to be a perfect opportunity to deepen their relationship, with the tacit approval of the Hieda household management. After all, what dangers would the young mistress of the Hieda family face, surrounded by the good people of the village?

The servants stared at Minerva with the bloodless shock of a pleasant excursion rudely interrupted by a nightmare.

"I want you to go to my room in the mansion," Minerva said, enunciating clearly and firmly. "Somewhere among my belongings, you will find a leather bag with a large strap, sealed with silver buckles. It will be heavy, and full of equipment and items. Bring it to me. Also in my room, somewhere on the desk, will be a small plain wooden box, about this size. If you check inside, it will be filled with cotton. Bring it to me as well; if you are unsure, gather all the boxes that fit the description, and I'll sort them out here. Do you understand?"

The servants nodded, the woman recovering faster than her partner.

"Good. Now go, quickly."

The rain continued to fall steadily, a low, angry mutter on the rooftops and the ground. Minerva splashed over back to the teahouse; Aya sat there alone, surrounded by the light of lanterns and candles. She turned at Minerva's approach, her face carefully smoothed of all expression.

"The patrollers around the village perimeter have reported no noteworthy incidents," Aya said. "Nobody was seen venturing in or out. The search has been concentrated inside the village for now. I can ask them to do no more, at least for the moment."

Minerva accepted this acknowledgement of futility with a nod. The sequence of events during the festival had been confusingly, infuriatingly simple. Maria had been located early on, and recounted
a tale of Alice having grown bored of the attractions at and around the Kirisame stall. Someone else had offered to escort Alice around the festival; this turned out to be the wife of a restauranteur whom Maria trusted implicitly. Minerva could not bring herself to criticize Maria's judgment; Maria was beside herself, utterly convinced that Alice's predicament was all her fault.

The restauranteur's wife was brought before Aya and Minerva to give her nervous report: she had brought Alice to the main stage, where she taught Alice the basic steps of the folk dance. Alice happily joined the circle of dancers for a couple of revolutions around the tower stage; this was corroborated by Aya, who had spotted Alice at a distance, but had been too much in a hurry to make her presence known to the child. This, at least, narrowed the time of disappearance.

Alice had unexpectedly been mobbed by a group of children from the school, eager to play with their strange foreign classmate. The woman had kept tabs on the blonde head at Alice-height in the crowd, and was satisfied with that. For how many little blonde girls were in Gensokyo, after all?

Several representatives from the children were produced. They reported Alice leaving with a woman they could only describe as tall and foreign, both in dress and manner. Minerva having been watching Hakurei's dance at the time, she was certain this did not refer to herself.

Recollections grew vague at this point. Some people claimed to have seen a small blonde child at various locations in the village during the festival; these sightings began to contradict each other. None except the children had seen the other foreign woman.

The conclusion to this tale was obvious, even if most of the villagers refused to believe it.

"I thought youkai did not enter the village, Aya-san," Minerva said. Her voice held no accusation; it would not help matters now.

"They do not," Aya said. "This is unprecedented. No youkai attack on the village itself has been recorded in millennia, and the village is larger today than it was then."

"Yet should they choose to do so, this night would have been the most likely time." Hakurei materialized out of the rain into the circle of light within the teahouse. She doffed the woven straw hat and cloak that constituted rainwear in Japan, setting them carelessly on another table. "It has not been done in many years, true. But there are stories of youkai holding their own festivals in parallel among the humans. They do not attack, for that is not their intention. Rather, they wish to join the celebrations, and disguise themselves appropriately."

"But they still took Alice," Minerva snapped. "They were not in the village with peaceful intentions."

"Yes. Something about that child may have triggered some instinct that overrode all others."

"We may assume that Alice, and the youkai that took her, are no longer within the village," Aya said heavily. "How they escaped the patrollers will be a matter of much debate in the days to come. But what is done is done."

"Someone get me a map," Minerva decided. "As detailed a map of Gensokyo as possible. And someone else boil some water in a bowl. In fact, they should boil a needle at the same time."

"Margatroid-san?" This from both Aya and Hakurei.

"I did not come all the way to Gensokyo to expire of tetanus," Minerva said unhelpfully.

The arrival of map, bowl, and needle coincided with the return of the servants carrying Minerva's
equipment from the Hieda mansion. Minerva slung the leather bag over her shoulder, and cleared out a space on a nearby table to lay out the map, placing the other instruments carefully at the side. Eyeing the bowl of water critically, she emptied out most of it, leaving only a shallow puddle lurking at the bottom. To this, Minerva introduced a drop of her own blood, drawn with the needle from a finger.

These bizarre proceedings had drawn a small crowd of spectators. Minerva spotted a likely candidate. "Seiji-san! I need your assistance."

Seiji approached reluctantly, his wariness of foreign magic clearly warring with his desire to help find Alice.

Minerva plucked out a strand of hair from her head, giving it to Seiji. "Be careful with this," she ordered, thrusting the wooden box at him next. "You'll find a small tooth inside, padded with cotton; it's the one Alice lost a good while back. With any luck, it should still work."

"Er, what should I do with it?"

"Tie the hair securely around the tooth, and then give it to me. Hurry; Alice's life may depend on some speed."

"You kept Alice's tooth?" Aya said with morbid fascination.

"I'd paid her for it, hadn't I? Well, the Tooth Fairy did, by proxy." Minerva's words were muffled around the finger in her mouth, in lieu of proper medical care and bandages. "Alice had mentioned some story of Miho-san's, about Japanese customs for children's teeth, and wanted to try it out. We never did get around to it, of course, and Alice probably forgot about the tooth. To be honest, I almost forgot myself."

Seiji handed the tooth and hair back to Minerva, who dunked it into the bowl of water. Muttering something long and complex, she let it stew for a moment, before lifting it out and holding the tooth, suspended by the strand of hair, over the map.

"Dowsing?" Seiji said dubiously.

"Quiet," Minerva said, before returning to her low-voiced incantations. The tooth hovered close above the map, slowly tracing an unsteady spiral emanating outwards from the icons representing the village. An uneasy murmur rose among the gathered villagers. Out of the corner of her eye, Minerva noticed many of them glancing towards Hakurei, as though for reassurance.

Hakurei simply watched, calm and silent.

The spiral finally terminated at an unlabelled spot on the map, distressingly far from the village. "What is this place?" Minerva demanded, jabbing a finger at the map.

"It doesn't have a name," Aya said. "It is a hill where... never mind. Are you sure Alice is there?"

There was always the possibility of magical bafflement caused by counter-spells, but this was not the time to second-guess oneself. "Yes," Minerva said. "What were you about to say, Aya-san? Do you know why a youkai would take Alice there?"

Aya and Hakurei took the time to exchange a significant look. Most of the bystanders, including Seiji, merely looked uncomfortable.

"It is a place with special significance to Gensokyo," Aya finally said. "It is where we take our
children to die."

Minerva took a deep breath.

Hakurei quickly held up a hand. "Not now, Margatroid-san. Remember that Alice's welfare comes first. We will admit to our tragedies, and attempt to explain ourselves, whether or not you believe us justified. But accusing us of barbarity now will not help Alice. Margatroid-san! Listen to me! That nameless hill may be where children die, but Alice need not be one of them!"

Minerva let out that breath slowly, controlling herself with great effort. "All right. This is not over, Aya-san, Hakurei-san. But you are correct that Alice takes priority. Seiji-san? Go wake a stablehand and get us some horses."

Seiji swallowed hard. "But even with horses, getting to that hill would take-

"Just do it!"

As Seiji fled, Aya turned to the other villagers. "Thank you for your assistance," she said formally. "Please remain in the village, and in your homes. Your parts in this incident will not be forgotten, and our gratitude shall not be found wanting."

This failed to placate the villagers, but none dared speak out against a member of the Hieda family. Hakurei drifted to a quiet corner, beckoning Minerva to join her.

"They do not know why we are expending so much resources to find Alice," the shrine maiden said quietly, apparently trusting in the ever-present hiss of rain to mask the conversation. "To them, finding a child lost to youkai is a futile endeavour. There is despair at first, but this is Gensokyo, and we have had thousands of years to learn the meaning of acceptance."

"Hakurei-san, if I find out that you, or any of your associates, were in any way responsible for-

"Later, Margatroid-san, later." Hakurei sighed. "If it would appease you, I did not know about Alice's disappearance until I was... told. I do not harm children, Margatroid-san. I do not think my... associates do either. Whatever the truth of the matter, I only wish to help. Please accept my sincerity, and leave the recriminations for tomorrow."

Because however things turned out, it would all have settled tomorrow, one way or another. "So? What sort of help are you willing to give?"

"Your watch."

"What?"

"Your pocketwatch. The silver one."

Frowning, Minerva took out the silver pocketwatch, and deposited it in Hakurei's waiting hand. Hakurei produced an oversized paper talisman from somewhere about her person; Minerva caught a glimpse of an illegible scribble on the paper, as Hakurei neatly folded it around the pocketwatch.

The resulting packet was returned to Minerva. "This will last until dawn," Hakurei said. "Don't remove the charm until then."

"What did you do?"

"Trust me, Margatroid-san."
Seiji returned with two horses in tow. The animals looked none too pleased about being roused in the middle of a dark and stormy night, but were placid enough not to make too much of a fuss about it.

Hakurei, donning her hat and cloak again, mounted one easily, her traditional hakama trousers allowing her to sit astride. Minerva pondered briefly on the mystery of a shrine maiden with equestrian training, as she settled side-saddle behind. Someone handed her a waxed lantern, its unsteady light casting a pool of visibility around the horse.

Seiji was already on the other horse. "I'm coming with you," he said, shifting reins and lantern from hand to hand. "Don't try to argue with me. Please."

"Hardly the time for it," Minerva muttered. "All right, Seiji-san. But keep close behind us."

"I know a shortcut," Hakurei said, deliberately loud. "It should get us there quicker."

If Seiji had any doubts about this excuse for supernatural interference, he chose not to voice them. "Lead on, Hakurei-san, Margatroid-san."

"Wait." Aya darted to Seiji's side. "Help me up." Seiji, nonplussed by this sudden development, did so.

"What are you doing, Aya-san?" Minerva exclaimed.

"Cutting the strings," Aya replied cryptically. "Go!"

They rode for an eternity. Minerva clung grimly onto Hakurei's waist, the cold rain lashing at her face. She could see nothing but visions of barren scenery flashing past them, and hear nothing but hooves on sodden dirt.

They dared not ride too quickly, in the darkness and the rain. The horses were jittery, and very much unhappy with the task at hand. In comparison, the curiously irregular passage of distance throughout the journey was a mere irrelevant distraction.

Time lost all meaning, in their mad ride through the unending night. Minerva could feel the hard lump of the silver watch in her pocket. What had Hakurei done with it? How had she known what to do with it? How had she known to prepare for it?

All of Minerva's hypotheses, all the available evidence, pointed towards Violet Hearn. But Hakurei had appeared sincere enough when she claimed she intended no harm towards Alice, and neither did her poorly-concealed youkai associate.

Of course, intentions often meant little, in the end.

Eternity ended abruptly, with a flash of lightning that caused the horses to whinny madly, skidding to a sudden halt. Minerva managed to turn the unexpected stop into a controlled dismount; miraculously, the waxed paper lantern stayed lit.

"This is as far as we can go," Hakurei announced, raising her voice to be heard through the rain. "I don't-" Her horse reared, and Hakurei clutched at the reins, fighting to keep the beast under control.

"What? Are we there yet?" Seiji's horse was less demonstrative in its displeasure, confining itself to snorts and stamping. Seiji took this opportunity to dismount, helping Aya down as well. "How long has it been since we left the village?"
"Too long," Minerva said. She took out a small navigational compass from her bag. The needle swung jerkily, refusing to settle on a single direction. "Well? Are we there yet, Aya-san?"

Aya crouched for a moment. When she straightened, her face in the lantern-light was even paler than usual. "Yes," she said. "We have reached the fields where the suzuran grow."

"Suzuran?"

"You may know it as the lily of the valley."

Seiji was about to comment, when his horse decided to bolt. Sensibly, he let go of the reins, rather than be dragged under and trampled. "Hey!"

"I'll take care of the horses," Hakurei said, wheeling about. "The rest of you, go find Alice. Hurry!"

"Hakurei-san! Hakurei-san, wait!" But Hakurei was gone, and Minerva was left feeling less betrayed by the Hakurei's abandonment of the mission, and more by her transparent excuses. Grumbling, she trudged forth through the flowers, the others following close behind. "Wonderful. Did the horses sense the presence of youkai?"

"Entirely possible," Aya said, her voice muffled. "But it should be obvious to anyone that this place is unnatural."

"Yes, I'd imagine a graveyard for children would make any right-thinking human uneasy."

"Margatroid-san, do cease your self-righteous indignation for just one moment. We may have used this nameless hill for certain purposes in times past, but this is no longer true. Progress, as you said, is inevitable."

"I've not heard stories for a long time about children being... left to the flowers," Seiji said. "It's something our grandparents did, and their grandparents. Not us." His voice was also muffled, enough for Minerva to stop and turn around, to see that the other two were trying to breathe shallowly through their sleeves.

"What's the matter?"

"Look down," Aya instructed.

Minerva did so. "... I assume this is also the work of youkai."

"For flowers blooming en masse out of season, that would be a reasonable assumption."

"I heard stories about this too," Seiji said. "Happened... what, fifty, sixty years ago? Just lots of flowers blooming when they shouldn't. I don't know the details myself; I can tell the difference between a mushroom and a tree, and that's about all."

Minerva dragged her leather bag open, and rummaged inside for a kerchief, which she efficiently tied loosely around her face. The rain promptly made it damp and useless, but she kept it on anyway. "And from the way the two of you are acting, I take it the lily-of-the-valley that grows in Gensokyo is poisonous even without being ingested."

"We should not spend too much time here," Aya agreed.

Left unspoken was the implication of what the poisonous plants would have done to Alice by now. "I have another kerchief in here, and a cloth pouch that should serve as well once dismantled,"
Minerva said, handing them out to the others. "After the incident in the forest, I decided a well-prepared suite of equipment would not be amiss."

Seiji ripped apart the cloth bag, tying it around his nose and mouth with a rough knot, as Minerva helped Aya with her kerchief. "Do we even know where Alice is, in all of this?" he said. "It's a big field to search."

Something caught Minerva's eye in the pool of light surrounding them, and she bent down to pick it up. "Here's your proof," she declared, holding the object to the light. It had once been a cheap bamboo fan, its fabric now in tatters. The handle had been broken into a sharp point, on which something sticky too dark to be human blood was rapidly crusting.

"She fought back," Aya said, a hint of approval in her voice.

"Yes," Minerva said with pride, "she did." Inhaling: "Alice! Alice, where are you? Alice, we're here to rescue you! Alice!"

The rain baffled their shouts, mocking them with crashing thunder that echoed through the hills. Aya grew hoarse quickly, descending into a coughing fit. Seiji had to support her, as they stumbled through the darkness.

Finally, Minerva called for a halt. "Aya-san, you know the habits of youkai. You told me they attack lone travellers. Will they attack that traveller if she has a companion beside her? Is the minimum number necessary for safety two?"

Aya blinked. "Two is... sufficient," she managed to croak. "Sometimes. Mostly."

"All right. Seiji-san, stay with Aya-san, and make sure she doesn't move. Keep the lantern burning, so I'll know where you are."

"Margatroid-san, you can't be serious-" Seiji protested.

Minerva cut him off with a sharp gesture. "I am perfectly capable of handling myself. I promise to keep my lantern alight as well, and I'll be hollering as loudly as I can anyway. What's important now is Aya-san's condition."

"I'm all right," Aya said, attempting to stand on her own. "I just needed... a moment to recover..."

"Shut up, Aya-san," Minerva said pleasantly. "Sit if you want, unless you're worried about mud on your kimono. Considering we're all drenched anyway, I do not think it matters. Just stay here, and do not move. Seiji-san, you have my permission to knock Aya-san down and sit on her if necessary."

Seiji and Aya shared a pained expression, plainly visible above the cloth around the lower half of their faces. "Margatroid-san..." Seiji began.

"You can always tell anyone who objects that it was on my orders," Minerva said, already moving away. "After all, as an ignorant foreigner, I can hardly be expected to understand the nuances of class etiquette."

Perception, Minerva mused, as she splashed through the mud and flowers. When frames of reference were removed, all that was left was one's own personal perception. Here, everything was seen from a relative position, where the self was the origin point of a Cartesian coordinate system.

As such, an effective search of an area of unknown size must utilize something more complex than
a simple marking of point A to point B. For when the origin was in flux, then nothing else could be
fixed, save one's own perspective. What was needed was a way to measure the world, on a plane of
infinite dimensions, when everything was mutable.

Of course, none of this applied to Minerva at this particular point in time. For hers was not the only
light in the darkness, and with two known points, an entire coordinate system could be
extrapolated.

Now, if only she could confirm that the erratic bobbing of that other source of lantern-light was
merely a negligible example of nervous jitters on Seiji's part, and thus could be safely ignored. Otherwise, it would seem that both Seiji and Aya had disobeyed her clear instructions, and were
beginning to move again.

Minerva stopped in her tracks, peering at the distant light. It appeared quite stationary, or at least as
stationary as it could be in a world that was spinning dizzily around her. The ever-present sound of
rainfall was skewing her perception of space, a state of affairs exacerbated by the irregular
thunderclaps that stunned the senses.

Minerva took a step a towards the other light, when everything plunged into night.

Of course. It could never be as easy as that. One lantern-flame dousing itself was unremarkable.
Two at once was enemy action.

Minerva crouched down, cautiously feeling her way through the contents of the leather bag, trying
keep them as dry as possible. Her fingers closed around a long, slim vial, stoppered with a rubber
bung. Nimble probing of raised symbols on labels confirmed her find, and she slowly worked the
stopper out with exquisite care.

The tell-tale pop and hiss would be impossible to hear over the rain. Minerva counted out several
heartbeats, before restoppering the vial, and extracting it from the bag, where it glowed with a
bright, eldritch light.

"Margatroid-san!"

Holding the vial aloft, Minerva briskly made her way to Seiji, who was shouting desperately,
waving his arms about, and, quite unfortunately, alone.

The sight of the glowing vial arrested Seiji's thoughts. "What is that thing?"

"A derivative of phosphor," Minerva said shortly. "Take it. Keep it high, so we can see."

Seiji accepted the charge with thinly-disguised trepidation. "Is it dangerous?"

"It generates fumes that causes severe necrosis of the skeleton, and it has a tendency to set careless
apprentices ablaze. So, yes. Where is Aya-san?"

"She ran off," Seiji said, holding the vial as far away from him as he could. "Over there."

"I didn't think Aya-san was in any shape to run off," Minerva said, setting off in the indicated
direction.

"Neither did I. Hieda-san was all quiet for a really long time, but when the lantern went out, she
started dragging me away. I tripped over something, stumbled, and when I recovered, she was
gone."
"I see. Well, if we're going to rescue one little lady in distress, we may as well rescue two. Alice! Aya-san!"

And now there was only the one point of reference in an unknown and unknowable universe. Never mind saving Alice and Aya; were Seiji and Minerva doomed to wander this accursed hill of flowers until they succumbed to its poison? They were hardly children, but Gensokyo's lethality had proven unconcerned with such details.

Saving humans from monsters. Saving humans from themselves, was more like it. The monsters just provided the backdrop for the horrors that had men and women did to one another. A small village, beset by youkai, and unable to sustain more than a very few extra mouths, much less those who had no hope of sustaining themselves. They must have thought they were doing the children a kindness, by laying them down among flowers, to go to sleep and never wake up.

A mother's duty and fear, through the ages. And the light of civilization had advanced even into the deepest reaches of Japan, into Gensokyo, and there was no more need for sacrifices. And the light shone on the darkest shadows of history, and demanded a reckoning for what it found there.

"Saving humans from the monsters within ourselves," Minerva muttered, gathering her strength for another bout of shouting.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, Seiji-san. Alice! Aya-san-"

"No, what's that sound?" Seiji clutched at Minerva's sleeve. "There it is again! Like some sort of... ringing..."

But Minerva heard it too, now. Fighting her way through roots that seemed to try to drag her down, she clambered inexorably towards the unmistakable, clear sound of a silver bell being rung as hard as it could.

Aya was in a bad way; her breaths came in irregular wheezes, each lungful a painful struggle. But even as she slumped over the tiny, ominously still form of Alice, one hand grasped the bell's handle with a grip firm with desperation, waving the bell wildly in the air, a beacon for her rescuers.

"How did Hieda-san find Alice?" Seiji exclaimed, kneeling down to engulf both Aya and Alice in a protective embrace. He gently pried the bell out of Aya's hand, which fell back limply at her side.

"Never mind that," Minerva said, checking on Alice. The little girl was still alive, but only barely; her pulse was faint and thready, and she did not respond to Minerva's ministrations.

Seiji was poking vaguely at the ground, looking for some fallen trifle.

"What are you doing?" Minerva demanded.

"Alice's doll," Seiji mumbled. "She probably dropped it somewhere around here..."

"Forget the doll!"

One point of light in the darkness. The lilies of the valley stretched out to infinity on all sides, and they were trapped in the middle of it all.

No choice around it.
"Seiji-san, hold that light as steady as you can," Minerva commanded, "and keep close to me."

"Margatroid-san?" Seiji followed her orders, even as his voice and eyes questioned her.

Back to the basics. First, Intent. That much was not an issue; Minerva had Intent steaming out of her ears by now.

Next, Ritual. Minerva dug through her bag of tricks, as her mind considered and discarded possibilities. She had packed the bag with solutions for as many contingencies as she could think of, while still keeping the total weight portable. She had not considered the possibility of being lost in a field of deadly flowers, but surely there was something that might help...

"Margatroid-san?"

"Be quiet, Seiji-san," Minerva said. She took out a piece of paper, and slapped it wetly onto the ground. The rain immediately began to obscure the designs drawn onto the paper. That being accomplished, she recited syllables from memory, concentrating fiercely.

Next, Power. This was what defeated most practitioners of the magical arts; producing enough Power for spells often required a whole other spell of their own, and another spell to power that spell, even unto an infinite procession of power-spells.

Gensokyo had power. Minerva had finally understood this, not so very long ago. It had more power than any other place Minerva had been, gathered here by mysterious forces for purposes unknown. Tapping into it was easy enough, but it was dissipated, unfocused, and inconstant. Was there time to focus that power into the spell?

"Margatroid-san-"

Minerva snatched the glowing vial out of Seiji's hand, and hurled it to the ground. The thick glass smashed, and a thin line of blinding white fire raced around the four lost humans, tracing out a perfect circle which hissed and sparked in the rain.

Thunder rolled.

"Margatroid-san!" Seiji tried one final time. "Margatroid-san, I don't think Hieda-san's breathing!"

A second, tiny glass bottle was extracted and uncorked. This released a billowing cloud of dark vapours, far more than should have been in so small a volume. Minerva was shouting now, her voice strident and commanding, the spell taking shape by her words. The dark cloud twisted and writhed, unaffected by the storm overhead. The shadows inside the cloud reached out, a negative space that suggested a form resembling a humanoid head and torso.

The shadows touched Minerva's forehead in benediction. A question was asked.

"Home," Minerva replied.

Lightning flashed, and thunder answered. When they faded, they left behind an empty field of flowers.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter title is Latin, and commonly translated as "Let there be light".

The idea of youkai participating in festivals is from some really fuzzy memory of some early anime-related thing I may have watched. I didn't actually look it up to see if it's true, since it works so well for the purposes of this story that I can always claim author fiat.

I know nothing about riding horses. Everything here about equestrianism is pure guesswork.

I do know phosphorus does not work that way. Hence "a (magical) derivative".

**Intentional Reference Count:**

Consciousness returned to Minerva in an instant, sharp and piercing. She quickly sat up on the bench, and then wished she hadn't.

The early morning sun cast its rays across the floor, even as it illuminated the sad, pathetic sight of one foreign witch huddled on a bench in a corner. Some considerate passer-by had laid a blanket over her as she dozed through the cold, wet night, still in the bedraggled remains of the dress she wore to the festival. It was a minor miracle that all she had to show for her exhaustion and chill was a splitting headache that made the world seem to throb in sympathy.

Compared to the others, she had gotten off lightly.

Minerva had refused to leave her post just inside the Hieda mansion, even as she was politely but firmly refused entry into the inner chambers where everything was happening. A great many people had been roused out of bed the previous night, and hustled into the rooms where Aya and Alice had been taken with some urgency. Minerva lost count once the number of visitors reached double digits, but after a certain point, she could guess their respective destinations. The ones who had a medical bearing were bound for Alice, and the prognosis was promising, if delicate; Alice's heart was strong, and given enough rest and medication, she was expected to return to full health in due time.

The ones carrying assorted religious paraphernalia intended to ease the passage of souls to the next world were all for Aya.

The residents of the mansion were still largely in shock, but Minerva had already seen the looks directed her way when the rescue party had finally returned that night. None of them had been so blatantly accusatory, of course; this was Gensokyo, and everyone understood. But they also understood whom to blame.

Seiji had been overwhelmed by his newfound experiences with the paranormal, and he had gladly accepted Minerva's gentle suggestion for him to go home. He promised to return the next day, refreshed and ready to assist in any way he could.

Minerva had offered her own help to the household staff, but had been rebuffed, politely as always. She dared not press the issue: Minerva Margatroid, foreign magician and self-proclaimed youkai hunter, had done enough damage for one night.

The activity within the mansion had fallen into the droning cadence of distant ritual, after the first few frantic hours. Minerva had ensconced herself on her corner bench, and succumbed to sleep. Even now, after she had woken, the rituals continued.

Minerva stood, feeling every ache from the night's exertions. Too many questions left unanswered, and too many suspicions left unproven.

Too much guilt to bear.

Attempts to straighten out her dress were met with predictable failure, and so Minerva could only try to ignore her lack of dignity when the patriarch of the Hieda family emerged to meet her.
Minerva noted the dark circles under his eyes, and the weary lines on his face. Yet his expression was utterly impassive, hiding whatever emotions he might have had as he faced the one most responsible for his niece's current condition.

The Hieda patriarch gazed silently at Minerva, as though rehearsing a mental script. Minerva returned the stare; contrition had never come easily to her, and if she was going to face the consequences of her actions and inactions, she would do it with her head high.

"The little girl is doing well," Hieda finally said.

"Thank you, Hieda-san," Minerva replied. Had she used the wrong honorific? Nothing in Hieda's expression betrayed his thoughts. Damn the language and its over-complicated social structure, anyway. "How is Aya-san?"

Hieda proceeded to the next line of his script, as though he had not heard. "The Hieda family will, of course, continue to sponsor your research, if you so choose. Your rooms will be kept as they are, and you will retain full use of the mansion, as before."

And Minerva would have to endure the stares of every servant in the house. Not to mention what Miho would say when she returned; a messenger had been dispatched to Nagano some time earlier. Miho was close to her cousin; how would she react when she heard of what had happened?

"I appreciate the offer, Hieda-san," Minerva said, "but I have..." Torn your family apart. "I have imposed too much upon your hospitality already. I will make arrangements for other lodgings as soon as convenient."

Hieda blinked very slowly at her. "I see. Then we will care for the child until she recovers, for it is not advisable to move her at the moment. You are free to visit her as you please, of course. And you may have use of your rooms in the house until... arrangements are made."

Minerva tried not to read that as a statement on her untrustworthiness as a guardian. "You have my gratitude, Hieda-san. For that, and for everything your family has done for me."

Hieda grunted in acknowledgement, almost imperceptibly. "Very well. That is all." He turned to leave.

"No, it's not," Minerva suddenly said. "Hieda-san, I am truly sorry for what has happened. I should not have let Aya-san follow, and I should have kept a closer eye on her. There is nothing I can say in my defense, and I know there is no recompense I can give."

Hieda was still for a moment, before taking a deep, calming breath that seemed to go on forever. When he finally turned back to Minerva, his expression was impassive once more. "There is nothing to apologize for. She is the Child of Miare. It is done."

"What does that-" But Hieda was already striding away, and Minerva could not help the edge of desperation in her voice: "May I see her, at least?"

Hieda did not face her. "No," he said, "you may not."

And that was that. Minerva stood alone and silent, while the mansion bustled around her, servants pretending not to notice, pretending not to care. All emotion had drained from her, ever since the night in the field of deadly flowers, and it would be some time before the receptacle would fill once more.

Gradually, a certain thought percolated through the blank expanse of nothingness in Minerva's
mind. The thought said, in a diffident manner, that it might be time for her to change out of her ruined dress, at the least.

It was a good idea, and Minerva decided to follow it. After all, good ideas were to be treasured for their rarity.

Minerva took her time in the baths, and by the time she emerged in clean, pressed clothes, she was not feeling quite as sorry for herself as before. There was not getting around what had happened, but now Minerva could face whatever would come next with grace.

Her first stop was to the room where Alice was resting. This had apparently been chosen for its excellent ventilation and natural lighting, allowing for optimum convalescence of patients. The only fault Minerva could find in its design was that it was in the Japanese style of architecture, which meant a bedroll on the floor instead of a proper four-poster.

Alice was fast asleep, her breathing laboured. She looked worryingly pale, and her forehead was cold and clammy to Minerva's touch. A basin of hot water and several towels had been prepared beside the bedroll; a sickly smell in the air bore evidence to the effects of poisoning from the lilies of the valley. Someone had changed Alice out of her kimono and into loose, light clothing; Minerva wondered if the kimono would be cleaned or burned.

Minerva daubed away Alice's sweat with a towel, for lack of anything more meaningful to do. Minerva's knowledge of medicine extended to folk remedies and scattered fieldcraft, along with whatever lessons in practical anatomy she had picked up over the years. Nothing that would allow her to second-guess the doctors here, certainly.

A maidservant poked her head into the room, peering suspiciously at Minerva. Minerva guessed that she was the designated medical assistant, watching over the patient.

"Please make sure Alice eats something when she wakes up," Minerva told her quietly. "I don't suppose you have a recipe for soup- oh, yes, you'd be more familiar with rice porridge. I, er, I'll leave you to it, then."

Minerva let herself out, stalking the corridors in a discontent mood. Violet Hearn had called her the greatest magician in the world, and yet she could not even help a single child.

Or save her friend, for that matter.

Her path led her outside, to the alchemy shack behind the mansion. The irregular light of dawn shrouded the boundary between field and forest, and Minerva stopped at the edge, facing a pool of shadow.

"You can come out now," she murmured.

Minerva had seen a wide enough variety of optical illusions during her time with travelling fairs. A mass of conflicting shades, blotches of what appeared to be random colours on canvas, would suddenly coalesce into a picture of a horse, or a man, or some other otherwise mundane image that leapt out of the chaos as though by magic.

It occurred to Minerva that magic may, in fact, be responsible for this particular illusion, as the dappling of light and shade detached itself from its fellows, and was revealed to be a young woman who could not have been there a mere moment before, had Minerva not known about her presence prior.

Minerva took the opportunity to get a better look at her, now that the light was better. The young
woman was dressed in plain, simple clothing, almost designed to pass for something any young Japanese lady of reasonable means would wear on a day without important occasions marked on the schedule. Only a closer inspection would reveal certain peculiarities that made the entire ensemble not quite conventional; the mysterious lack of needlework or weaving in the cloth would have been a significant clue.

Of course, any notice attracted by the young woman would have been more due to her flaming red hair. Some quirk of the lighting gave it an uncanny shade that reminded Minerva uncomfortably of fresh blood.

The woman bore this scrutiny in faintly amused silence. "English, or Japanese?" she finally asked, using the former language.

"English," Minerva replied in the same. "How do you know English in the first place?"

The woman tapped the side of her head. "I could say that it came to me in a flash, when we met in the field of flowers."

"When you touched my mind," Minerva said. "I had intended to borrow some power from the sample of gas collected from that cave behind the shrine. I had not expected, well..."

"A familiar?"

"For a start. Are we even under a formal contract, between master and summoned servant?"

The woman shrugged. "Formal? No. But still a contract in most of the ways that matter, nonetheless. Everything else is ceremony and ritual. We can go through all of that if you'd like," she added helpfully.

Minerva sighed. "Never mind. What else did you take from my mind, in that moment of summoning?"

"Less than you might imagine," the woman admitted. "Randomized pieces, certainly. Unattended shards of knowledge. Enough to understand the situation, both the immediate and the general. You wanted to get out of that field, and needed my power to do it. Voila, you are out of the field, and back among civilization. Such as it is, in your opinion."

This woman was clearly dangerous. "And what are you?" Minerva said. "Where did you come from? Or did you spring fully-formed from my imagination?"

"Ah, but that would be much more suited for yourself, Minerva," the woman noted. "Goddess of wisdom, crafts, and magic. Which would make me, in some small way, a servant of knowledge. I commend your choice of nomen."

"My thanks, but you have not answered my question."

"I come from... hm. I'm not sure what the proper term is, here in the human world. There is a name I've heard used before, in Japan... Makai? Probably translated as a world of magic. Or, alternatively, a world of devils."

Minerva paced around the woman with slow, deliberate strides, as though appreciating a museum display. "And once again the traditions of Japan run aground on the mystical writings of Europe. I am fairly certain you do not resemble any of the demons listed in the Lemegeton, and Solomon never evoked a spirit as you."
"Did he not?" the woman challenged. "How do you know this is my true form?"

"I concede the point. But I seem to have bound you as my familiar, however unintentionally, and until the terms of the contract are fulfilled, I should be in no overt danger from your actions. Am I correct in assuming so?"

The woman curtsied. "As you say, my mistress."

"Swear on it," Minerva commanded.

"Excuse me?"

"Swear that you will be worthy of my trust, and that you will not betray me, while the contract is in effect. Swear that you will not knowingly cause me harm, and that you will assist me to the best of your abilities in all that I require."

The woman rolled her eyes. "I do so swear, upon my true name, that I will abide by the terms of the contract as stated," she recited impatiently, "and that I will bring no harm to you and yours. I also swear to serve you to the utmost of my abilities, and protect both you and that child I know you are so worried about. This I swear upon my true name, upon all my other names not quite as true, upon the honour of my kind, upon both my world and this one, upon the rather queasy examples of comestibles you call English cuisine... Minerva, this has all been done. It is implicit in the contract. I could go on if it makes you feel any better, but I could no more break the terms of the contract than I could, say, bring the dead back to life."

"Can you?" Minerva said, curious.

"What? Of course not. Simply beyond my power. Why do you ask?"

"Never mind." Minerva pinched the bridge of her nose. "I know I must be overlooking far too many possible loopholes for a self-proclaimed devil to exploit, but it has been, as you well know, a busy night."

"I promise, in the event that I should end up betraying you, that I shall give ample and explicit notice beforehand," the woman said. "Possibly in an affidavit. Would that satisfy you?"

"It would be a start," Minerva said. "I presume there is nothing in this contract that deals with the matter of an irreverent, almost disrespectful tone."

"Fawning subservience is optional."

"And if I command you to adopt such a clause, you will make things even more inconvenient for myself through a pretense of vapid idiocy, I would assume."

"Including an interpretation of orders that may or may not be a tad too literal," the woman agreed. "Die ich rief, die Geister, werd ich nun nicht los."

"Thank you for your Goethe." Minerva reached out to touch the woman's scarlet hair. "I'm afraid you'll be rather conspicuous if you venture out among the other humans of the village. I don't suppose you have some sort of disguising magic prepared?"

"Not at the moment, but I am aware of a potent spell for that purpose," the woman said. "I call it a wig. Or possibly a hat."

"For that, you may hide in the shadows until I have need of you, for all I care," Minerva said.
"How did you do that, by the way? The camouflage was most effective."

The woman spread her arms. "You do not see the wings?"

"What wings?"

"Then I cannot explain in a way you will understand," the woman said solemnly. "When you can see the wings, then you will know."

More riddles. Minerva was getting tired of riddles. "What should I call you?" she wondered.

"Does it matter?" the woman said. "I've been called many things, by those who summoned me in times past. 'Devil' and 'Demon' are always popular. 'Servant' for those who revelled in their superiority, 'Lady' for those who did not. And, of course, for some unfathomable reason, a great many instances of 'Temptress'."

"Quite appropriate," Minerva said.

"I don't see how. It isn't as though I lead men down the path to damnation-"

"Oh, but you do. You are a creature of magic, and your very presence signifies power. Power that, by its very nature, leads people to do what they might not otherwise have done. And you, my scarlet devil, will be companion and witness to these acts of... of human perversity."

The woman nodded slowly. "And when humans are on the brink of a precipice... there is, very often, the unaccountable urge to leap headlong into the abyss."

"Thus do I borrow from Poe," Minerva said, "and name you something that has been by my side for as long as I can remember. Something that has been at every human's side, perhaps. In so naming you, I remind myself of your presence, and am better able to guard myself against the whisperings of the Imp of the Perverse."

The newly-christened Imp winced. "Not a name I would have chosen for myself. But it will serve well enough." She straightened. "And? What would you have your Imp do, Minerva Margatroid?"

"Stay hidden for now," Minerva ordered. "I shall return later to give further instructions. There is a certain clearing in the forest I want you to see, but I cannot guide you there yet; Alice needs me here."

The Imp nodded. "As you wish."

"Imp. Before you go."

"Yes?"

"I would just like to... express my gratitude. For your help, last night. If you hadn't lent me your power, events would have gone quite badly." More than they already were.

The Imp smiled. "You are most welcome, Minerva," she said, as she vanished into the shadows.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter title is obviously from *Hamlet*. "Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar?"

I first heard of the idea of the Imp of the Perverse years ago from something to do with Edgar Allen Poe, before I read about it in *The Baroque Cycle*. So there's something I didn't actually steal from Stephenson. Of course, the actual timeline and whether Minerva could have conceivably heard of it is based only on Wikipedia.

"Imp" is used in the sense of "little devil", ie Koakuma. I wanted to acknowledge the many interpretations of Koa as a succubus of some sort, even though I have no idea whether it's canon.

Aya's fate was pre-ordained, thanks to Akyuu being the first Child of Miare to exist with the Hakurei Barrier up. So she pretty much had to die mid-fanfic, and I had made a note to that effect.

However, this was back in chapter 3 or so. Around the time of chapter 12, back in mid-2011, my father had a stroke he did not survive.

So all of Minerva's feelings and reactions to Aya's death are coloured heavily with my own for my father's. I can promise you that guilt is a ridiculously powerful component of the general emotions felt, regardless of how logical it is. Life goes on, even if only because you have to force it to go on, but the guilt and regret never goes away.

"Die ich rief, die Geister, werd ich nun nicht los.": "The spirits I called, I now cannot get rid of." Among other translations. From *Der Zauberlehrling/The Sorceror's Apprentice* by Goethe.

*Intentional Reference Count:*

Koakuma, mythological Minerva, Patchouli Knowledge, Key of Solomon/Lemegeton, Scarlet Devil, Imp of the Perverse
Smithies had a certain similarity of layout and form all across the world. This should have come as little surprise, as there were only so many ways one could shape metal for a living before pragmatism dictated a turn towards efficiency.

The master smith was not present; the lead apprentice, an accomplished metalworker in his own right, mumbled something about a cold going around, thanks to the changing weather. Minerva supposed it didn't matter whether this was actually true, or a polite fiction to disguise a hangover.

The apprentice led her through a cacophony of assistants and journeymen, all involved in the business of transmuting raw ore into functional tools and works of art, and occasionally both in the same object. Few of them glanced her way; customers picking up commissions directly were unusual, and Minerva was well-known enough in the village by reputation and sight, but hammering white-hot metal tended to require more concentration than could be spared on passing distractions.

At the end of their journey at the other end of the smithy, the apprentice rooted through stacks of several wooden boxes of varying sizes and quality. Minerva was eventually presented with something slightly bigger than a breadbox, darkly lacquered in a faintly striped pattern.

"Well done," she murmured, opening the box to check its contents. "Half at commission, and half on completion, as I believe the contract was?"

The apprentice gave her a single curt nod which somehow managed to convey an affirmative answer combined with a careful disdain for monetary matters, subordinate as it was to the True Appreciation of Art.

Minerva snapped the box shut, handing it back to be wrapped in a carrying cloth. "Give my regards to the master," she said. "As well as my thanks and congratulations on a job done admirably. Er, if I might impose on your time further, there are a few changes that will have to be made regarding payment terms... oh, the payment will certainly be made, but the bill will have to be made out to-"

"That will not be necessary."

Minerva frowned, turning to face the newcomer. The unfamiliar voice belonged to a vaguely familiar man, who leaned over to make himself more easily heard over the background din. "The Hieda family will, as always, make good on the payment," the man said. "Please send the bill to the usual place."

The taciturn apprentice shrugged, indicating that one person's money was as good as another's, and expertly wrapped up the box. Another nod for the requisite pleasantry regarding the pleasure of doing business, and then both Minerva and the man were politely escorted outside.

Minerva shifted her grip on the box. "My thanks, Ryoutarou-san," she said, memory having finally identified her mysterious benefactor. "Um, I take it this means Miho-san is also...?"

Ryoutarou coughed nervously, and waved a hand in the direction of the main square. "Maybe we should have a seat somewhere comfortable first. And some tea, maybe; tea sounds good right now."
In other words, discussion of weighty matters should not be done while standing aimlessly on a public street. Minerva gladly conceded the point, and held her peace until they were seated at the now-familiar teahouse. This time, Ryoutarou paid for the tea up-front.

"I hear you're moving out of the house," Ryoutarou finally said, once he felt ready to speak without inadvertently blurring out something impolitic. Halfway around the world, Minerva reflected, and one still ended up in the same place, avoiding uncomfortable issues until forced, and even then with an ill-formed sense of resentment.

"Yes," Minerva said, matching British propriety to Japanese. "The Kirisame shop has very graciously allowed me to store my odds and ends indefinitely. Under the circumstances, I've decided to re-sell much of it." At a greatly reduced price; Maria was willing to buy the goods back at cost, but Minerva would not hear of it, especially considering the immense favours she would have to ask of Maria and Seiji in the near future.

"Where will you be living now, if I may ask?"

"Somewhere," Minerva said vaguely. "I have a place over... somewhere."

"Er, right." Ryoutarou took a deep breath. "Miho-san is... coping."

"I can't imagine what she must feel like now," Minerva said. "How, exactly, has she been coping?"

"At the moment? She's looking after Alice. Although there's something in the way she..." Ryoutarou fidgeted with his teacup. "I do hope you won't take this the wrong way, Margatroid-san, but, um, it would, that is... I think it would be best, for everyone, if you, uh... avoided Miho for the time being. Just for now."

Minerva kept her expression neutral. "I understand, Ryoutarou-san."

"No, I don't think you do, Margatroid-san," Ryoutarou said placidly. "It's more than Aya-san. Miho hasn't actually said anything, but it's clear in the way she looks at Alice."

"Alice? What about Alice?"

"Margatroid-san, since you've come to Gensokyo, how much time have you spent with Alice?"

"I..."

"I understand you were trying to find ways to solve Gensokyo's problems. And I've seen how Alice tries to be independent and all grown-up." Ryoutarou took a sip of tea. "You've both spent a lot of time alone, haven't you? It's probably not very easy to change that."

Minerva was silent.

"Anyway, Miho will settle down after a while," Ryoutarou said, as though he hadn't just laid Minerva's doubts open on the dissecting table moments prior. "She's just not ready right now. It's this thing she's been avoiding, I mean. The whole Child of Miare business."

"That is the second time I have heard that term. Who or what is the Child of Miare?"

Ryoutarou looked surprised. "Aya-san didn't tell you?"

"Ryoutarou-san, nobody around here tells me anything. All I know is that Aya-san was expecting something to happen to her some time soon, within the next few years. At first, I assumed it had
something to do with her health, but from the way everyone has been acting ever since... since that night, I am beginning to think it is something more."

"Um." Ryoutarou looked upwards, perhaps seeking divine intervention from this conversation. "The Child of Miare is... well, let's look at the term itself. The Child of Honoured Are. Hieda no Are, the revered ancestor of the Hieda clan."

"Who helped write the Kojiki," Minerva said, "and elevated the family's status to nobility. Or its equivalent, anyhow; I'm not too familiar with the social strata of Japan. Aya-san is a Child of Miare? Is this some sort of title passed down through the generations?"

"In a way," Ryoutarou said. "You must understand that I'm passing on information I've only been told; I think Miho expects me to know all of this, since I'll be joining the Hieda family." He chuckled uneasily. "I'm just a government clerk. Marrying Miho has, er, elevated my social standing, and I've married into the Hieda family, rather than Miho marrying out of it. Miho told me plenty of times before, but it hasn't really sunk in until very recently."

Minerva nodded, motioning for him to continue.

"Anyway. Being the Child of Miare is a sort of title, but based on... I'm sorry, I'm trying to think of the proper term, tip of my tongue... resurrection? No. Reincarnation."

"... oh."

"Margatroid-san, are you all right? You look a little pale..."

"No, I'm fine, it's... so many things are falling into place now. Reincarnation. Are you telling me, sir, that the Child of Miare is the reincarnation of this Hieda no Are, centuries past?"

"It's a little more complicated than that, but that's the gist of it," Ryoutarou said. "I didn't really believe it when I first heard about it, but, well, I'm in Gensokyo now, aren't I? I should start getting used to things like this."

Minerva rubbed her temple. "If the Child of Miare is the reincarnation of Hieda no Are, and Aya-san is the Child of Miare..."

"The eighth," Ryoutarou said.

"What?"

"The eighth reincarnation. See, there was Aichi, Ani, Ami, Ayo... oh, I'm sorry. I assumed you were familiar with Japanese counting terms. They're not actually written as those counting numbers, but they do sound alike..."

"Of all the strange Japanese customs I thought I was prepared for, integer puns to number reincarnations was not one of them." Minerva did some quick mental calculations. "That timeline would seem to be within the margin of error. Although it's a wide margin..."

"Apparently there's a price," Ryoutarou said. "Again, this is a family legend, so I'm not sure how accurate it is, but... there's a responsibility to the Gensokyo Chronicles, for one. The current Child of Miare is meant to write and update the Chronicles, and that is their entire purpose. After they're done, well..."

Immortality, of a sort. The Gensokyo Chronicles required eternal revision, and one mere human lifetime could not encompass the necessary eons of observation and recording. A charge set to a
family or organization may inevitably change over the intervening years, but if there was the original founder to oversee the project...

"So when I was speaking to Aya-san," Minerva said, "I was addressing Hieda no Are?"

"Mm... I don't think so. Miho was quite adamant on that point; Aya-san was, well, Aya-san, rather than some historical figure reborn. I didn't know Aya-san for all that long myself, but I thought she bore her position well."

"You make it sound something of a curse."

Ryoutarou sighed. "It's complicated. There's the obvious, of course; the reincarnation method is not perfect, or some such, and each reincarnation is less likely to live as long as the previous one. In fact, there seems to be something of an exact calculation into how long the Child of Miare would live. Until now, anyway."

"Until now?"

"Aya-san was... early. The calculations have been thrown into disarray, I hear."

Predictions on the length of a life. Accepted with Oriental fatalism... "So I may have disrupted a centuries-long cycle of reincarnation, in addition to killing my friend. Somehow, Ryoutarou-san, the latter distresses me rather more than the former."

Ryoutarou shrugged, neither confirming nor denying any part of the statement.

"No. You're right, Ryoutarou-san. I've been ignoring my responsibilities for too long, and others have paid the price. Is there anyone else who needs to be informed about Aya-san's... about Aya-san? Her parents, for instance?"

"Ah. Well. That may be difficult." Ryoutarou spread his hands helplessly. "From what I can tell, they ran away from Gensokyo and haven't been back ever since."

"Ran away... leaving Aya-san?"

"Very suddenly," Ryoutarou confirmed. "When Aya-san was still an infant. As a relative newcomer to the family, I don't know all the details. Miho always changes the subject, and I didn't want to pry any further."

What could cause a parent to abandon their child? Aya had never spoken of her parents before, or even acknowledged their existence. The only family member she seemed willing to show any warmth towards was her cousin Miho.

Aya was the Child of Miare, a title conferring great status and pride. The Child of Miare, a reincarnation of the first Hieda no Are.

Eight reincarnations, each one shorter-lived than the last...

"Ryoutarou-san, would Aya-san's parents have known about her being the Child of Miare, by any chance?"

"Yes, I believe so. There was a lot of talk about signs and portents, and some sort of celebration at the birth."

"I... see." Of course. And Aya's parents would never have been able to say anything against the
tradition of the Child of Miare; not when the only ones who might understand even the general circumstances were in Gensokyo, and all of Gensokyo was celebrating.

"Margatroid-san?"

"Never mind." Minerva nudged her teacup away from her. "Thank you for the tea, Ryoutarou-san. And for, well." She inclined her head at the wooden box. "Please give my regards to Miho-san, if I may."

"Of course," Ryoutarou said. "I'll speak to Miho tonight. You are still welcome at the Hieda mansion, if you need anything for your... business requirements."

Meaning youkai hunting and Gensokyo-saving. "Thank you, but I will probably just need to make a few notes after consulting with your library."

"Oh, the library is being moved," Ryoutarou said. "Another one of those traditional arrangements regarding the Gensokyo Chronicles. When the Child of Miare is... not present, then another family will hold the materials needed for the next edition of the Gensokyo Chronicles in trust."

"Another family?"

Kamishirasawa peered up at Minerva over his spectacles. "Please excuse the mess," he said, more polite than apologetic. "I'm in the midst of marking some tests."

"I'll come back when you're less busy."

"No, no, please take a seat. These can wait."

Minerva did so, across the desk. "Kamishirasawa-san..."

"How's Alice?" Kamishirasawa asked.

"Hm? Oh, she's recovering. Sitting up and getting more restless by the day. The doctors said she'll be able to go outside in a week or so, provided the weather doesn't turn too cold."

"That's good to hear." Kamishirasawa shuffled a few papers. "What brings you here today, Margatroid-san?"

"The Hieda library..."

"Ah? Yes, it's being transferred to this school building, as a matter of fact." Kamishirasawa gestured around him. "My own house is, unfortunately, not especially roomy. Certainly large enough for my wife and children, and any time my grandchildren visit, but the Hieda collection is a little, well, abundant. In any case, you're welcome to visit any time you wish.

And that was, evidently, that. "Thank you. But if I may, Kamishirasawa-san..."

"Yes?"

"Why is the Hieda library being placed in your care?"

Kamishirasawa leaned back in his chair, which creaked slightly. "It is a long story."

"Since the time of Hieda no Are?" At Kamishirasawa's surprised expression, Minerva smiled faintly. "I had a quick course on the significance of the Child of Miare this afternoon. I was hoping
you might be able to provide the other half of the tale."

"Little enough, I'm afraid. Only stories and hearsay, masquerading as myths. It is true that an ancestor of mine, whose name has unfortunately been lost to time, was a close friend of Hieda no Are. Some event then occurred which tied our families together, although only through a shared responsibility to the Gensokyo Chronicles. Some say it was not during the time of Hieda no Are, but with the first Child of Miare, Hieda no Aichi. As you might imagine, the records are unclear."

"What sort of event might this be?"

"That, I cannot say." Kamishirasawa held up a hand. "I admit there is an element of 'will not say' in my reticence. Perhaps next time, when I feel it is right. Now then, I'm sure you'll be busy with your research for the foreseeable future. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Minerva briefly considered pressing the issue. Then again, it wouldn't do to antagonize Kamishirasawa now, particularly over a tangential concern at best. "I had been looking up a certain record before the... incident after the festival. I'm afraid I'm not familiar with the system used in Japan for arranging books." Especially books of such esoteric topics. What would Dewey's new system make of subgenres of the arcane?

"I'll keep an eye out," Kamishirasawa said. "What topic would it be under?"

"Myths and rituals concerned with the creation and powering of seals through human sacrifice," Minerva said promptly.

Kamishirasawa blinked at her.

"Rest assured I do not plan on murdering anyone for my witchcraft," Minerva said dryly. "There is, however, a preponderance of stories in Japanese folklore involving the sacrifice of some poor soul in order to seal away some great evil. I must hasten to add that European occultism is not any cleaner in these bloody works." Possibly more sullied; the Japanese stories were largely concerned with sealing evils, while Europeans were often attempting the opposite. "In particular, there is an account of an otherwise inanimate object... a tree of some sort, I believe... which gained malevolence, and had to be sealed. The record went into some detail."

Kamishirasawa hesitated. "I don't think I've seen that one before. Nevertheless, I shall make a search."

"Thank you." Minerva rose. "I'll leave you to your work, then."

"One moment, Margatroid-san, if you don't mind."

"Yes?"

"You are, I am led to believe, working on some method to curtail youkai attacks on the human village," Kamishirasawa said. "Is this accurate?"

Minerva considered this. "Broadly speaking, yes."

"Will this involve removing every youkai from Gensokyo? Will Gensokyo be free from youkai influence once you have completed your task?"

Minerva cocked her head to one side. Kamishirasawa had asked the questions not with hope, but apprehension. "Why do you ask?"
Kamishirasawa shook his head. "Never mind," he said, bending back to his work. "Good day, Margatroid-san."

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to include a Touhou discussion from RPG.net about how the parents of the Child of Miare might feel, to know that they'd likely outlive their child. This seemed like the best spot.

Also there was supposed to be a huge dramatic call-out of just how horrible a role model Minerva has been, but in the end I felt it would be uncharacteristic for everyone involved.

You may have noticed some irregularities with "Ryotarou" and "Ryutarou". I had settled on "Ryotarou" the first time, many chapters ago, but ended up typing "Ryutarou" anyway. I think I finally decided to go with "Ryutarou".

Intentional Reference Count:

Hakutaku, Dewey Decimal System, Fatal Frame among zillions of other Japanese horror stories, Saigyou Ayakashi
"Some day," Seiji grunted, "you're going to have to explain what you're doing."

Minerva glanced at him, surprised. "Is it not apparent?"

"Not for an ignorant carpenter such as myself."

"Consider it... preparation. And research, most of the time. I have a rather clear idea of what I plan to do, and a large portion of my current exertions involve prodding that idea from every angle I might imagine, in case there is some chink in the armour. I would rather catch an error early than discover it too late."

"That's not an answer, Margatroid-san."

Minerva sighed. "It'll be much easier to demonstrate than talk about. In any case, we may discuss it further once we're at our destination."

"Ah, as it happens, that's something else I've been meaning to ask you about..."

Minerva had dropped by the Kirisame shop that morning to ask for one of the major favours she would have to owe Maria. Negotiations had been delicate, and only Maria's trust in Minerva had overcome her instinctive disapproval.

Seiji, for his part, displayed little to no hesitation for this excursion, and had even seemed outwardly enthusiastic at the thought of venturing into the dark forest near the village. This enthusiasm had been tempered significantly when he learned of the other passenger on this trip.

Alice had turned out in front of the Hieda mansion, bundled up in rather more layers of clothing than looked comfortable for her. Minerva had yet to run into Miho even after all this time, but Ryoutarou was present, and his skepticism was obvious.

"It's her decision," Minerva had said, even as her own doubts crept into her voice.

"She's just a child, Margatroid-san. A child recovering from a severe illness."

Minerva sighed wearily. "Not severe enough to prevent her from leading us on a merry chase through the mansion. I suspect it's her way of rebelling against the unreasonableness of big people."

"Unreasonableness, you say?"

"Look, I've promised to bring her back before sundown. I'm not sure why Alice is so curious about what I've been up to, but I'm sure her inquisitiveness will be satisfied after today." Or so Minerva hoped.

At the very least, Seiji had coaxed Alice into letting him carry her to their destination. Alice had made the usual exaggerated expressions to convey the exact length of her exasperation with fussy grown-ups, but complied. She had dozed off soon enough, leaving Minerva and Seiji to converse quietly with awkward small talk.
Alice was, when all was said and done, Minerva's responsibility, but Seiji was another matter. Minerva had promised Maria that she would bring Seiji back safe. Even now, she could almost feel the ghost of Seiji's brother staring reproachfully at her.

But this path should be secure, from both natural and supernatural hazards. After all, Minerva had spent a great deal of the past few weeks making sure of that, and she would have wagered anything anyone would care to mention that it was safer than even the main village square.

Which did not indicate complete safety, of course. The night of the festival had proven that much.

"We're taking a bit of a shortcut," Minerva said aloud. "Through a slightly less direct route. Going straight through the forest would not be wise, even discounting the youkai."

"You mean this isn't straight into the forest?"

"Not exactly. Please don't wander off too far, Seiji-san; it is dangerously easy to lose one's way."

"A little late for that," Seiji grumbled.

"We're almost there," Minerva said encouragingly. "Just a little further, I believe... and so."

A familiar clearing, located incongruously in the midst of the forest. The late morning sun shone merrily on the freshly-trimmed grass, the cheery little garden, the picturesque stone well, and the large manorial English house in the middle of it all.

"A house," was all Seiji could say. On his back, Alice woke up just in time to do a double-take at the sight before her.

"There's a bit of a story behind it," Minerva said. "Although I don't know the whole of it myself. I was just as surprised to find a house in the middle of the forest, but it's the sort of thing that sticks in one's memory, so when I needed a place to stay..."

"No, no, it's not that," Seiji said. "I mean, it's a house in the middle of the forest, yes, but... er. That's magic, you see."

"I'm not certain I... oh. Of course." Minerva was a magician, a witch, with strange and witchy ways, and so a strange house where no house should be was no more peculiar than any other thing she might have done, in the secret whisperings of village gossip. "I suppose you're wondering why the house looks so..."

"Normal."

"I was going to say European, but now I must admit I'm curious about what you expected."

Seiji managed to look socially embarrassed, despite the wonders before his eyes. "Well, there was that story I read once from Maria's collection of foreign books. Something about, uh, a house on bird legs..."

Minerva opened her mouth to reply, thought better of it, and settled for a harrumph. It wasn't as though she could refute the stereotype of the Baba Yaga when most of her own actions were just as inexplicable to the poor villagers. At least the people of Gensokyo treated her with suspicion and skepticism at worst, rather than witch-hunting fear and fire.

Alice climbed down off Seiji's back, and crouched in the grass, staring at something only she could see. Still wide-eyed, she scampered to Minerva's side, gawking at her surroundings.
"Now that you mention it, though," Seiji mused, "why does it look Western?"

"To be perfectly honest, I haven't a clue." Holding Alice's hand, Minerva stumped towards the house with the self-assurance of the mistress of her domain. "It was this way when I found it."

"What, you mean this isn't actually yours?"

"Considering the improvements and works I have invested in it, I should say it's mine now. Particularly since its previous owners have obviously abandoned it." Minerva reached the front doors, and hammered on them. "Imp! Do come out, there's someone I'd like you to meet!"

"Imp?" Seiji said, puzzled.

The doors opened, and a head of red hair poked out. "The Imp," the Imp corrected. "Pleased to meet you... oh, there he goes."

Fortunately, Minerva had caught Seiji's collar in time to arrest his backwards leap of surprise. "Seiji Kirisame, Alice, allow me to introduce you to the Imp, who is indeed not exactly human. I believe she is already acquainted with you."

Alice peered suspiciously at the Imp, who returned her glare with a brilliant smile of her own.

Seiji recovered soon enough. "You're working with youkai now, Margatroid-san?"

"Inasmuch as the term applies to any non-human supernatural being, yes," Minerva said, without any trace of hesitation. "If it will help me save Gensokyo, I would shake hands with the Devil himself and be glad for it."

The Imp emerged fully from the house. She had changed into a reasonable facsimile of a Japanese servant girl's plain brown kimono and apron, albeit still made from the strange not-cloth her previous attire had been constructed of. "The last time we met was a while ago, Kirisame-san," she said pleasantly. "On the hill of the lilies of the valley. I don't blame you for not recalling," she said, fixing her gaze on Alice. "You were, if I am not very much mistaken, preoccupied with other matters at the time."

Seiji eyed her carefully. "I suppose I should thank you for saving my life. Our lives."

"Think nothing of it. Please, make yourself at home."

The interior of the house was as pristine as the exterior would have suggested. Western-style shelves lined the walls, tidy and quite bare of decorations. The house seemed as though it was still awaiting a tenant, rather than already being lived-in.

Minerva and Seiji sat at the single round table in the parlour, while the Imp puttered about retrieving tea and its associated crockery from various niches. Alice, having quickly exhausted the possibilities for exploration in this empty house, climbed into her own seat, swinging her legs impatiently.

Minerva held up a hand to forestall the obvious question from Seiji. "Yes, I trust her. At least as far as this matter with Gensokyo is concerned. She has been an invaluable assistant, and possesses resources beyond anything I have ever experienced. I would not go so far as to call her my bosom companion and trust her unreservedly with my life, but thus far I have had no reason to suspect her of treachery, whether present, past, or future."

Seiji seemed unconvinced, but nodded. "Whatever you say, Margatroid-san. It's just... I'm only a
humble peasant, and I admit I don't know much about magic and youkai and all that, but, well, all of this." He gestured towards the house. "This must have cost something. You can't expect me to believe that the, er, the Imp is doing all of this out of the goodness of her heart."

"And why would that be so difficult to believe?" the Imp said pleasantly from the other side of the room. "Still, you are correct in this instance. My services have been, as it were, paid for. Payment has been deferred for now, but it was willingly and fully given."

Seiji jumped in his seat, startled. "Um. Good ears."

"It helps in oh so many ways." The Imp laid out four teacups, into which she poured out fine black tea; Minerva had personally overseen the culinary experimentation that yielded a blend passably resembling Darjeeling tea, to the Imp's increasing bemusement.

Having completed her immediate duties, the Imp carelessly dragged a chair over to the table, where she sat, inspecting Alice closely.

"What is it?" Minerva said.

The Imp ignored her, firing off a quick question in an unfamiliar language to Alice instead.

Alice, who had begun to squirm under this examination, sat bolt upright in surprise. She replied in what sounded like the same language, albeit rusty with disuse.

Seiji glanced uncertainly between Alice and the Imp. "I do hope this is one of those things that will turn out to have a perfectly reasonable and unremarkable explanation."

"As do I," Minerva said. "Imp?"

"My apologies, Mistress Minerva," the Imp said easily. "Just a suspicion I had that I wished to confirm."

"What was that language, though? Alice?"

"Something I picked up a while back," the Imp replied. "From... an acquaintance, shall we say, who had also visited this world. Somewhere on the border of Transylvania and Wallachia... Romania, I believe it's called now."

Alice gave Minerva a helpless shrug.

"The little lady doesn't really remember much of it, evidently," the Imp continued. "Just that it's another language she knows, from some unknown provenance. Where did you find her, anyway?"

"Shanghai," Minerva said. "Or rather, a boat from Shanghai. You've led a very interesting life for your age, Alice."

"Oh, Alice is probably far older than she looks," the Imp said, "assuming I'm not too far off with how human children usually appear. There's some sort of... ritual? Spell? Something woven around her, to change her very nature." The Imp's hands traced the air around Alice, following the path of magic cast a long time ago, never quite touching the little girl. Alice watched the Imp's hands warily, apparently quite ready to bite should a single finger intrude too close.

"What sort of spell? To what purpose?" Minerva demanded.

"I don't know," the Imp said. "It's been too long; these spells needed to be maintained, and now that
they're fading, I don't know what effect they'll have. Or have had. Oh, none of it seems to be directly harmful, as far as I can tell," the Imp added reassuringly. "The one aspect that seems to stand out is... preservation."

"Preservation?"

"Stasis. Keeping Alice here the same as she was for an extended period of time, unchanging. In preparation for what ceremony, I cannot guess. This enchantment has fallen away by now, of course, and Alice is free to grow up into an undoubtedly lovely young lady, but..." The Imp leaned back in her chair. "This is a very fascinating little girl you've brought to Gensokyo, my mistress. I do hope you know what you're doing."

Minerva had yet to unravel the tangled threads of the Imp's usual conversational processes, but even she could recognize this prompt for what it was. "And what is it I should have been aware of, Imp?"

"In any other place and time, Alice's wonderful cloak of many spells would be unremarkable for the vast majority of beings both mundane and otherworldly. In Gensokyo, however..." The Imp spread her hands. "Alice presents a very tempting target, when the circumstances are right. Not always for the usual unpleasant reasons, but largely in the same manner as corvids confronted with bright shiny objects. When they do come to their senses, however, they will have a little defenseless girl in their clutches, and..."

Alice hissed quietly, defiantly.

"Hardly defenseless," Minerva said, "but I do see your point. It seems to me that we have a few options available to us with regards to this matter. The most obvious one is to make sure Alice is always protected and kept away from any danger. Taking her out of Gensokyo, if all else fails."

Alice's hiss morphed into a growl.

"All right, we'll consider that an absolute last resort," Minerva said placatingly. "The second one is to make sure Alice can either defend herself, or is in the presence of someone who can defend her." She took a breath. "It's far past time I took responsibility for my actions and inactions, anyhow."

Alice looked at Minerva. "Lessons?" she asked.

"I should tell you, dear Alice, that this is not my first choice," Minerva said. "I never wanted you to be in any sort of danger. I wanted to teach you everything I could, with or without magic. Somewhere along the way, I lost sight of that, and for my mistakes I am truly, truly sorry."

Alice hopped off her chair, and clasped Minerva's hands in her own. She shook her head, whether in forgiveness or in rebuffing Minerva's apology as unneeded, Minerva could not tell. "Magic," she said firmly.

"Um." Seiji cleared his throat as every eye turned to him. "I've been lost ever since Romania, but isn't there a simpler way? Why not just remove all the magic around Alice?"

"I'd rather not risk it," Minerva said. "Meddling with someone else's spell, particularly when I'm not clear what sort of spell it's supposed to be, is not something I'm willing to put Alice through. If it were some inanimate practice doll, I would make a try at it, but as it is..." She looked down at Alice. "Are you sure you can't tell us anything at all about who put this enchantment on you, or why?"

Alice shrugged.
"I'm not dismissing the suggestion outright, of course," Minerva assured Seiji, who had begun to look crestfallen. "Given enough time and study, I might be able to attempt something... slowly. Very slowly and carefully."

"It always comes down to time, doesn't it?" Seiji said.

"Most things do."

"I don't suppose you could... you know, do your magic thing on the hours and make the clocks stop or something?"

Minerva glanced at the Imp, who held her hands up hurriedly. "Look, I said I'd take a gander at the thing. I didn't say I'd be able to figure it out right away."

"Of course," Minerva said.

"You're welcome, I'm sure," the Imp muttered, just loudly enough for Minerva to catch and delicately ignore.

Minerva turned back to Seiji. "Enquiries are proceeding," she said smoothly.

"It must be nice," Seiji said, "to be able to wave a wand and do anything you want. Or almost anything."

Minerva stood, suddenly feeling the need to wander over to the parlour windows, where she would have a few moments to compose her expression. "Being a magician isn't always what people believe it is," she replied. "Most of it is not a matter of power. Which is why the greatest magicians are those who hungrily seek out all that may be learned, and all that may be discovered. The true secret of magic, after all, is in knowing just a trifle more than anyone else."

"That's not a lot of help," Seiji said, a bare hint of anger in his voice. "All the knowledge in the world won't save you from being attacked by youkai."

And yet Aya had dedicated her life, and all her past lives, to that very principle. Knowledge of the youkai, knowledge against the youkai... "Seiji-san, if you were in my position, how far would you go to solve the youkai problem? What would you be willing to give up?"

To his credit, Seiji took a few moments to formulate his answer. "I'm not going to go so far as to sacrifice my loved ones," he said. "There won't be any point to ridding Gensokyo of youkai if the village has to suffer. Apart from that, however... everything I have and own. Including my life, if it would make even the tiniest bit of difference."

And what would you be willing to sacrifice, Minerva Margatroid? For a faraway land that you are as much a stranger to as it is to you? How far will you go to repay your debts?

"An excellent reply," Minerva said, whipping back around to face the others, eyes glinting. "Seiji-san, I have several commissions for you, and your informal network of craftsmen. The sooner they are accomplished, the better; I no longer have the luxury of dawdling." She looked at the Imp. "The winter solstice, correct?"

The Imp fidgeted uncomfortably. "I can delay it until the full moon after that," she said. "I give no guarantees, however."

"And then you'll take Margatroid-san's soul?" Seiji said angrily.
"Kirisame-san, contrary to whatever drivel you've read, I have no particular interest in individual souls," the Imp said archly. "I mean, I wouldn't turn one down if it was offered to me, but I wouldn't go through all this trouble for what would be the rough equivalent of, say, a potato. Souls, and I should note the term is used quite incorrectly, are more valuable in bulk."

"It's all right, Seiji-san," Minerva said. "I did agree to the price quite willingly."

"What was this price, then?"

Minerva thought of Aya. "Far less than what others have already paid. And it's something I should have parted with a long time ago, besides." Sentiment made fools of all. "Alice?"

Alice puffed out her chest, ready to receive orders.

"It's about time for you to head back, don't you think?"

Alice deflated with an incredulous sigh.

"I do apologize for this arrangement, but I did promise, just for today. In the very near future, however, I will need an assistant who is very quick and very clever, and who will obey my instructions to the letter. Will I be able to count on you for that?"

A firm, confident nod.

"Good girl. Seiji-san, if I might trouble you for travelling duties once again?"

Seiji was on his feet, bowing gallantly to Alice. "Your squire is ready, my little lady. Shall we depart?"

"I'll follow you back to the village, Seiji-san," Minerva said. The Imp handed her something wrapped thickly with cloth, squared at the edges and curiously heavy. "I have your first commission here. I'll need you to find a way to bind it and place a secure lock on it. Only one key, for myself alone."

"What is it?"

"It is a very important book. I strongly suggest you do not peek inside."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title comes from the Latin phrase: "Populus me sibilat, at mihi plaudo ipse domi simul ac nummos contemplor in arca." Translated roughly as "The public hiss at me, but I cheer myself in my own home when I contemplate the coins in my strong-box." Taken from the end of the Sherlock Holmes novel *The Sign of Four* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

This chapter is when I consciously try to be more obvious in what Minerva is planning. Giving more answers than raising questions, which works out to actually placing the Chekhov's Guns in more prominent locations.

This is also around the time when I had finally gotten *The Baroque Cycle* out of my system, only to fall (again) into the Vorkosigan saga by Lois McMaster Bujold. Hence
the difference in writing styles.

The Imp's clothes are supposed to be an anachronism, hence Minerva not recognizing them. They're synthetics.

Intentional Reference Count:

Alice's house in the Forest of Magic, Baba Yaga, Oka-Mystia, Tea Earl Grey Hot, Dollmaker of Bucharest, eternal youth of the Scarlet sisters, Grimoire of Alice
"Margatroid-san," Kamishirasawa said amicably, as Minerva returned to the portable stage she had set up just outside the tea shop overlooking the main square. "I have a minor riddle for you."

"All Cretans are liars," Minerva responded absently.

"Beg pardon?"

"Never mind. What is it, Kamishirasawa-san?"

Kamishirasawa sat back in the manner of an old man about to regale his juniors with tales long past, suitably embellished. Minerva continued preparing the stage for her next performance, while discreetly stowing away the collection hat, tinkling with contributions from her previous audience. Or the parents of her previous audience, at any rate; her puppet-show that afternoon had been aimed at the very young. Now, if only she could teach them to shout "Rumpelstiltskin" on cue... no, that was phonetically unlikely.

"Two men, both possessed of more wine than sense, saw something peculiar a few days ago," Kamishirasawa began. "A certain mysterious young lady from foreign lands..."

"Thank you," Minerva murmured.

"... had ventured towards the edge of the village, in the direction of the forest. Now, these two men, being of an unusually curious bent, opted to follow her. They returned some hours later, scared almost out of what wits they had."

Minerva paused. "When precisely did this happen, Kamishirasawa-san? I don't remember being followed any time in the past week."

"These are hunters, Margatroid-san. Tracking prey undetected, particularly in a land like Gensokyo, is their livelihood."

"Il n'y a pas des sots si incommodes que ceux qui ont de l'esprit," Minerva muttered. "And? What happened to them?"

"Therein lies the puzzle, Margatroid-san. As far as anyone could tell, after our two erstwhile adventurers had been sufficiently calmed with several more bracing cups of alcohol, they claim to have seen some sort of apparition. Wreathed in crimson hair, surrounded by shadows, cackling for their blood. A woman, they claim, but not of this world; a new and terrifying youkai. What do you make of that?"

Minerva covered her eyes with a weary hand. "It's a mystery I plan to solve very quickly, Kamishirasawa-san."

"I shall leave the matter to you, then," Kamishirasawa said. "You are certainly building a reputation for yourself. Where's Alice?"

"Running a few errands," Minerva said. "She should be back soon, when Seiji-san... that is, Kirisame-san the woodworker... finishes his repairs and maintenance of the puppets."
"I watched your performance. The latter part, at any rate. You have much experience in puppet-shows?"

"It was my bread and butter for a long while, back in Britain," Minerva said, finishing the set-up of the tiny puppet stage. Her immediate work done, she took a seat near Kamishirasawa. "It's always been enough to keep me comfortably fed and clothed, but for more expensive purchases, I take commissions."

"Oh?"

"Mostly little things. Charms and potions and concoctions. Fortune-telling, which never does seem to make any difference; the customer always comes already convinced of what his own future holds."

"Are your predictions accurate, then?"

Minerva waggled a hand. "It's complicated. What I foresee usually comes to pass, but only in the most general aspect. A prediction of disaster may entail anything from being trampled by a cart to losing a penny in the gutter. Fortune-telling is largely a matter of interpretation, and the future does not care for human scale."

"Have you attempted a prediction of your own future?" Kamishirasawa asked curiously.

"Haven't thought about it," Minerva lied. "Maybe I'll lay out some cards when I have the time. I've never been very good with the crystal ball, and entrails are rather too messy. Oh, here comes Alice."

Alice was accompanied by another man; Minerva found herself vaguely disappointed that it was not Seiji. This was instead Ryoutarou, who had evidently offered to help carry the repaired puppets on Alice's behalf, along with the other packet of papers he was holding.

Kamishirasawa rose to greet them. "Takahashi-san," he said, bowing deeply.

Ryoutarou looked mildly embarrassed. "Please don't do that, Kamishirasawa-san. And call me Ryoutarou, please. I'm probably more a Hieda now than Miho is a Takahashi, and it's probably less confusing to just work around the issue for the moment."

Minerva coughed delicately. "Ryoutarou-san. How, er, how is Miho-san?" And had Miho's pain over the loss of her cousin dulled yet?

"Miho is..." Ryoutarou glanced at Kamishirasawa, whose expression went carefully polite.

"Miho-dono has decided to concentrate on her... new duties as an important part of the Hieda family," Kamishirasawa said. "She is no longer teaching at the school, as the demands on her time have been more significant as of late. We wish her the best, and will always keep a place open for her should she desire to continue, of course."

Minerva remembered Miho's love of children and the education thereof. "I see," she said, clamping down with difficulty on the latest upsurge of guilt.

Alice, unconcerned with the conversation between grown-ups, had retrieved the box from Ryoutarou, and was inspecting its contents with a critical eye. Minerva had the distinct impression that she had already checked the two puppets within for defects several times earlier, but was taking her new responsibilities very seriously.
"What are those supposed to be?" Ryoutarou wondered.

Alice held the puppets up in turn. "Uncle Red," she declared. "Uncle Black."

"Macbeth and Macduff," Minerva corrected. "Just a thought for the future. I hardly think I am up to translating the Bard into Japanese."

The proprietor of the teahouse brought forth extra cups and snacks for the newcomers, as well as refills for those already present. While Ryoutarou negotiated payment via a typically Japanese excess of head-bobbing polite bows, Minerva took this opportunity to examine the packet of papers left on the table.

"Ah, those are copies of some things Kamishirasawa-san asked me to help look up," Ryoutarou put in, when he noticed Minerva's interest. "I believe they are for you?"

"Oh? My thanks." Minerva slid the packet towards herself, and browsed its contents. "Printed? Do we have a press in this village?"

"Brand new," Kamishirasawa said. "Motoori-san is very proud of it. We may be seeing a rise in the distribution of pamphlets and handbills in Gensokyo, at least as far as his supply of ink and paper holds."

"Have you given any thought to his offer, by the way?" Ryoutarou asked conversationally.

Kamishirasawa shrugged. "I have not decided. In any case, shouldn't the disposition of the Hieda library be your concern?"

"Yes, well..." Ryoutarou took a sip of steaming tea, buying time to gather his thoughts. "The Hieda library is, from what I understand, to be held by the Kamishirasawa clan until... the next Child of Miare. Who will not be born until a century or so, if this whole reincarnation business holds. My great-grandchild, to any degree of greats and grands, which is still a concept I haven't gotten used to, I should add. But I am asking you, Kamishirasawa-san, because I am still an outsider to all of this... tradition. I will not gainsay your decision, whatever it may be, but I would know your reasons."

Kamishirasawa shrugged. "I am willing to unbend enough to make the Hieda library a sharing library. Motoori-san, and indeed anyone else, is welcome to browse at their leisure. But I do not think it is wise to disperse the library on the whims of commerce. I am sure Motoori-san will be able to find his own sources, whatever that may be."

"He might not find a lot of demand for ancient books of mythology here in Gensokyo," Ryoutarou mused. "Although, if I read the signs correctly, he's thinking of branching out into all sorts of new business ideas, like using that printing press of his for textbooks."

"Ah? That would be most welcome."

"I saw some proofs the other day. 'Calculate the area of a square field forty-three shaku in length-''"

"One thousand eight hundred," Alice chirped, pausing her private re-enactment of the climactic final battle between Macbeth and Macduff. "And forty-nine," she added after a moment.

Two pairs of eyes snapped towards her, staring.

"To calculate the product of a number close to fifty by itself," Minerva said, not looking up from her work, "first one must know that fifty multiplied by itself is two thousand and five hundred."
Multiply the original difference from fifty, here seven, by a hundred, which is seven hundred. Subtract this seven hundred from two thousand and five hundred, and then add the square of the original difference, here forty-nine. End result, one thousand, eight hundred, and forty-nine." She smiled brightly at the other two adults. "The trick to magic," she said, "is knowing just a little more than the next person."

"Er... what exactly are you working on, Margatroid-san?" Kamishirasawa ventured.

"The same objective I have been striving towards since my arrival in Gensokyo," Minerva said. "I was tasked to deal with the youkai problem. God willing, that is precisely what I mean to achieve."

Ryoutarou glanced down at the papers spread out across the table. Several of them now bore Minerva's pencilled scribbles, largely written in the arcane and unfamiliar language of English. "And these notes on, er, sacrificial seals..."

"As I have reassured Kamishirasawa-san, I do not plan to murder any unfortunate soul for my plans." Minerva sighed. "Look, how many youkai hunters has Gensokyo seen before my arrival?"

"Records are unclear," Kamishirasawa said blandly.

"And yet you still have this youkai problem. That suggests to me that rushing out to challenge every youkai in the vicinity to single combat is not, perhaps, the most efficient solution. Haven't you ever wondered why Gensokyo is populated with so many youkai?"

"It is the way it always has been," Kamishirasawa said.

Minerva started flipping the papers over, searching for ones with blank pages on the reverse. Finding one, she began sketching a rough map of Gensokyo. "Some time in the ancient past, something happened in this area to... alter the nature of magic. Of belief and imagination. Imagine much of the rest of the world as a desert; here and there, oases may be found, and that is where certain classes of beings have retreated. But here in Gensokyo, the rain has never ceased."

Kamishirasawa caught on almost immediately. "You mean to stop this rain."

"Such as it is. I do not know how effective my methods will be, but if I cannot clear the skies, at least I might reduce the downpour to a drizzle. And the youkai of Gensokyo will have a choice: leave for other lands, or stay and starve."

"Hm." It was unclear whether Kamishirasawa's grunt was approving or suspicious.

"How are you going to work this... rain magic?" Ryoutarou asked.

"A modification of certain methods I picked up some time ago. Back in Britain; Cardiff, in Wales, to be precise." Not that the institute which drafted her as a consultant had given her much of a choice, royal writ or otherwise. "I am working with greatly reduced resources now, but these..." She gestured to the notes before her. "These hold vital clues that may lead to my ultimate success."

Kamishirasawa and Ryoutarou exchanged a glance. Unfortunately, their meaningful silence was spoiled somewhat by Alice's quiet excitement, as Macbeth went through a dramatic, ad-libbed, and quite lengthy death soliloquy.

Ryoutarou cleared his throat. "I should mention, having read through the passages I copied, that if you're planning on using these methods to create a seal... well. I'm not sure how you're going to get the soul required for it; I mean, that does seem to be a major requirement."
"I do not have to procure a soul to sacrifice, Ryoutarou-san. I only have to simulate one."

Ryoutarou still looked uncomfortable. "Maybe Hakurei-san should review this plan of yours. Most of these rituals are based around Shinto, after all."

"Ever since the day after the autumn festival, I have tried contacting Hakurei-san to arrange a meeting," Minerva said evenly, "but I have been unsuccessful. Were I a more paranoid sort, I'd say she's been avoiding me."

Ryoutarou seemed about to reply, but mutely threw his hands up in surrender instead. With a distracted polite nod, he rose to confer something or other with the tea shop owner.

Kamishirasawa leaned forward. "Margatroid-san, a word. I do not know which parts of these... practices you wish to perform. Nor, I suppose, is it any of my affair. Particularly if you hold true to your promise to refrain from kidnapping other citizens for occult purposes."

Minerva noted the conditional in Kamishirasawa's words. "And yet..." she prompted.

"Souls... spirits... they are not what you may be accustomed to, in your Western beliefs. How much of a soul is a person?"

Minerva tried to remember the death rites and beliefs of Eastern religions. Buddhism had something to do with reincarnation, didn't it? This world was Purgatory, and all had to repeat the same cycles until they proved their worthiness somehow. Which explained the Child of Miare, and yet not why Aya's reincarnations, past and future, were perceived as unusual.

Shinto... Minerva didn't know what customs Shinto had for death. It seemed to be one of those topics carefully avoided unless necessary; Minerva remembered the salt-purifying ritual after her brief sojourn into... what had that place been?

"I am not sure I understand the question, Kamishirasawa-san," she said. "What are you worried about?" A movement to the side caught her attention; Alice had finally finished her personal puppet-play, and had wandered over to see if this discussion was worth paying any attention to.

Kamishirasawa shook his head. "Stories... myths... some of them might be listed in those notes, I do not know. But there is a certain risk to those who would perform these rituals of binding. A risk that the spirits sacrificed to their great cause may find their lot unfair, and return to those who wronged them."

"Kamishirasawa-san, are you speaking of hauntings by ghosts?"

"Yes and no. Not ghosts of the dead, or rather not always. In fact, some stories speak of wandering spirits of those not yet dead, but asleep for a very long time. A sort of... projection of self."

Dornroschen; Sleeping Beauty, having fallen under the witch's curse and pricked her finger, might have found a way to communicate with her grieving attendants after all. The part of the witch was certainly fulfilled here; now all Minerva had to do was find someone to play the role of the unfortunate princess, and prepare a sharp spindle, preferably disinfected beforehand.

She firmly pushed away visions of turning up at the birth of the next Child of Miare with dire curses and appalling makeup; then again, in a century's time she might not need the makeup to look like a proper crone. "As I said, Kamishirasawa-san, I do not intend to involve any other, er, victims to my little scheme. This applies in all cases, including induced comas."

"Hm." Kamishirasawa did not sound convinced. "How long is it before you put your plan into
"There are still a few obstacles to overcome," Minerva said, "but I am in the process of working on the most important one." Alice, with a bored mutter, slid away, venturing just outside the teahouse. The afternoon was shading into evening, and foot traffic was increasing in the village square; townsfolk and tradesmen seeking dinner, layabouts returning from wherever they spent their days, womenfolk emerging from shopping trips... Alice dove into the storage chest beneath the portable puppet stage, rummaging for props.

"Oh?" Kamishirasawa said.

"By my reckoning, in order to perform this... miracle of rain, I need to be in this location," Minerva said, circling Youkai Mountain on the sketched map. "However, climbing it on foot is out of the question. As such, I need to find another way up. There is one obvious solution."

Kamishirasawa's brows furrowed. "Margatroid-san, you can't seriously be saying you're going to fly up there."

"I am a witch, am I not?" Curiously: "What stories does Japan have regarding human flight, by the way?"

"Legends speak of potions and pills that lighten the body, enough to float to the moon," Kamishirasawa said. "These often have other side effects, such as immortality."

"I... see."

"Other stories deal more with supernatural beings, like youkai. Cloud-riding is popular, as is the use of mystical clothing as a conveyance. In more recent times, assassins have been said to use giant kites to clear the walls of enemy castles."

"Giant kites? Oh, you mean as an airfoil assembly. I've read a few monographs by Sir George Cayley; it could very well work. Weight, lift, drag, and thrust; the basics of aeronautics."

"But you're not planning on using that method," Ryoutarou stated, returning to their table.

"No, I'm not. Cayley's designs are masterful, but scaling Youkai Mountain will require something more suited to vertical flight. I do admit to stealing certain concepts from his models for my own flight apparatus."

"What flight apparatus?" Kamishirasawa asked, but his attention was quickly drawn to a growing commotion outside the teahouse. Ryoutarou stepped outside to join the crowd gawking and pointing at something rising in the sky.

Minerva remained in her seat, calmly gathering her notes. It was almost time for the evening puppet-show, but in view of the circumstances, it might be better to pack up for the day. Best to let the people of Gensokyo discuss this strange event instead, of an unidentified fantastic object floating high above their land.

Minerva did not need to look outside to know what it was. A large spheroid, blue and green, and garishly decorated with bright yellow stars and moons, despite Minerva's increasingly desperate insistence. This offense to good taste would remain in the skies for a few hours, until the Imp was satisfied with its airworthiness.

"A bit from Cayley," she told a speechless Kamishirasawa, "but rather more from the Montgolfiers. I do have a model I was intending to use for demonstrations, if I may be allowed."
Alice trotted back to their table, where she deposited a deflated miniature version of the thing in the skies.

"Balloon," she said smugly.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is Indonesian, or at least within the Malay language group, meaning "Puppet-play". Here in Singapore, it's used in slang to mean the sort of fakery and misdirection often seen in bureaucracy and politics, be it government or office.

I think this is the first chapter I explicitly made mention of Minerva's colours, quite similar to that of another canon Touhou character.

"Il n'y a pas des sots si incommodes que ceux qui ont de l'esprit": "There are no fools so troublesome as those who have some wit." From The Sign of Four by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Intentional Reference Count:

Epimenides Paradox, Rumpelstiltskin, Sherlock Holmes, Takahashi (one of Norinaga Motoori's disciples), Shin Megami Tensei, Macbeth, Touhou side-manga Forbidden Scrollery, Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman, Sanae Kochiya, Torchwood, Kanon and Clannad and probably other Key games, Sleeping Beauty, Kaguya-hime, Sun Wukong, ninja kites, Cayley's work on aerodynamics, Montgolfier balloons
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes


"Artificial silk," the Imp replied.

"Er..."

"We're still trying out alternative names," the Imp allowed. "But it's artificial, and it's meant to replace silk. Costs a fraction of the price, too. Elastic, durable, quite resilient, and, being synthetic, holds little interest to mildew and moths."

"How does it fare in a fire?"

"It melts," the Imp said. "Try not to be wearing it when basking in open flames."

Always a hazard to self-proclaimed witches. Minerva turned her attention to the knapsack itself, in which the artificial silk had been compactly folded. "And this mechanism... I need only pull the leather strap here, am I correct? Upon which the parachute deploys and saves me from an unfortunate tumble?"

"In theory," the Imp said. "Obviously the optimum condition is not to have to use it at all."

"No doubt." Minerva glanced up at the hot air balloon, already inflated and idle, straining gently against the ropes that held it earthbound. Dawn, arriving later in this time of year, was just now peeking over the horizon, through cloudless skies.

A good day for ballooning. After the initial demonstration by the Imp on its flight-worthiness, Minerva had taken her familiar aside for a few refreshers on the concept of restraint in dramatic displays. Further testing had therefore been restricted to pre-dawn or late evening flights, which had helped reduce the number of spectators.

This particular flight had been planned for the past two days, culminating in a night of sleepless preparation just a few hours prior. The Imp had found this launching site, in an abandoned field overseen by the weather-eaten ruins of a farmhouse. Minerva wondered if the previous residents had left of their own accord, in years long past.

The balloon basket was sporting some new additions, in the form of a set of rudders or sails, made of the same artificial silk stretched over a thin wooden frame.

"I thought it might help with steering," the Imp explained, following Minerva's gaze. "Otherwise, you'll have to rely on the prevailing winds. The sails should be manipulable through your magical threads."

Minerva wiggled her fingers. The sails squeaked back and forth. "Do they work?"

"Not very well," the Imp said. "I doubt they'll make much of a difference, to be frank. Still, it might prove minutely useful." She looked worriedly at the balloon. "I must reiterate that the wind maps we've drawn up are only preliminary, and you'll have to take further readings once you're up
"Which is why this is only a test flight," Minerva said, fastening the last buckle on the parachute harness around her waist. "I'll just be circling Youkai Mountain without landing, and return here after I'm done. Are you sure you won't be joining me up there?"

"With all due respect, milady Margatroid, you don't pay me enough for that."

Alice emerged from the farmhouse, sturdily trying to suppress a yawn. She held a battered nautical spyglass in one hand, while a pair of opera glasses was looped on a string around her neck. Wordlessly, she unhooked the opera glasses and handed them to Minerva, before lidding her eyes, swaying slightly as she dozed on her feet.

"In the event that you feel compelled to land on the mountain," the Imp continued, "I cannot guarantee that you'll be able to take flight again. You'll have to find your own way back; I hope you recall the runes for the Shadowed Paths?"

"Light into dark and dark into light," Minerva recited. "Which should find me back at our residence in the forest. Where comes this newfound worry, Imp?"

"I'd hoped to spend more time with our balloon," the Imp complained. "More trials, and some way to give it more mobility. Instead, we are left with this huge, slow, ungainly thing..."

"...which you've dyed in garish blue and green and gold, for some bizarre reason," Minerva muttered.

"They are your colours, are they not?"

"Advertisement may be done with more subtlety, Imp. What would people think of some enormous blue and yellow sign floating in the skies?"

"They'd call it the spirit of innovation," the Imp replied promptly.

"Nevertheless." Minerva ran through a mental checklist of the makeshift safety procedures they had invented out of whole cloth. She was dressed warmly, to ward against both season and altitude. A dark strip of real silk was tucked into her collar, to wrap around her eyes should the sun's glare be overwhelming. Thick leather gloves, capable of withstanding intense heat for a brief moment. Loose yet secure clothing, including a pair of ancient riding trousers, as well as Persian slippers in case of any emergencies where heavy footwear would be inconvenient. A waistband, with several slim tubes carefully sealed and attached. "For this flight, I am only going up to observe Youkai Mountain from the air. Should any unforeseen circumstance arise, the signal flares we have arranged should suffice for communication. Alice?"

Alice blinked awake, and saluted.

"I'll be relying on you to keep a look-out for the balloon, and any flares I might send up. In the meantime, it would be very helpful if you could sketch out the balloon's path on the charts, for later review."

Alice nodded firmly, clutching the spyglass in her hands.

"Marvelous." Minerva climbed into the tiny wicker basket underneath the engorged spheroid of cloth above her. A small, steady fire was already burning, fueled by a supply of gas in a sturdy cylinder; a set of bellows and valves allowed her to moderate the flame. "Imp, if you would do the honours?"
The Imp paused at one of the four stakes anchoring the balloon. "Are you quite certain of this?"

"If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly. Up we go, then."

As the Imp darted to the other stakes to release the ropes, Minerva started dumping out the sandbags that had helped weigh the balloon down. The entire contraption quickly began to rise; Minerva managed a cheerful wave at Alice, who was staring up at the balloon in appreciative awe. No matter how many times Alice had seen this performance, she never seemed to get bored by it.

The principles of ballooning were fairly well-understood, and Minerva encountered no significant deviations from the established records of similar experiences as she ascended. A few tentative adjustments to the sails produced no discernable result, to Minerva's disappointment.

Several small apertures had been cut into the top of the balloon's envelope, each sealed by a flap that could be opened via Minerva's magical puppet-strings. When opened, these allowed the hot air to escape and the balloon to drop into a lower air current, or to rotate the balloon to a new facing. Increasing the flame momentarily would provide a corresponding increase to buoyancy, allowing access to higher currents.

What were the implications of the Coriolis again? Winds pushing to the right upon ascent, wasn't it? Minerva crouched, unfolding a carefully-copied wind chart, double-checking her assumptions. While the Imp had worked on the balloon itself, the others had begun an observation regimen of the winds in the valley of Gensokyo. Alice's dexterity and skill allowed her to produce hundreds of tiny brightly-coloured paper balloons, each gossamer-thin to reduce weight. Hydrogen for lift had been provided by Minerva, using the electrolysis of water. No doubt these discarded guide balloons were scattered across the face of Youkai Mountain, causing much consternation among its residents, be they youkai, tengu, or bewildered goats.

The readings thus obtained were odd but consistent, and fairly comprehensive. In theory, all Minerva had to do was to maneuver the balloon skilfully enough to catch these wind currents.

Simple, but rather time-consuming, as Minerva puffed more hot air into the envelope, settling down to wait for its results.

From this height, Gensokyo seemed like a patchwork quilt of fields and forests, hemmed in by the mountain ranges. Much of it was farmland, raising crops of one variety or another, all to feed the hungry village where most of the humans dwelled. Mostly dormant, of course; harvest time had come and gone, and the food had been stored safely away for the coming year. A few winter wheat fields still showed signs of defiant activity, awaiting a spring harvest.

Minerva brought the opera glasses to her eyes, her vision clear in the crystalline air. The village was waking up, and tiny human-shaped figures were gathering in the main square. Quite probably there to watch the foreign magician's balloon take flight once more, although this time untethered.

Still using the opera glasses, Minerva traced the path of the river tributary that flowed through the village, giving it most of its water. The tributary joined the main river some distance away, where it meandered off into the distance, most likely to the sea. Once, Minerva had read an account of local superstitions of the afterlife in Gensokyo. What had that river been called? Not the Styx, but something similar, complete with a ferryman. Coins had also been required for payment, lest Charon refuse to take the dearly undeparted.

Aya would have been able to afford such a fee easily. Minerva wondered if the Child of Miare was charged extra for a return ticket.
And what price are you willing to pay to bring her back, Minerva Margatroid?

Minerva's telescopic inspection swung towards the foot of Youkai Mountain. That large lake must be the one where she had met the fairy; the mists were clear at this time of day, but Minerva's view of the elusive opposite shore was blocked by several outcroppings from the mountain itself. Well, maybe next time she could take a closer look.

The balloon was flagging, as the air within the envelope cooled. Minerva shot a stern glance at the gas burner, which obediently flared up once again.

From this distance and angle, Youkai Mountain was a breathtaking beauty of nature. Sparkling waterfalls could be seen cascading from its heights, feeding rivers and lakes and ponds. White frost took the place of the riot of colours that would have been seen in any other season on the trees. The occasional sudden splash of evergreens rose unexpectedly from the bare forests.

The top of the mountain was still too far up to see, which was odd; Minerva was fairly certain, based on her calculations, that she'd be nearing the peak any time now.

Curiouser and curiouser.

Minerva pumped the bellows, eking more height from the balloon. The air was thinning, if clear and bracingly cold; Minerva sucked in a deep breath, trying to dislodge the popping in her ears.

How high was Youkai Mountain, anyway? Minerva tried to recall what she had learned of Japanese geography, idly consulted in the early days of her fateful trip to this strange and rather irritating land. The tallest mountain in Japan was one Mount Fuji, which was about... ten thousand feet? Twelve thousand? Youkai Mountain seemed to be at least that height, by Minerva's increasingly unsettled estimates.

Mount Fuji was a volcano too, as a stray unpleasant thought reminded Minerva. An active one, which was said to have ever-burning smoke due to some ancient emperor or other burning the elixir of immortality there... one way of disposing of temptation, that. Much more romantic than tossing in sacrificial virgins to appease the angry mountain god.

Up, and up. Was Youkai Mountain another active volcano? If it decided to erupt, that would technically fulfill her quest to save the humans of Gensokyo from monsters. It would also have every human in Gensokyo and quite a large part of the surrounding area dead from the aftermath of an eruption, but that was another problem entirely, and one Minerva would not have to solve herself. Perhaps it would be widely reported back in Europe, the way the explosion at that volcano in the Dutch East Indies had been a few years back. Krakatoa, if she remembered the name.

An image flashed through her mind: Alice, even now conscientiously observing the path of Minerva's balloon, and, like everyone else in Gensokyo, under the shadow of the hypothetical volcano of Youkai Mountain. Minerva grimly pushed aside all frivolous speculation, and maintained her efforts to gain even more altitude.

The wind charts were useless now, since Minerva had not expected Youkai Mountain to seem bigger from the top than from the bottom. No readings had been taken for this height; thankfully, the peak of Youkai Mountain was just becoming visible. There seemed to be something of a plateau near the top, which would make a suitable landing site for some future expedition.

Minerva focused her binoculars on a collection of black dots spiralling up from the mountainside. Blackbirds, although she was too far away to see the details. As luck would have it, the balloon had caught a wind that was bringing it closer to the mountain. Just a little while more, and Minerva
could find out just what it was that had caused this flock of birds to take flight. Crows in winter...

A peculiar ripping noise from very close by tore Minerva's attention away from the blackbirds. She glanced down to see a large ragged hole in one of the sails, now made even more useless.

Minerva barely had time to puzzle this one out when the balloon basket jerked with several impacts to the envelope, each accompanied by a similar noise, as with a hard object fired with some force through thin cloth. Minerva stared up in horror at the open sky visible through several fresh entry and exit wounds in the balloon envelope.

Crows in winter were most certainly an ill omen, especially if they turned out to be youkai.

The balloon was dropping quickly; Minerva opened the envelope flaps to speed its descent, hopefully out of range from whatever artillery the youkai of the mountain might send her way next. Such a large and gaudy balloon could hardly present a more tempting target, although Minerva had yet to hear any thundercracks confirming the presence of cannons. Were the youkai sending these roundshots at her through main force? Some sort of advanced catapult? Or was it simply youkai magic?

Whatever the case, it was best to leave this little experiment to its fate. Minerva glanced down at the madly-wheeling landscape below, and wished she hadn't.

No way around it. Minerva stepped onto the rim of the wicker basket, braced her legs under her, and leapt into the wind.

Calm, now. There was nothing between herself and the rather final embrace of the earth, save for her own rational, logical intellect, which should not even be taxed to any extent, since the only action it needed to oversee was the grasping of that little leather strap, followed by a firm yank.

There was certainly no reason for this to be the most difficult thing Minerva ever had cause to do, despite what the pounding of blood in her ears and the blankness of her mind was implying.

Grasp, yank. Easy as that. Grasp...

Minerva just about managed not to bite her tongue, as the sudden jerk of an arrested fall indicated the successful deployment of her parachute. She was still falling, of course, but no longer terminally, and there was a fairly good chance that she might survive this adventure.

The balloon was still somewhere above her, but gaining fast. It appeared to have rather more holes than when Minerva had left it.

Bemused, Minerva watched as what appeared to be a streak of bright light traced a path towards the balloon. Apparently the mountain youkai were using incendiary shots now, which ought to react inconveniently with the container of hydrogen gas...

The explosion was not unexpected. The sudden shockwave was, in that brief instant before Minerva realized that the winds buffeting her were from some other source entirely. Somehow, the youkai of the mountain were able to control the element of air, the fact of which had probably been in some report or entry in the Gensokyo Chronicles somewhere, had Minerva been able to recall it some hours ago when it would have been of more help.

Now, however, she was caught helplessly in these gales, and the world spun dizzily, parachute fighting hard to save its owner's life from these unexpected interferences. Of course, the parachute might probably be of better use placed above her, rather than somewhere below...
A horrific series of snaps and cracks heralded the entrance of Minerva and parachute into the forest canopy just below. There was just enough time to silently curse all youkai and mountains and combinations thereof everywhere, as the first flight of youkai hunter and foreign English witch Minerva Margatroid ended ignominiously in a tree.

When Minerva drifted awake from her unplanned unconsciousness, she was quite surprised to find that she was still alive.

Not only that, but there did not seem to be any broken bones around her person. She was feeling rather bruised, scratched, and generally worse for wear, but she had no significant injuries to complain of.

Sadly, the good news ended there. Minerva was tangled in an effective mesh of parachute cords, hanging suspended from the branches of a maliciously sturdy tree, facing up at the sky. Her right arm was trapped painfully behind her back; some experimental struggling only succeeded in a listless swinging, accompanied by sharp spikes of pain.

With the limited mobility of her left hand, she managed to scrabble around her waistband, until she found the signal flare she was looking for. With a dextrous flick of her fingers and a covert spark, a small rocket shot up towards the sky, before detonating in a rather pretty firework display. Number three, green: I am unharmed but stranded. Please collect me with all due haste and decorum.

Minerva craned her neck, trying to catch sight of the ground. It seemed intimidatingly far.

Maybe a careful descent? All she needed to do was to find purchase on a handy tree branch, after all. Minerva kicked her legs out, hoping to gain some swing on the pendulum. She had somehow mislaid one of her slippers during that mad parachute jump; now the other inadvertently worked itself loose, and tumbled past her to the ground.

Minerva took a deep breath, and swore vociferously in English. Somehow, it made her feel better.

"What I find quite interesting," Violet Hearn said in that same language, her voice wafting from somewhere behind Minerva's head, "is how your accent changes when you are, shall I say, less than mannerly. Yorkshire?"

"Lancashire," Minerva said shortly, reverting to her usual pronunciation as per Oxford.

"Ah, I see. I should have thought about it more. A trifle more, I surmise."

"Miss Violet Hearn, you are a complication, an encumbrance, a hindrance, a problem, an obstacle; you are unwanted, undesired, unsought, objectionable, outrageous, wicked, reprehensible, you are quite simply not welcome, and were I not stuck upside-down in a tree I would beat you to death with my grimoire. What the devil were you doing at the autumn festival?"

"Checking in on little Alice," Violet replied placidly, apparently unperturbed by Minerva's splenetic venting. Minerva strained the limits of her movement to catch a glimpse of Violet seated comfortably on what seemed to be thin air, floating easily without visible means of support. "I realize my word may not be sufficient for your reassurance, but please believe me when I say that I mean her no harm."

Minerva returned to contemplating her current entanglement, and any possible routes of escape.

"And did you meet her?"

"Well, yes. I asked her to follow me, quite innocently, to a less crowded area, where I could
ascertain a few details." Violet sighed. "Alice complied at first. Then she kicked me in the shins and ran away."

"Ha." Minerva's right arm had gone to sleep. She continued working at the tangles with her other arm regardless.

"Among those details I was attempting to verify," Violet continued sharply, "was why other youkai seemed to be drawn to her. I was aware of one such youkai also present at the festival, a creature of darkness, who sometimes takes the form of a young girl."

"Is that so?"

"Yes; I may have to take some steps on that issue. In any case, I had hoped to protect young Alice from the youkai's predations, but Alice's little rebellion incapacitated me long enough for an infelicitous interception."

The knot Minerva had been trying to undo slipped out of her fingers; she hissed through her teeth in frustration.

"What have you been trying to do?" Violet asked, curious. "I must say the balloon was quite eye-catching, if ultimately unproductive."

"Learning to fly," Minerva said. "Unsuccessfully."

"If you intend to scale Youkai Mountain," Violet said, "you must find a more nimble form of flight. A clumsy balloon simply will not do."

"One of da Vinci's ornithopters, perhaps?"

"You may be more right than you imagine in your none too gentle sarcasms, Miss Margatroid. But no. I was speaking of your status as a magician, possibly the greatest magician in the world."

"Are you implying that I should find a broomstick to levitate upon?"

"This is Gensokyo, Miss Margatroid. If you wish to make real progress here, you should be prepared to believe in the impossible."

"Oh, just one impossible thing? Sometimes I've believed as many as six," Minerva snapped. "Before breakfast."

"Which no doubt speaks to the breadth of your imagination. Of course, as a mortal human, you might need some assistance. Some sort of focus, to channel your energies upon. You may find the practice far easier than the initial theories."

"I shall take your advice under consideration." Minerva wriggled. "Are there any further surprises in store? Are artillery fire and freak weather patterns all I have to deal with from the youkai of the mountain?"

"Mm, not all, but they are the most common. You might wish to consult with the young lady of Hieda before you venture forth."

"Necromancy is not something I wish to take up at this point, Miss Hearn."

So absorbed was Minerva in untangling herself that she almost missed the sharp intake of breath. By the time she managed to twist around to face Violet, the floating woman had reasserted her
usual expression of a smile. This one, however, seemed to have been hastily donned, revealing the presence of something less friendly, less human, behind the mask.

"I do beg your pardon," Violet said, reciting each word carefully. "I believe I am somewhat behind the times on current events. Has anything happened to Hieda no Aya?"

"Aya-san accompanied us... me... to the nameless hill of lilies of the valley. To rescue Alice." Minerva swallowed a fresh dose of bitter guilt. "She did not survive."

"I see. I... see. Do excuse me, Miss Margatroid. I must... please, do excuse me."

Minerva twisted around again. She was alone; no sign of Violet's presence remained.

How very odd. Violet the omniscient could not see the fall of every sparrow, after all. Had Aya messed up Violet's plans by dying inconveniently early?

And what was it worth to have done so, Miss Margatroid?

Minerva was brought back from her thoughts by the thousands of needles stabbing into her right arm, or so it felt like. She resumed her futile struggle. When this failed to achieve any result, she turned her eyes to the skies, and swore.

Presently, it began to snow.

When the Imp and Alice finally found her, Minerva was covered with a fine dusting of snowflakes, and had just finished with her latest volley of curses, searching her vocabulary for more.

"You really shouldn't use language like that in the presence of children," the Imp noted.

Alice, for her part, simply stared at Minerva's predicament, before clamping her hands over her mouth, eyes wide, not quite able to conceal the strangled, choked sounds.

"Do be quiet," Minerva growled wearily, "and help me get down from here."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title took some time to decide, until I finally settled on something from the Ace Combat 5 soundtrack. Not very imaginative, I admit.

Once again, I know nothing of ballooning, and all information was taken from Wikipedia. Most of the research was done trying to figure out when various innovations were introduced, and how anachronistic they would be.

Most of the ballooning in this chapter was written while listening to remixes of "The Gensokyo The Gods Loved" and "Fall of Fall."

Intentional Reference Count:

Nylon, City of Heroes, Goodyear, Macbeth, Sanzu river, Komachi Onozuka, Touhou 10 Mountain of Faith, mythological shortening of Mount Yatsugatake, Fujiwara no Mokou (and related actual myths), Krakatoa, TARDIS, danmaku, Sherlock Holmes, Quicksilver (The Baroque Cycle), Chantelise, Rumia, Leonardo da Vinci, Through The
Looking Glass
The first snow of Gensokyo quickly turned to slush, and disappeared into the dry days that followed. Judging from the overheard commentary of the villagers, this was a sure harbinger of severe frost to come, in the non-specific near future.

Minerva spent most of her time indoors, preferably somewhere with a warm fire to sit by. After her abortive attempt to reach the top of Youkai Mountain, and the subsequent sheepish expedition to retrieve the remains of the balloon, she had made a point to put on a few public appearances in the village to forestall rumours of her spectacular demise, before plummeting temperatures drove her to shelter.

The library holding the majority of the Hieda materials had been converted from an outlying wing of the village school, which had in turn been borrowed indefinitely from the old municipal government offices. Some alterations to the architecture had been made in the service to convenience and comfort, including the installation of modern European-style fireplaces on every floor. Thankfully, each one had been carefully designed to limit the hazards of open flame in the vicinity of so much paper.

The Hieda library was situated in the basement, set apart from the reading and lending library meant for the masses. Minerva could hear the occasional snatch of conversation and thumping footsteps from above, which was a heartening indication of the number of village residents seeking self-improvement. Minerva had encountered far too many people in Britain to whom reading began and ended with the Bible, and even then not very well.

One set of footsteps could be heard making its way down to the basement, pausing momentarily before the sliding door into the library. The door was gingerly opened, just enough for Kamishirasawa to poke his head in to glance around.

Minerva gave him a cheery wave from the nest of books she had constructed around herself, before placing a finger on her lips for silence, indicating the fireplace with a flick of her eyes.

Alice had insisted on helping Minerva with her research after lunch, and brought an armload of promising-looking books to the fireside to read. She had lasted for approximately ninety minutes before nodding off, and was now curled up like a contented cat around her last book, Minerva's coat laid gently over her.

Kamishirasawa nodded, and carefully entered the room, making as little noise as possible. He padded over to Minerva, and frowned meaningfully at the mess of paper around her.

"I'll put them all back where I found them," Minerva reassured him. "I work best this way; though it might not seem so, there is an order to this chaos. My personal order." She placed a hand on a tattered journal on her left. "An account of expenses over the course of a minor landowner's life." She shifted her hand to rest on a sturdy tome beside the journal. "A listing of superstitions and folklore associated with that region, explaining some of the landowner's more obscure payments." A scroll lying on top of the tome, haphazardly rerolled. "Representations of creatures from those local myths." Minerva continued pointing out books in sequence as she laid out her chain of thoughts. "A collection of methods used by a youkai hunter long past to deal with those creatures. A travel guide for another region of Japan, likely the background of that youkai hunter. An
exploration of common religious rituals, including those prevalent in that region. A thesis on numerology often used in Far Eastern rituals. Its direct rebuttal, from the archives of the Jesuits. And a synthesis of those ideas, buried in a collection of poetic structures."

Kamishirasawa looked skeptical. "And you can recall every piece of information that you come across in this manner?"

"I do not have that particular talent, I'm afraid. But now and again some helpful trifle makes itself known in my mind, and I may well find it of use." Minerva waved a hand, indicating the library as a whole. "And the pursuit of knowledge is the primary concern of an amateur scholar as myself."

"A scholar, and a magician?"

Minerva's smile turned fixed. "That, too."

Kamishirasawa nodded. "I was just checking to see if you needed anything. Alice as well, but she seems happy enough here. Are you staying long?"

Minerva took out her silver pocketwatch, still ticking away quietly without any apparent need of winding. "Mm. I suspect Alice will wake in time for dinner, which will be our cue to depart."

"A nap after lunch beside a warm fire, followed by another hearty meal. A pleasant life."

"Would that I could make it last forever. Alice has been working hard for my account, and nothing I can say seems able to deter her from trying to help in every way. I keep thinking she should have a happy childhood, but..."

But what? Countless generations had lived here in Gensokyo, with little more visible effect on their collective psyche than a heavier standard of Oriental inscrutability. For all its youkai, Gensokyo was hardly more dangerous to young people than other, more mundane locales. Less so than the smoke-filled factories of London, at that.

Would Minerva be willing to raise Alice here? Particularly since, if all went well, Gensokyo's dangers would be drastically reduced in the very near future. Life in a small village in rural Japan was certainly an option, as Maria Kirisame proved. Although given a choice, Minerva would prefer taking Alice back to England...

Minerva viciously clamped down on the sudden bout of homesickness. "What do you think, Kamishirasawa-san?" she asked instead. "How is Alice doing, from your perspective?"

"I doubt I can help you there, Margatroid-san," Kamishirasawa said dryly. "Apart from her brief indisposition after the festival, her attendance at school has been exemplary. Which is still only three half-days a week, and hardly in a situation allowing close observation. Still..." He hesitated, but pushed on. "As a father, and a grandfather, I do not think Alice is unhappy. Perhaps a little shy, and not easy to draw out of her shell... but she seems glad enough be in your company."

Minerva turned an anxious glance towards the sleeping child. "I don't know where to begin, sometimes."

"We muddle through, somehow," Kamishirasawa said gravely. "As all parents do. I'll leave you to your research, Margatroid-san. Unless there is anything more you require?"

Minerva considered this. "Just an answer to a minor mystery."

"Oh?"
"Nothing all that significant. And yet... Kamishirasawa-san, is this the entirety of the Hieda collection? Were there any books that have been given away, or returned to prior owners?"

Kamishirasawa frowned in thought. "It is the entirety of the collection as I am aware of," he finally said. "What its disposition had been when the Child of Miare was... available... I cannot say."

"Hm. Well, thank you anyway, Kamishirasawa-san."

A ritual sacrifice to seal away a great evil. Minerva was fairly certain she had read an account of one specific incident, or at least an incident enshrined in myth and retellings. A tree that had turned into a youkai, requiring the sacrifice of some unfortunate soul. To act as a barrier against further depredations? Or simply to appease the hungering monster?

Whichever the case, the account of the incident had not been in any of the books Minerva had found thus far. She had not yet scoured the entire library, but Kamishirasawa had been conscientious in his role as caretaker of the Hieda collection, and arranged the books by broad subject categories. Youkai classifications here, cultural observations there, legends and myths two shelves to the right. Minerva's little pocket dictionary was becoming distinctly dog-eared by now.

And yet nothing. Only the most tantalizing of passing references remained in the other works, and the primary source had been quietly removed by some mysterious censor.

Or had Minerva imagined the entire thing, of trees and seals and sacrifices? If so, where had her mind come up with such a tale?

A youkai tree. This was certainly not the only instance Minerva was aware of, regarding trees being more than mere vegetation in mythology. Stories of dryads and nymphs living within the wood itself were common, and other trees in certain groves might have offerings placed upon them by passing travellers wishing for safety and fortune. The Glastonbury Thorn famously flowered twice a year, whether or not it had truly sprung from the staff of Joseph. And the Yule tree was a common sight around Christmas even in Britain, courtesy of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria of the House of Hanover.

Eden had a certain tree, too, quite well-known for its fruit.

Someone evidently believed this particular tree dangerous enough to seal away, however. Active malevolence, or simply unfortunate circumstance? How had this tree gained its youkai powers? Had it been a natural process, or was it the interference of an outside practitioner?

"... shall never vanquished be, until great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill shall come against him," Minerva muttered under her breath. She rose, careful not to dislodge any of the book piles around her. One more check on little Alice, still fast asleep. Then Minerva retreated into the library stacks, drifting past shelves of knowledge pressed and dried between pages.

A giant tree, girt with a holy rope, standing barren in the land of the dead. Recognizable in dimly-remembered myths, and yet no records could be found about it. Either nobody bothered to collate these myths, or someone already had, and the results had been spirited away.

Minerva ran a lazy hand across the uneven spines of the books on the shelves. The responsibility of the Child of Miare, passed down over the centuries from reincarnation to reincarnation, to catalogue and disseminate the descriptions of youkai and their countermeasures. Aya had performed her role, before Minerva had ever met her.

And then... what? Having completed the one charge laid onto a life, what other purpose could that
life serve? Was that life free to seek its own destiny? Or would it be trapped by the rigid strictures of duty?

Minerva had found the manuscripts about the Child of Miare easily enough, once she had known what to look for. There were only a few, and none of them went into any great detail about the people to whom the title was given. Only names and dates, births and deaths and rebirths. Aya's entry was not yet written.

And how would history remember you, Hieda no Aya? Who chronicled the chroniclers?

Minerva's fingers caught on a jutting spine of a slim volume. She pulled it out on a whim, and she opened the book.

It took a moment longer for her to realize what was wrong.

There was, after all, little reason for the Hieda family to have a book such as this. Most of its collection were in Japanese, of varying age and incomprehensibility. A few ancient tomes were in Chinese, which made little difference for Englishwoman Minerva, or Portuguese, for older records dating from Japan's extended isolation from the world.

An Italian primer on the relation of the elements applied to magic was probably beyond the Hieda collection's scope.

Minerva snapped the book shut, replacing it hastily. The tiny basement of the village's library had somehow turned into a dizzyingly vast cavern of a room, lined on all sides with rows upon endless rows of books. The ceiling disappeared into inky blackness far above, absent any obvious lighting.

Curious. The basement library had been lit by several oil lamps set in the walls, providing ample light for reading. Here, there was no visible source of light, and yet there seemed to be a halo surrounding Minerva, illuminating the shelves around her.

She picked another book at random, which turned out to contain something unintelligible in an angular hand. Scribed, not printed, and yet the book seemed new enough, its pages crisp and clean.

Something on a page caught her eye: the eight trigrams of the I Ching, arranged in an octagonal shape. Clearly a design for some sort of ritual circle, containing whatever was within for some purpose. The symbol of the Yin and Yang was set into the centre. Providing balance and harmony to the pattern?

Minerva browsed through a few more pages. The rest of the chapter appeared to explain what each part of the diagram represented, and how it achieved its given purpose. Possibly useful, if Minerva could understand the book's language.

There was a larger drawing on a later page, superimposing the ritual circle design onto another picture, demonstrating and emphasizing how the two fit together. Something about the picture seemed familiar, although Minerva was hard-pressed to place it in her memory...

A quiet cough echoed through the silence. It was not a cough of politeness, intended to assert the presence of a throat to cough with, but the real reflexive action of someone just a touch under the weather at the moment, and obviously unaware or uncaring of whoever else might be listening.

Minerva slowly returned the book to the shelf, feeling very much like the trespasser she was. Most people, much less mages, would have a negative impression of strangers riffling through their books without permission. Minerva would have limited herself to a disapproving frown at the outrageous lack of manners, possibly with a snide remark or two if she was feeling especially annoyed. Other
mages of her acquaintance would have responded with murderous violence.

Should she announce herself? Or should she skulk away in the hopes that the owner of this strange library had not noticed her presence? Even if she chose to skulk, where could she skulk to? It wasn't as though Minerva knew how she arrived here in the first place.

Announcement it was. Minerva cleared her throat meaningfully, and awaited a reaction.

It came quickly, in the form of a startled gasp. Minerva counted out seven heartbeats, before she became aware of the rustling of pages. And if she strained her listening to its utmost, she could just barely make out the susurrations of a rapid whisper, speaking words of power that could not be discerned, yet clearly rushing to a conclusion...

Minerva woke abruptly, her sudden movement dislodging several books around her, which tumbled messily to the floor. The crackle of the fireplace was the only response she received.

She had fallen asleep in the midst of her research, it seemed. And had a peculiar dream, quite vivid, except for... what had happened, after she had startled that dream-person? She woke up, of course, but something had happened in the dream right at the very end, a maddening blank in her memory that was quickly fading away.

Nothing she could do about it now. With any luck, the dream had merely been a result of her nigh-endless work the past few days, and devoid of any mystical significance. Oneiromancy had always seemed too inconsistent for Minerva's purposes.

She was alone in the basement library. Alice was nowhere to be seen, although Minerva's coat now lay on the ground like the casually discarded blanket it was. Minerva toddled over to pick it up, shrugging it on as she ascended the steps up to ground level.

The rest of the building was deserted as well. A glance out the windows showed the sun still shining bright, already past the midpoint of its descent into the early winter evening.

"Alice?" Minerva tried. "Alice, are you there?"

Only the faint echoes of an empty building replied.

Minerva stepped outside, shivering in the chill, breath puffing out. She was unsurprised to note that the village appeared to be entirely lacking in any other living being.

It wasn't as though the villagers had suddenly disappeared in the midst of their daily chores. As Minerva passed through familiar streets and locales, she could see everything placed neatly as it should, behind boarded windows. No perishables had been left out in the open, and restaurant tables had been conscientiously wiped clean.

Minerva stopped in front of the Kirisame shop, its sign hanging serenely above the entrance as normal. She tried the door, which had been securely shut, just enough to discourage petty thieves. Minerva could probably break it down with sufficient force, whether magical or mundane, but she refrained from damaging the property just yet. The interior of the store, as glimpse through cracks in the window boards, was dim and tidy. All the items had been taken off the shelves, which had then been dusted and polished.

The entire empty village gave the impression of having undergone a very well-ordered evacuation, spread over enough time for everyone to get their affairs into order before leaving.

"Good Lord Almighty," Minerva said peevishly to nothing in particular. "You certainly do not do
things by halves, Miss Violet Hearn."

Rip van Winkle had gone to sleep one day and woken up twenty years in the future, and the entire colonial revolution had passed him by. Was this Gensokyo as it might be some years into the future? And whose future did this represent? Minerva had a vague idea of the sort of Gensokyo her efforts would someday produce. The human inhabitants by and large shared that vision, if differing in certain details. The youkai probably did not think that far beyond the present. Heaven only knew what Violet Hearn intended.

An abandoned village, lost to time. Kamishirasawa had talked to Minerva about something like this when Minerva first came to Japan, several lifetimes ago. Youkai and other fairy tales had no place in the new order of reason and progress, and the younger generation migrated to the cities to seek their fortune. Memories of the haunted past remained that, eventually fading into unreliability and rationalization. Don't take the old man seriously; he's just confused. Don't listen to the country bumpkin; he's just superstitious.

Don't worry about the magician; she's just a charlatan and a fraud.

Minerva stalked back towards the schoolhouse, her mood growing as grey as the skies above. Clearly someone had laid this illusion out in front of her to make some arcane point. A closer look at the library's fireplaces confirmed this suspicion: the fires burned merrily with ample fuel, which would have been unlikely had Minerva truly slept for several years while Gensokyo vanished around her.

She stamped down the stairs with just a little more force than was strictly necessary, slid open the door, and pursed her lips in irritation as she beheld the sight of the eclectic, mismatched collection of the Hieda family replaced by what appeared to be identical rows of leather-bound volumes filling the shelves.

Minerva pulled down the closest volume. It was unmarked and untitled.

She opened the book.

Minerva woke abruptly, her sudden movement dislodging several books around her, which tumbled messily to the floor.

She was buried under more of the same, albeit not very deeply. Warily poking her head up from her fallen position on the floor, she observed the empty shelves beside her, from whence these books had dropped.

She was back in the mysterious cavern of a library... unless she had never left at all. The spellcasting owner of the library seemed to have left her alone, after whatever it was that had sent her through that dream of the empty village. Perhaps she presented so little threat that the owner had just left her there to muddle her way back out. Or maybe the owner had been distracted by something else, and was taking care of more important matters, now they knew the intruder had been temporarily neutralized.

Minerva pulled the nearest book towards her. Greek, which had never been one of her stronger languages; it appeared to be yet another treatise on the Philosopher's Stone. Not particularly useful for her efforts immediate or long-term.

Sitting up, she made a well-meaning effort to replace the fallen books on the shelves. She took the opportunity to glance through each one as they passed her hands. More Greek, another unknown language, something familiar-looking that might have come from India, Chinese, unknown, a
German lineage of Danish kings, Chinese again, a few more unknowns...

English. Minerva took her time with this one, if only for the novelty; most esoteric texts tried for high-minded Latin or popular German or French. English was generally not a useful market until quite recently, historically speaking. In addition, the Age of Reason had caused most authors of mystical works, be they fair or fraud, to retreat into conservatism and the bastions of old, including languages dead and moribund.

Unfortunately, the author of this particular book was more concerned with tiresomely apocalyptic imagery than with readability. All Minerva was able to divine from the book was that making pacts with devils was not advisable.

Much too late for that, of course.

Minerva continued her desultory task, almost missing the most interesting book of the lot. This one was marked only by a strange sigil on its cover, and try as she might, Minerva could not quite recall where she had seen it before. Some fleeting glimpse, when her attention had been occupied by a hundred more important concerns. Something that brought to mind an association with the most peculiar smells: flowers, and rain.

She opened the book.

Minerva woke abruptly, her sudden movement dislodging several books around her, which tumbled messily to the floor.

She had nodded off for just the briefest of moments, possibly as a result of overwork. She fought through the brief moment of disorientation: what had she been doing moments before?

Power. That was it. Researching ways to achieve enough power to do... something. It would all come back to her in time.

She was surrounded with loose-leaf notes and papers more than properly bound books, as had increasingly been the case since she arrived at the Hieda mansion. She had thrown herself into her research, keeping the plan she had formulated in the back of her mind, while collecting data to refine and adjust the scheme as required. So busy had she been, in fact, that she had quite neglected her puppets and puppet-plays ever since she arrived in Gensokyo.

Alice's little doll had reminded her of that. Seiji had made it for her, or helped her make it, or whatever they had been doing at his workshop. Seiji's skills seemed internationally diverse; it was one reason Minerva had entrusted him with various aspects of her projects, after all.

Alice's little doll, moving and acting and dancing without strings. Could a doll remove itself far enough from its string-puller, to fool both puppeteer and puppet?

Someone entered the room then, and some small part of Minerva that did not quite belong here in this place and time began to mutter uncomfortably. She did not turn around, but reached instead for a book within handy distance, something dull and plodding about Aristotle.

"Please don't step on anything that looks important," Minerva said, while that small part of her refused to look or even think about the newcomer, having filled to the brim with inexplicable guilt.

She opened the book.

Minerva woke abruptly, her sudden movement dislodging several books around her, which tumbled messily to the floor.
The table lamp was still burning steadily, throwing off a warm glow on this cool spring evening in the countryside. Much more agreeable than the undoubtedly wet weather back in London.

The innkeeper had thrown a true feast, particularly with good ingredients in ready supply thanks to the country fair. Minerva had eaten too much and drank too much, distracted as she had been by the desire to return to her work.

Who was this mysterious Violet Hearn? She had not been present at the evening's celebration, or Minerva would have buttonholed her to demand further explanation. That design for the magical power source was breathtakingly elegant, in a way only centuries of refinement and study could achieve. Violet had clearly taken it from some long-standing mystical tradition, and Minerva was determined to find out which.

Come to think of it, what had Violet been up to, when she had been left alone in Minerva's room? She had clearly been building up to something, in her stilted, scripted conversation. The description of Minerva as one of the greatest magicians in the world was obviously false flattery, but there was something else beneath the surface, slippery and dark.

Well, either Violet Hearn would turn up again tomorrow, in which case Minerva could seek clarifications then, or she had already left the village, in which case the matter was forever closed. Brooding on it was of little purpose now.

Minerva pulled together her latest notes, checking them once more for errors before transcription into the leatherbound tome that was her life's work. Her life as a magician, in any case. Everything seemed to be in order, and she reached for a pen and the textbook-in-progress.

She opened the book.

Minerva woke abruptly, her sudden movement dislodging several books around her, which tumbled messily to the floor.

"My word," her host said with some amusement. "I hadn't expected my attempts at explaining magical theory to have such a soporific effect."

Minerva glared at the shadowed figure seated at the head of the long table. It was typical of him to hide himself in shadow, entirely to unnerve visitors. He had invited her into his home as a peer and equal; shouldn't he act more appropriately to his role?

"When you ply your guests with wine before burying them with words, you may wish to consider the consequences," she said. She bent over in her seat, picking up the fallen books. "This system of yours. Why cards?"

Her host shrugged. "Cards are more compact. I suppose I could use tokens and coins, but the risks of confusion and misplaced objects seems rather greater. With these cards and their key, it all becomes simplified. Why, even a child could use it!"

"Never entrust any arrangement to simplicity," Minerva warned. "Complexities have a way of spawning."

"Are you planning an excursion to some land where common sense does not hold sway, perchance?" That was one of the more infuriating habits he had; Minerva could never tell if he was speaking with sincerity or sarcasm. Everything was delivered with calm, smug certainty. "I'll take your advice under consideration. Perhaps I could arrange for a guide."

Minerva suppressed a shiver. She had never seen anyone else in this particular house, which did not
assuage the ever-present sensation of eyes, not quite human, watching from the darkness. "This card system seems different from the one certain other parties have been promoting."

"Yes, I know whom you speak of. You were close acquaintances at one time, were you not?"

"It was a mere childish infatuation," Minerva snapped. And then, unbidden by her brain, her mouth added: "Unrequited."

"Ah. My condolences," her host said, in a way that made Minerva wish she could tap him none too gently upon the head with his own staff. "In any case, I find the conceptual sun and moon to be sufficiently robust bases to subordinate each element to, should you wish further control of the spirits in the cards." He smiled. "Although one must not underestimate the power held by the stars, of course."

"No," Minerva said, her mouth suddenly dry. "No spirits. No contracts. Never again."

"As you wish." Brightly: "I do recommend the green book by your right hand, by the way. The wisdom of the Orient is by no means the lesser to European wizardry. You might find the examples within instructive, if not entertaining."

Minerva sighed, reaching for the item in question. There was some sort of circular symbol embossed on the cover. White and black, like two commas fitted together. Or fishes, eating each other's tails.

She opened the book.

Minerva woke abruptly, her sudden movement dislodging several books around her, which tumbled messily to the floor.

The boy who had startled her awake gave her a worried grin that nevertheless managed to add to his charm. "You all right?" he said.

"Perfectly fine," Minerva said, with adolescent irritability. "What's the matter now?"

"Well," he said, drawing out the syllable. "I was thinking, you've always been a bit of a reader, aren't you? And you've got plenty of talent. So..."

"Get to the point, Springfield."

"I'm thinking of putting on a little demonstration," he blurted out. "But, er, I'm a little wobbly on the circles, so I was hoping you could give me a pointer or two. You know, just to set me on the right direction."

Of course. He was always surrounded by other girls, with his natural good looks and rogueish charisma. And yet he always tried to impress them, and never her.

Never, ever her.

"I'll think about it, I'm sure," Minerva said, meaning nothing of the sort. She glanced around the library; nobody else seemed to have overheard their little conversation. A normal library, at a normal school. Only a tiny, select group of students had... other skills.

It had seemed like an answer to undirected prayers, when Minerva had finally found others around her age who knew about the other world, apart from the one everyone else saw. She liked being special, but being special in a way she couldn't tell anybody about had been annoyingly,
unnervingly lonely.

"Aw, come on," the boy wheedled. "You're smart, you're a good friend, and you're the only one I can trust. Please?"

Damn him, for always managing to get his way, even when Minerva longed to pound some sense into that thick skull of his. "Oh, all right. But just this once, you understand?"

"Thanks," he said, his grin growing wider. "Maybe you can figure out something I've been wondering about. Contracts and stuff."

Minerva held the book she had been reading up between them, a shield against further blandishments. "Get away from me, you bloody Welshman."

After he departed with a jaunty wave, Minerva shut her eyes for a moment, controlling her breathing. When she felt sufficiently confident that the blush on her cheeks had receded, she firmly pushed all thoughts of the boy out of her mind, and returned to the book.

It was a good one, detailing the theories of human flight as imagined by Leonardo da Vinci and his amazing designs. Careful explanations and footnotes detailed why none of these contraptions would ever work, while grudgingly allowing that with some unspecified changes, there might be a chance that one or two machines might show some promise.

What a marvelous world it would be if everyone could fly. Minerva laid a hand upon the book's cover for a moment, as she envisioned herself soaring through the skies. It didn't matter, she decided, if her flight was supported by machinery or magic.

She opened the book.

Minerva woke abruptly, her sudden movement dislodging several books around her, which tumbled messily to the floor.

She was wearing a light blue dress, white stockings, and curls in her hair. She was ten years old.

Minerva was not her name.

"Maggie!"

She was on the front porch, where the lazy summer heat of late August had lulled her into a nap while reading. The house was the hub of the family's country estate, near Alton, East Hampshire.

The year was 1867. In less than an hour, she would meet the Adams girl. A few more hours after that, she would see something that would change her life forever.

But for now, she simply waved in acknowledgement at her little sister calling to her. She picked up one of the books that had fallen, a pressed flower she used as a bookmark in her other hand.

She opened the book.

Minerva woke abruptly, her sudden movement startling Alice, who fell back with a surprised squeak.

"Alice?" she mumbled groggily. "I'm all right. Just a little more tired than I thought, evidently."

The basement library containing the Hieda collection was just as it should be. Books on the shelves and on the floor, fireplace burning merrily, and the faint treads of other visitors on the ground floor
above. Minerva surreptitiously pinched the back of her hand, and stared accusingly at the resulting welt, which hurt quite a bit.

She extracted her silver pocket-watch. Barely an hour had passed since Kamishirasawa had checked in on her.

Alice, meanwhile, was frowning disapprovingly, exactly as Kamishirasawa had, at the mess of books around Minerva.

"I'll clear it all up soon enough," Minerva sighed. "Give me a moment to recover... what a bizarre dream." A thoughtful pause. "Alice, would you happen to have a piece of paper and a pencil with you?"

Alice provided the requested items, eyes puzzled. The paper had seen some use as Alice's practice board for her artistic interpretations on the theme of cat; Minerva turned it over to the blank other side.

She sketched a map of Gensokyo, as she remembered seeing it from the air in the balloon. Less concerned with routes and symbols, and more an impression of what Gensokyo had seemed like, through her eyes.

On top of this, she pencilled in the circle octagon design of the eight I Ching trigrams. The patterns fit perfectly, matching the picture she saw in her dream.

If it had been a dream.

Alice tilted her head curiously at the picture. "Map?" she said uncertainly.

"A plan," Minerva replied. "Let's hope it works."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is from the concept in the Discworld novels, where all the knowledge contained in libraries bend time and space.

This is almost entirely a filler chapter. I was going to have something about Minerva's backstory, realized that I had no idea how to do it, and decided to just wing it.

Intentional Reference Count:

*The Jargon File*, Saigyou Ayakashi, various mythical and legendary trees, *Macbeth*, the Scarlet Devil Mansion's library, Hakker, Patchouli Knowledge, Rip van Winkle, Koakuma and Makai, Aristotle's "divine spark", Clow Reed and *Card Captor Sakura* in general, "You can't rely on common sense in Gensokyo!", *Negima*, Fanny Adams
It had been several months and an eternity ago since Minerva had last visited the lake. Like the rest of Gensokyo, very little had changed since then.

Most of the necessary equipment for the expedition had been rented back from the Kirisame store, at much-reduced prices. Maria had seemed willing to act as a guardian in trust for the various alchemical apparatus, partly on the basis that having anyone else express an interest in those particular items was growing ever more unlikely.

"To be honest, all of these would be gathering dust in the back rooms if you hadn't asked for them," Maria said, while Minerva fretted over her potential impact on the Kirisame business. "It's good to see things put to proper use. There are stories, you know, about neglected items returning to take vengeance on those who ignored them."

"Oh?" Minerva said weakly.

"Well, they're just stories," Maria said dismissively. "For all of Gensokyo's youkai, I don't think I've ever heard of one of those pop up yet. Good luck on your experiments, Margatroid-san. If there's anything else you need, just let me know."

Stories, Minerva pondered, as she trundled her little wagon to the spot she had conducted her orihalconic Experiment so long ago. Everyone told stories; it was a peculiarity of human nature, over the entire world. Every land touched by the British Empire had stories of its own, and these stories were brought back to be analyzed by the professors and dons at great centres of learning, where they were dissected, numbered, and filed away into neat cubby-holes. Minerva wondered if there were copies of the Gensokyo Chronicles even now languishing in the depths of Oxford or Cambridge, several editions out of date.

Probably not; Japan's isolation through the centuries had seen to that, and the only representative of Britain now in Gensokyo, where the Gensokyo Chronicles were largely distributed, was presently stamping about, trying to return some life and heat into her extremities in the face of this particularly frigid morning.

The mist around the lake had largely cleared up, save for a stubborn patch about halfway to the far shore, obscuring all beyond it. Minerva's curiosity would have to be sated another time, it seemed.

Minerva set the wagon down, taking a moment to re-tie her hair, inconveniently coming loose from the slim ribbon she wore. Heavy work lay ahead, and her appearance was among the least of her concerns, but her long hair was always more suited for theatre than toil.

She unslung the latest additions to her repertoire of tools. The gardening spade was very nearly brand new; it had originally been an ancient, rusted thing found in the back of some farmer's tool shed, but Minerva had sent it to the village smithy to be reworked, and they had included a brand new wooden handle for free. Minerva detected the intervention of Seiji in this, along with his mysterious network of fellow craftsmen.

She tapped the ground speculatively with her spade. She had not expected to return here during winter, which made her task rather more complicated. Where had it been? The alchemical
apparatus had been set up over there. The wagon at that time had been... here. Or was it over there? How many paces had it taken to go from one to the other...

"What are you doing?"

Minerva straightened, hiding a smile. "Merely searching for a small trifle I misplaced a fair while ago," she said. "Well met once again, little lady."

"How long ago? Wait, you mean you lost it back when you were here the last time? When was it..."

"Summer," Minerva supplied, looking around. The tiny clearing held no sign of the fairy's presence. "Where might you be, if I may ask?"

"You lost something all the way back in summer, and didn't bother to go look for it until now? Must be something you don't miss all that much," the fairy decided. Her voice was coming from somewhere in the darkness of the forest surrounding the lake shore, but Minerva could not pinpoint an exact direction.

"I didn't know I needed it until very recently," Minerva said. "Are you hiding from me, by any chance?"

"Of course I am," the fairy's disembodied voice said. "That's the entire point of hide-and-seek. Didn't you know that?"

The fairies of legend were famed for being able to conceal themselves from prying human eyes, largely so that their absence from organized searches in this age of reason was excusable. Of course, this was based on European mythology, and little had been written about the ability of the fae to find each other.

"Am I designated the searcher in this game, then?" Minerva said uncertainly. She could always brush off this unexpected responsibility, but she would rather not offend the youkai inhabitants of this land quite so cavalierly, particularly when they could see her, but not the reverse.

"We've already got one of those," the fairy said. "You're a bit big to go hide, and you're a human, so you shouldn't be in this game anyway."

"We?"

"The rest of us," the fairy said, enunciating clearly for the slow of thought. "You're really not very smart, are you? Good thing I'm so willing to help."

"I am most grateful," Minerva said, keeping a straight face. "Aren't you worried that you'll be found out? Especially if you continue to speak to me."

"Impossible," the fairy declared. "I'm the best at hide-and-seek, so there's no way anyone else can find me!"

Far be it for Minerva to press the matter, and lose a conversation partner. It helped to take her mind off the cold, at least. Come to think of it, the fairy had displayed a talent for manipulating cold and ice, during their previous meeting. Would the frosts of winter complement her power? Probably not something to test without adequate precautions.

"When I was here last," Minerva said, "I was conducting an experiment." Which the fairy had interfered in, but that was another matter. "I regret to say that I was a little careless, and I might
have spilled some of it around here. Just a tiny bit," she said quickly, reassuringly. "I was hoping that you might be able to remind me where it happened?"

"Experiment... oh, that thing with the fire?"

"That thing with the fire," Minerva confirmed.

"And you spilled it... oh, ew! You're talking about that thing in the ground!" The fairy made various noises to demonstrate her disgust. "Take it away, take it away!"

"I'd be delighted to, if I knew where to find it," Minerva said patiently.

"It's right there! Can't you... fine, look, go step to your left. No, your other left. That one, yes. Keep going... no, too far, go back. Go to the front a bit. Front, I said! Wow, it's really hard to deal with someone so stupid. Come on, keep going... too far, back, back!"

Minerva bore the directions with fortitude, as she made a mental note on fairies apparently not being able to tell the difference between left and right. Having reached her destination, she drove the spade in twice, forming a clear cross shape to mark the spot.

"I take it you've had some small interaction with the residue I inadvertently left here?" she said conversationally, as she rummaged through the wagon.

"What, you left it in our territory, didn't you?" The unseen fairy's tone gave the distinct impression of a shudder. "But it's icky and yucky, so we left it alone. You can take it back if you want."

The accidental spill had been Minerva's Experiment in creating Gensokyo's equivalent of orihalcum, or something very much like it. Violet Hearn had not expressed any discomfort in handling a bulk sample of the results, but the negative reaction of the fairies implied something more. Minerva had expected the not-orihalcum to absorb certain energies from the surrounding environment as it formed; could this be affecting the fairies?

She returned to the marked location with a small pot, which she carefully opened, and sprinkled its contents liberally around the area.

"What's that?" the fairy asked, curious but unconcerned.

"Salt," Minerva said, returning the pot to the wagon. It would take a moment for the salt to soften the ground sufficiently to ease digging; in the meantime, Minerva set about arranging her alchemical apparatus as she had the last time.

"Salt? Are you going to cook the ground? Ew, humans are weird."

"It's a ritual," Minerva sighed. Which was technically true, if not precisely magical. The ground there was already barren thanks to the residue of crimson metal, so the salt would not cause very much more environmental damage. The fairy didn't seem to be too put out by it, anyhow.

The instruments of alchemy set up this time were rather different. A large clay beaker, filled with water from the lake, took pride of place, and instead of alembics and pipes for distillation and purification, Minerva set out a piece of tablecloth with complex patterns embroidered upon it. The beaker sat in the center of the design, atop a miniature oil flame; Minerva kept the fire low, out of respect for the fairy of cold and ice. She did not require intense heat for this procedure, but merely enough warmth to counter this winter morning.

Around the beaker, at positions indicated by the ritual circle design, she laid out several sealed
ampoules, each containing samples of certain materials. Four arranged in the cardinal directions close to the beaker, followed by five more in a pentagram further out.

Not the first choice of methods Minerva would have used, but she was running out of time.

"Is this a common activity for fairies?" Minerva said, picking up the spade once more. She would likely be here for some time, and the fairy seemed to show no signs of leaving. "Hide-and-seek, I mean. Playing games?"

"Yeah! And I'm the best at everything there is, too! Hide-and-seek, tests of courage, eating bitter or spicy stuff, playing pranks on humans, flying really high and really fast... I'm the strongest!"

"Pranks on humans?" Not much of a surprise, considering Minerva had lost her sandwiches to fairies the last time she was here, but she had assumed the targets to be lone humans like herself in the wilds.

"It's really fun," the fairy assured her. "You should try it sometime. Just this winter, we've already sneaked into all sorts of places and taken all sorts of things. Seven socks, four hairpins, three chicken eggs, two wool gloves..."

"And a partridge in a pear tree?" Minerva said, fascinated.

"What's a partridge?"

"Never mind." Minerva wondered if it would be her civic duty to report this clear confession of larceny, or if she should magnanimously forgive the fairies on behalf of the human residents of Gensokyo, in the spirit of the season. "Do you do this all the time, or are there different enterprises for different times of the year?" Criminal or otherwise.

"Oh, different stuff. I mean, it's only really when it gets cold and snowy that I can try to freeze the lake."

Minerva blinked, pausing in her digging. "Freeze... the lake? The whole lake?"

"Yeah," the fairy confirmed. Not a boast, as much as a statement of fact.

"I see." Minerva drastically revised her estimate of the fairy's prowess. If the fairy could attempt to turn the waters of the entire lake into ice, or even just the surface of it, she may be very powerful, very confident, or very tenacious. All three could be problematic traits, to varying degrees. That patch of mist obscuring the lake might even be hiding a sizeable iceberg.

"What do you humans do?" the fairy wondered. "All I ever see are humans digging and putting things in the ground and taking things out of the ground and yelling at each other and chasing fairies away. Work, work, work, all the time. Don't humans ever play?"

"Children do," Minerva said, settling into an easy rhythm of digging. "Grown-ups like myself seem to have lost the knack of it, sometime in our lives." She brightened. "There are always celebrations, of course. That's when we can pretend we're doing something bigger and more important than simply playing around."

"Celebrations are nice," the fairy said wistfully. "Festivals are nice. Always plenty of food to steal, and nobody cares enough to chase us away. Unless we want them to. It's really funny to see humans running around, all out of breath. Their faces get all red."

"Yes, well, quite." Not any of her business, Minerva reminded herself. Besides, if her plan to solve
the youkai problem was successful, all those little annoyances and pranks would simply go away.

Including the boisterous, garrulous, friendly little fairy she was talking to right now.

Minerva's spade hit a strange, hard lump, rather deeper than she had estimated. She bent down to pick it up; it was an irregular blob of something black and calcified, perhaps eight to ten inches across.

Minerva brushed the dirt off it as best she could, and plopped the whole thing into the beaker, which sloshed over. Into this, she introduced three carefully-measured powdered substances from three separate vials. She covered the resultant murky concoction with another piece of cloth, this time a thick, coarse flap of sackcloth.

It was the work of a few moments to spread out a picnic blanket across the frosty ground, some short distance from the unfilled hole. Minerva sat in the middle of the picnic blanket, and pondered the weight of one fairy against the lives of countless generations of humans in Gensokyo. She didn't even like the fairy, as such; the fairy was too ill-behaved and arrogant, in her own childish way.

Which was certainly not a sin that Minerva could cast the first stone at, and hardly deserving of a fate uncomfortably close to extinction.

"Have you heard about Christmas?" she found herself asking.

"Ku-ri- what?"

"Christmas. It's a celebration, a festival from where I come from. It's new to Gensokyo, I would think; at least, I haven't seen anyone celebrate it yet." Nor would Minerva expect to. The Japanese government prior to this one had been ruthless in its persecution of Christianity, and change was still in progress. Not that Minerva had any love for the Church, nor the Church for witches like herself.

What was she trying to do, anyway? Explaining the birth of Christ to Japanese fairies in a land haunted by youkai. As a form of spontaneous repentance, it left rather a lot to be desired, both in intent and effectiveness.

But Christmas was not associated with churches and sermons in her memories. Christmas was a time with family, when the house was alight with noise and voices and laughter and tears and the sizzling anticipation of feasts and food and, in the secret hours of the night, the soft footfalls of someone delivering mysterious wrapped boxes under a Yule tree...

"You take a tree, and decorate it with lights and sparkles," she said aloud. "Fir, or pine; I'm not sure if any such trees are in Gensokyo. Maybe we can make do with others; it has to be green, even in winter."

"Why?" the fairy asked.

"To make it pretty," Minerva responded instantly. "Everyone likes a decorated tree. It's quite a big job, though, so most of us just do it once a year, when we don't have other things to do. Because of the snow, you see. Nothing wrong with snow, of course," she added hastily, "but it makes it hard to perform all sorts of tasks outdoors. So we humans set up a big green tree inside our houses, and string coloured balls and sugar ornaments and lighted candles all around it."

Minerva fancied the fairy's brief silence to contain much busy thinking. "So," the fairy said slowly, "Christmas is a festival where you decorate trees?"
"That's one part of it," Minerva said. "There's also food. Lots of food. Goose is traditional, but really the only criteria is that there needs to be plenty of it."

"Ooh," the fairy said appreciatively. "How long does this festival last?"

Minerva considered this. How should she explain the significance of the twenty-fifth of December? Did fairies have calendars, upon which they marked off the dates? "Usually just around the winter solstice, when the day is shortest and the night is longest," she said. "Just for a day or two. Well, the night before, the day itself, and the next day. Each day means different things, but it's all related." And each day might mean different things to different people, but Minerva did not quite feel up to explaining Boxing Day and the Feast of Saint Stephen to the fairy at the moment.

"And it's like that all the time? Lots to eat and drink and play with?"

"In a manner of speaking. However," Minerva said sharply, holding up a warning finger, "it's not all for one person. It's for the whole family, and all your friends, as many as are willing to come. The idea isn't to take everything for yourself; it's to share with everyone."

"Oh," the fairy said, sounding disappointed. "That doesn't sound like much fun. Why would anyone do that?"

Why indeed? "It's something humans do. Well, no, I suppose that's not quite correct; it's something humans can do, if we so choose. Not everyone does, but... well, there's a story."

"Is it going to be a very long one?"

Minerva choked down a chuckle at the fairy's plaintive tone. "I'll summarize it. A man who doesn't understand why he should care about others is visited by a series of ghosts." The images conjured up by Dickens leapt forward, fresh in her mind. "Through this, he learns that should he continue to be miserly and selfish, he will end up dying alone and friendless. So that's a reason to be nice to others, whether during Christmas or other times."

So who is your Marley, Minerva Margatroid? And what message will they bring, to a foreign witch in a foreign land? What chains still bind you down, that you must break free?

"Is that why humans are supposed to share stuff with each other? So they can have lots of friends?"

Minerva held out her hands, palms up, weighing ideas. "Cause and effect, little lady. We practice charity and benevolence because we wish the recipients to be our friends. And because the recipients are our friends and loved ones, we practice charity and benevolence."

The fairy mumbled inaudibly for a while, trying to work this out in a way that she understood. "Ah, that's all too complicated!" she finally yelled. "Everything you've said is weird. Why should I even listen to you?"

Minerva stood; the alchemical process should have completed by now. "Well, you've not been found and caught by the seeker in your game. I hoped we could have a pleasant chat, while we both waited for our respective results."

"They're all probably still looking around that flower field," the fairy said. "The one with those big flowers in summer, that turn to look at the sun."

Was there a sunflower field in Gensokyo? Minerva vaguely recalled a mention of some such, during one of Miho's extended introductions into Gensokyo's more unusual geographical and botanical features. "Isn't that quite a distance away?" On the other side of the mountain, at that.
"Of course," the fairy said. "That's why they won't find me here, see?"

Presumably the fairies had not laid down the boundaries of this game, and the one conversing with Minerva now was contravening the spirit of hide-and-seek, if not the letter. "In any case, you might wish to consider this: the very best of us consider all others, even utter strangers, to be our friends, to share our own bounties with. No matter who they are."

"The best..." The fairy sounded thoughtful.

"Look, you can try an experiment of your own. Is there anyone you're particularly close to? Friends among the other fairies?"

"I'm the strongest!" the fairy proclaimed once again. "Everyone follows me!" Her confidence faltered. "Well, they should, anyway. Most of the time."

"Hm, that's not quite what I meant. Are there any of your fellow fairies whom you feel particularly happy to be with? Someone you may share your thoughts with, or someone you like playing together with more than others?"

The fairy fell mostly silent, interrupted only by the occasional sounds of intense cogitation. Minerva took this opportunity to collect the beaker and set it aside. As for the rest, ampoules and all, she wrapped haphazardly within the tablecloth.

"Hey, human?"

"Yes?"

"How do you make friends?"

Minerva took this obvious change in topic with a smile. "That's a very good question. It's different for everyone, but I find that one of the more effective methods is simply to approach them, and ask them if they are willing to be your friend. It works surprisingly well." For a start, anyhow. "Was there someone you had in mind?"

"She has pretty wings," the fairy said. "Maybe I'll go talk to her later!"

Wings... "Might I ask you a question in return, little lady? I'll make it worth your while."

"Of course! Ask me anything!"

"How do you fly?"

"Huh? You just fly. Can't you fly?"

"I tried, for a bit. It wasn't very successful." Minerva pondered. "What about gravity? That force which keeps us rooted to the ground, I mean. When you throw a rock up, gravity makes sure it comes down."

The fairy laughed. "I don't know what that 'gravity' thing is, but who cares about it? Who cares about rocks? You're cleverer than a rock, aren't you?"

"I do hope so," Minerva said dryly. "Well-answered, my fairy friend. As promised..."

She circled the clearing, close to the edge of the forest, searching for a patch of clear ground, or a small flat rock she could use as a plateau. Finding one, she pulled the yellow ribbon out of her hair, and carefully folded it, laying it on the rock.
"It's a Christmas present," Minerva said. "A little early, but it'll do." Japanese fairies appeared not to have the complex system of bartered favours and gifts that stories of European fae warned of. "You may keep it for yourself, but I would propose an extension of the experiment: try offering it as a Christmas present of your own, to that fairy friend of yours with the pretty wings."

"What? Why?"

"That's why it's an experiment. Wouldn't you like to find out for yourself?"

"Hm." The fairy sounded skeptical, but at least she did not dismiss the idea out of hand.

Minerva walked back to the covered clay beaker, and removed the sackcloth. The water had turned inky-black; Minerva unceremoniously upended the entire container, pouring out its contents onto the ground, heedless of the further pollution she was causing to the lake. Perhaps some time in the future, when she had completed her task, she might return here to make amends.

For the lake, and for the fairies.

The black water flowed in rivulets towards the lake, staining it with cloudy tendrils. A small jet-black lump of something solid fell out of the beaker, and it was this that Minerva pounced upon.

The lump crumbled apart easily. Minerva exhaled in relief when she saw the final result, glittering in the palm of her hand. She took out a clean handkerchief, and wrapped it safely within.

Time to clean up the rest of the ritual equipment. Minerva took the bundle containing the ampoules of precious magical extracts, now drained of any power. She dropped it into the hole she had dug earlier, and stood back.

"You may want to avert your eyes, little lady," she warned. The last of the ingredients she had prepared went into the hole: first a significant sprinkling of thin, needle-like silvery sticks, and finally a tiny, fragile porcelain container filled with a pungent liquid.

The flames shot up out of the hole, red and green and white, incinerating everything within. Minerva, her own eyes shut and face protected by her scarf, felt the pressure of intense heat almost pushing her back; she did not open her eyes again until the fire died down.

Only ashes remained in the hole, its sides blasted and melted.

There had been no reaction or outcry from the fairy to this pyrotechnical display. Minerva glanced at the rock she had left her ribbon on, and saw that it had disappeared.

No telling whether the fairy had taken her advice about Christmas cheer seriously. But it was a start.

Minerva filled the hole back in, tamping the earth down firmly. Having accomplished what she intended, the remainder of the equipment was returned to the wagon: oil burner, beaker, portable table, picnic blanket, spade, and all. Minerva was sweating from the exertion even in the cold, but declined to wash up using the lake water, even though it now appeared as pristine as it had been before her arrival.

She took the handkerchief out, and beheld the result of her alchemy. A tiny, perfect sphere of metal, no bigger than the tip of her little finger, tinged with the slightest hint of crimson. Unblemished, and unblemishable, it reflected the world around it in its mirrored surface. If one were to keep very still and be very quiet, one might even be able to detect the very, very faint humming of power.
Power enough, perhaps, to be cleverer than a rock.

The sphere went back in the handkerchief, which went back into her pocket. Minerva took the handles of the wagon once more.

"Seven years dead," she muttered to herself. "And travelling all the time."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. Meaning trickery or fakery, which Scrooge initially believed Christmas was.

This was originally posted to the other fanfic sites on Christmas Eve, Singapore time. While the chapter was always going to be Christmas-themed, I only decided to write it in time for real-life Christmas about two days before.

The vast majority of research for this chapter is in trying to figure out what Christmas traditions were like in 19th century Britain, as opposed to 20th/21st century or 19th century America.

I actually had notes about what the firestarters Minerva threw in were supposed to be (for general use in case Minerva ever needed firestarters), but I couldn't find them in time, save for descriptions of what they might look like. So I don't know how accurate it all turned out to real chemistry, or if I have to hide behind MAGIC as a handwave.

Four Western elements plus five Eastern elements, or four cardinal directions plus five pentagram points, equals nine ampoules. Hurr hurr.

Intentional Reference Count:

Tsukumogami like Kogasa Tatara and Medicine Melancholy, Cirno Nine, Touhou side-manga about the Three Nature Fairies, "Twelve Days of Christmas", Touhou 12.8 *Fairy Wars*, *A Christmas Carol*, Garden of the Sun, Daiyousei
It was a chilly winter morning sometime in late December when Minerva finally reclaimed possession of her grimoire.

Seiji laid it onto the teahouse table with a thump, settling in on the bench opposite Minerva. "Pretty cold weather, isn't it?" he said, signalling for hot tea to be brought forth. "One of the colder winters we've had recently, I reckon. Of course, this is still nothing compared to that winter a few years back. Icicles the size of a man."

Minerva managed to thaw herself out sufficiently to reach for the book. Whoever had worked on it had done a fine job; the binding had been reinforced, and some sort of tastefully understated copper design had been embedded into the covers, following the natural creases of the leather, yet elegant and symmetrical.

Dark red bands of flexible leather, of rather better quality than the covers, bound the book shut. A large, ornately-decorated lock sat in the center where the bands crossed, and a brass key hung next to it, tied loosely to the bands by a thin steel jewellery chain.

"You've certainly exceeded my specifications," she said, fumbling at the key. "I expected something a great deal simpler, especially at the quoted price."

"Well, anything worth doing," Seiji said vaguely. "Have you been waiting long?"

"No," Minerva said, indicating her own cup of tea, still steaming. "I only arrived here a few minutes ago myself."

"Alice isn't with you today?"

"It's not a school day. Alice woke up this morning, took one look out the window, and burrowed back into bed."

"Smart girl."

"I left breakfast and lunch for her back at the house, anyhow. If it weren't for this book, and a few other matters, I'd probably follow her example. Did you peek?"

"What?"

"It's a simple question, Seiji-san. Did you peek inside the book?"

Seiji examined his tea guiltily, as Minerva finally managed to fit key into keyhole. "Um, I know you told me not to look, but, er, you know..."

"Oh, stop worrying about it so much," Minerva said with a chuckle. "I trust your discretion, and if you've already seen the contents of the grimoire, you'll know it's not something that the layman will easily understand. My concern was more for your safety than my secrecy, and since you're still
alive, in one piece, and more or less the same species as when you began, we seem to have had the
good fortune to avoid any mishaps."

Seiji looked faintly queasy. "Is that book really so dangerous?"

"Only in the same way certain tools can be dangerous. You would not leave a child or an untrained
novice unsupervised with your woodworking tools, for example. Magic is much the same way,
although the hazards to navigation may be relatively unusual." Minerva carefully leafed through
the book. "Putting aside the more mundane risks inherent in careless handling of dangerous
materials, most magical accidents occur due to a misfire, rather than outright failure of a given
spell. The most dangerous and spectacular examples are usually a result of the spell being almost
correct, but missing some crucial piece. The odds of casual experimentation from ignorance
producing such a result is negligible."

"Oh." Seiji refrained from expressing further opinions on the dangers of too much knowledge.
"What language is it written in? I mean, some parts looked like English, but there are all those
symbols I've never seen before." He spread his hands. "I didn't want to ask Maria-san about it,
because, well."

"It is... hm. I am not certain of the Japanese term. It is a vocabulary common among our rather
specialized society. I do not know the origins of it, but it acts as a means to identify fellow
practitioners, as well as assist in our correspondence."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"The general idea is for a way to express certain concepts clearly and unambiguously. For example,
'circle'." Minerva used the English word for that last. "Just taking magical rituals into account,
there are several definitions. We have the idea of a round shape, as shared with the layman. We
also use it to mean a certain sort of gathering of magicians, called together for a stated purpose.
And a circle may also mean the markings enclosing an area in which a ritual is being performed. In
this way, we may have circles that are not circles."

"Like a... a square circle," Seiji said, manfully attempting to follow Minerva's lecture.

"Among others; pentagons are a more useful shape, specifically the innermost area of a pentagram.
In any case, the language used in this book has distinct and separate terms for each of these
definitions, so that there is very little chance of misunderstanding what a given instruction intends."

"So it's some kind of... magical language?"

"Well, no, it's not inherently magical in itself, but..." Minerva sighed, as Seiji's expression glazed
over. "Never mind. The details do not matter, and would take too long to explain. Suffice to say
that only those who have the proper knowledge will be able to read this book." That, or anyone
given sufficient time and a modicum of intelligence.

"Then if someone can read this book," Seiji said, slowly working his way through the
conversation, "they'll become a magician?"

Minerva closed the book. "That's not an easy question to answer, Seiji-san. I had intended for this
grimoire to be merely a textbook, but..." But events in Gensokyo had proven the need for
something more.
Seiji looked puzzled. "What use is a textbook for someone who's supposed to already know everything it teaches?"

An excellent question. "As I said, Seiji-san, it's not just a textbook. I've included a few... interesting variations inside."

"What about Alice?"

Minerva was caught off-guard by Seiji's sudden question. "I'm afraid I don't follow."

"Would Alice be able to read that textbook of yours? Didn't you promise to teach her magic?"

"Alice is... a special case," Minerva said. "She has a natural talent. She might not even need this grimoire, or my instruction, to become a great magician in her own right." So why do you insist on preparing her lessons, Minerva Margatroid? At what point are you willing to admit that the student has long surpassed the master?

Seiji ran a hand over his face, embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Margatroid-san. It's just that, well. Sometimes, what you're doing seems like it's so far above anything the rest of us can even understand. And when you take a child like Alice as your apprentice, it seems a little..."

Saving humans from monsters, at the price of turning into a monster oneself. "Alice will not be involved in this business about youkai," Minerva said firmly, "save in unavoidable circumstances such as what happened at the festival. In fact, the primary reason for her instruction in magic is to prevent just such incidents from happening again. She will be free to choose her own path in life, be it as a puissant mage, or as an ordinary young lady, should her interest in the arcane arts dwindle and fade as she grows older."

Seiji looked steadily at her for a moment, before letting the matter drop. "Do you have any plans for the rest of the day, Margatroid-san?"

"Mm. I do have to pick up a few notes I asked Kamishirasawa-san to hunt down for me; he said he was going to drop them off at the Hieda mansion." Courtesy of Ryoutarou, who seemed willing to shuttle back and forth endlessly between Minerva, Kamishirasawa, and Motoori the printer. "I must say that my research would be expedited terrifically if I could only track down Hakurei-san."

"The shrine maiden?" Seiji said. "Now that you mention it, she has been a little reclusive lately. But she's still at the shrine, isn't she?"

"Not when I make my way there. She seems to have some way of knowing when I'm approaching, and make herself scarce."

"Maybe she has her reasons."

"Maybe," Minerva said, unconvinced. She stood, holding her grimoire. "Thank you for the book, and the conversation, Seiji-san. Was there anything else?"

Seiji looked as though he was about to say something, but thought better of it. "Not particularly. Next time, perhaps." He nodded cordially. "Good luck, Margatroid-san."
Ryoutarou was not at the Hieda mansion; Minerva gathered that he was lingering at Motoori’s bookshop, likely warding off the cold with hot sake.

He had delivered the requested notes earlier, however, so Minerva collected them from the servants. The lengthy interval since the disastrous harvest festival had softened the Hieda household staff’s reaction towards Minerva, back to the mundane suspicion of a foreign magician on Japanese soil.

"By the way," she asked, "might I see the mistress of the house?"

The servants murmured something about a dojo.

Having lived at the Hieda residence for a number of months, Minerva was aware of the existence of the dojo building, located on the opposite side of the main house from where the alchemy shed had been situated. In Aya's time, the dojo had been silent and disused, another dusty old relic of a long-standing family.

As she approached the dojo today, however, Minerva could hear the occasional cry of athletic effort, accompanied by thumping footfalls on polished wood.

She found her way towards what seemed like a promising entrance, and carefully slid open the traditional Japanese paper door.

Three pairs of eyes tracked her, without their owners doing anything so obvious as to turn their heads to watch. The fourth person in the training hall was Miho, who did not deign to notice Minerva's arrival, or indeed anything other than the ritualized exercise currently underway.

Rather than linger awkwardly in the doorway, Minerva shuffled into the dojo, closing the door behind her. Everyone except herself was wearing what looked like a formal training uniform, a coarse thick white top and dark hakama trousers. The two women seated in the Japanese style on the sidelines were servants, whom Minerva vaguely recognized. The woman facing Miho on the dojo floor was unfamiliar, but probably also a servant.

Miho was wielding a long thin staff, taller than herself. One end tapered off into a curved suggestion of a blade; Minerva interpreted this as a training device for fighting with polearms of some sort. The woman on the other side of the duel had a much shorter wooden stick with the same tapering, which likely represented a sword.

Miho's movements were measured and deliberate, as were her opponent's. The swordswoman would advance with a rehearsed strike, which would be blocked and countered by Miho, who emphasized each equally rehearsed swing with a wordless shout.

Minerva took a seat some small distance from the other two servants, while her mind dredged up the relevant word from her scattershot studies of Japan: kata. A formal series of practice movements intended to teach the pupil the more useful techniques to survive in an actual confrontation against those who would do them harm.

That only women were present in the dojo right now was a point not lost on Minerva. Clearly Japanese women, or at least those of a certain social rank, were expected to be able to defend themselves and their homes, in times past.
But the world marched on, and the era of swords and spears was over, replaced by rifles, cannons, and reason. Save, of course, in this strange, confused land of ritual and tradition, where Miho and those like her would continue training with wooden weapons, passing the craft down to her daughters and granddaughters, even if all practical uses had passed into quaint antiquity.

Swords and spears and magic.

Miho and her opponent stepped apart, stowing their wooden practice weapons. They exchanged a bow measured to the precise millimetre, as dictated by ancient custom. The kata was evidently over.

Miho's opponent retreated via shuffling steps to the far side of the dojo, where she disappeared behind a door, possibly to change and refresh herself. Miho took a seat where she was, her practice polearm held upright, her expression neutral.

"Miho-san," Minerva began.

Miho responded to this with a silent, disinterested stare in Minerva's general direction. This lasted for a handful of seconds, before Miho's eyes flickered to the side, towards a rack of identical wooden practice staves.

"Miho-san," Minerva tried again.

Miho lowered her gaze, adopting a posture that suggested she would not mind waiting in that same position until the end of days. Despite Miho's earlier physical exertions, Minerva could see that her breathing was steady, and deliberately regulated. Trying not to show weakness, perhaps. Or anger.

It was clear what Minerva was supposed to do now, in any case. Minerva stood, and tottered towards the rack of practice weapons. Now that she could inspect these close up, Minerva could see that the emulated weapon would be closer to a glaive or voulge than a spear. Not that it would make much of a difference for Minerva's situation, since she had no training in either.

Minerva picked a weapon at random, testing its heft. She was, at the least, passingly familiar with the quarterstaff, and competent in its use to discourage the occasional bandit during her travels. This usually took the form of swinging the staff as hard as she could, and not stopping until she had beaten her would-be assailant senseless.

Definitely not a valid strategy for this particular duel.

Minerva divested herself of a few outer layers of clothing, folding them as neatly as she could beside the weapons rack. On top of these, she placed her grimoire and notes. Nobody seemed inclined to offer her a practice uniform to change into; she would have to make do with her current clothing.

She walked back to where Miho was waiting, stopping at what seemed like a suitable spot several feet away. She tried not to look at the two servants still seated at the sidelines, or imagine their disapproving glares at her patent ignorance of proper protocol.

Miho stood in a graceful motion, turned to face Minerva, and bowed. Minerva copied the bow, before settling into an ill-remembered defensive stance, holding the polearm like a quarterstaff at
Miho set herself into a posture that may have been straight out of a textbook on Japanese polearm combat. Minerva tried to recall what the movements of the kata had been like; she had received an impression of reach, with Miho using the length of the polearm to create a space in which any attack will be rendered ineffective, and proscribe any foolhardy attempts to close the gap.

For now, Miho remained still, apparently content to wait for Minerva to make just such a mistake.

Minerva essayed a hesitant poke, only to have her staff slapped aside almost contemptuously. Miho's weapon described a lazy arc as she efficiently closed the distance and smacked Minerva painfully in the side.

The blow was obviously held back, and the choked titter from the sidelines suggested that it was not supposed to hit at all. Miho remained blandly expressionless, betraying no sign of satisfaction, as she readied herself for the next clash.

Minerva staggered back to her starting position, wheezing slightly; there would be a marvellous bruise come a few hours later. Still, the point scored against her had been more embarrassing than debilitating, and a tiny voice at the back of Minerva's mind reminded her that she deserved it, in exchange for the pain she had already put Miho through.

So, the primary advantage of this Japanese polearm, like all polearms, was reach. It was inconceivable for Minerva, holding this weapon for the first time, to best someone who had trained with it extensively.

But Minerva was quick on her feet, a natural talent that served her well when volatile chemical and alchemical experiments went awry. And with her extra height over Miho, and indeed most women in Japan, reach was also her advantage.

Miho stepped forward, stabbing towards Minerva's feet. Minerva hopped backwards, arresting her momentum in time to sweep her weapon forward unexpectedly, pushing Miho back. Miho avoided this counter-attack with ease, but could not quite find an opening through the spinning barrier of wood that Minerva was desperately keeping between them.

The polearm was heavy, however, and Minerva's arms would soon tire. She deliberately faltered, and then used the last of her burst of activity to bring the shaft up to a level guard, intercepting Miho's overhead strike.

The duellists separated once again. Minerva was breathing heavily now; Miho still looked as dispassionate as ever.

This was, Minerva decided, as good a time as any to end this.

She darted in for a swift but clumsy lunge, which Miho predictably batted away. Minerva had discarded her weapon, though, and clapped her hands over Miho's. Before Miho could react, Minerva hauled on the polearm, dragging Miho off-balance towards her. At the last moment, Minerva released her grip, tucked her head down, and charged.

The tackle caught Miho in her midsection, knocking the wind out of her, and the two women sprawled over each other on the dojo floor.
Minerva recovered first, hauling herself up on her elbows to see Miho's expression go from astonishment, to anger, to distress, and to other, infinitely more complex emotions.

Finally, Miho closed her eyes, and laughed weakly. She waved vaguely at the two servants, who had rushed to their mistress's side in concern. The servants acknowledged this signal with silent bows, before padding off to pick up the fallen weapons.

"That was not a legal move, Margatroid-san," Miho said, still breathless.

"I apologize," Minerva said, sitting up. "It was the quickest way I could think of to get your attention."

"You have it now. What do you plan to do with it?"

"I... am not sure. I didn't think I'd get this far, to be perfectly frank."

Miho sighed, as she sat up as well. "I can guess what you're going to say, anyway. But I don't know how to answer."

"Miho-san..."

"What, did you think you were the only person who felt the way you did?" Miho shook her head. "I know you wanted my forgiveness, Margatroid-san, but there's nothing to forgive. And even if there was, I'm not qualified to dispense your grace for you."

"Then who would?" Minerva asked, slightly more sharply than she intended.

Miho gave her a sad smile. "If you find out, do let me know. I had, in fact, been cross with you, for the arrogance of assigning every bit of blame to yourself, but a mere moment's consideration proved that I was guilty of the same selfishness. Self-pity is always comfortable, but eventually we have to move on, don't we?"

"It is not easy, though."

"No. It never is." Miho reached out to clasp Minerva's shoulder. "If it will help, I can say that I don't bear you any ill-will. Nothing rational, anyway; I hope you will forgive me my occasional lapses into unreasonableness."

"That's... very kind of you, Miho-san. Thank you." Minerva shifted slightly, and winced. "Although I must say your absolution is a trifle severe."

"Mercy and charity is all very noble," Miho said cheerfully, "but occasionally the baser parts of ourselves demand a measure of satisfaction."

The two women helped each other up, and Minerva limped her way towards the weapons rack where she had left her belongings. Miho provided a small amount of assistance and support, but notably did not apologize.

"How is little Alice?" Miho said, as Minerva gathered her coat.

"Probably still in bed," Minerva said. "She finds this weather disagreeable. I imagine if she could hoard Spring for herself and ration it out on days like this, she would be much less lethargic."
"Would an invitation to hatsumoude lift her spirits?"

"Beg pardon?"

"It's a sort of tradition," Miho explained. "On the eve of the New Year, close to midnight, we gather at the shrine to pay our respects. It's part of the usual ceremonies and customs surrounding this period of time; in a day or two, the Hieda household will be starting our own preparations here."

Minerva considered this. "Would Hakurei-san be there?"

"The shrine maiden? I suppose, but she'll probably be busy organizing the whole thing." Miho shrugged. "Most of the village will be there, but some people prefer keeping to the old calendar, rather than, er..."

Rather than the imported calendar imposed by foreigners. When would the old New Year in Japan have been? About a month or two after the actual one, if Minerva recalled correctly.

Well, if Japan wanted to join the rest of civilization as equals, they would have to adapt or be left behind. "It would be my pleasure to participate, Miho-san," Minerva said, tucking her grimoire inside her coat. "And I'm sure Alice will be delighted as well."

"That's good to hear. We'll see you then, Margatroid-san."

Chapter End Notes

It's a naginata duel described without using the word "naginata". Because I have no idea if Minerva would have any reason to know what the weapon is called.

The entire duel was written based on whatever Youtube videos of naginata katas and competitions I could dredge up.

This chapter only exists to get Minerva and Miho on speaking terms again.

Intentional Reference Count:

Wilkins's Real Character, Magic: The Awakening, Perfect Cherry Blossom stage 3
Minerva rose early, despite having spent the previous night deep in research. She quietly crept out of the bedroom, leaving Alice still fast asleep.

The late winter dawn was just peeking through the trees surrounding the house as Minerva stepped outside, taking several deep breaths of the bracingly cold air.

Then she flattened herself against the side of the house, as the Imp erupted from the laboratory shed to pound around the corner at a terrific speed before diving head-first into a clump of frost-covered bushes.

When nothing drastic happened after twenty heartbeats, Minerva peeled herself off the wall, and strolled to the bushes, where her familiar had gotten back to her feet, spitting out bits of leaves.

By way of explanation, the Imp produced a piece of parchment from a pocket, depicting a cluster of long, dry-looking stalks. "Bloody needlegrass."

"Is that its name, or a value judgment?"

"It refers to the plant's habit of draining the blood of any unfortunate creature that wanders into its territory," the Imp said. "The grass grows on what is imaginatively called the Mountain of Needles, over at... well, it doesn't matter. I thought it might have some potential for our alchemy." She looked back at the door of the shed, swinging gently on its hinges. "As it turns out, it had a tad too much potential."

"Yet we seem to be undamaged. Should I credit providence or prudence?"

"Luck, I'm afraid," the Imp confessed. "My fault. I used the steel scoop instead of the copper; I'm not entirely accustomed to this world's magical climate."

Copper made no sparks, conducting the energy away and grounding it harmlessly. "Next time, try not to have the volatiles so close at hand. I'd appreciate having a house to return to."

"Oh, the house itself would have been perfectly safe," the Imp said. "The damage would have been more, er, localized. The shed, at the most."

And the Imp along with it, presumably. Would the Imp even be inconvenienced by an explosion at close range? Judging from her panicked escape, probably so. "I take it the needlegrass was, um... dry?"

"The sample I used had not fed on any victims recently, if that's what you're asking," the Imp said. "Unless you'd prefer otherwise? It would be less readily available; riskier harvesting process, you understand. But it can be done."

"No," Minerva said firmly. "We'll leave the needlegrass as it is. Do you have anything else to report? There was that other matter I assigned to your attention, wasn't there?"
The Imp spread her hands. "The solution requires a touch more refinement, but I foresee no great difficulties. It does hinge on your own success, if I may remind you."

"So it does." Minerva sighed, her breath puffing in the chill winter air. "God willing, I will make some progress on that today. In the meantime, did you have any plans for the day?"

The Imp waved at the shed. "More experiments. More of the same. Preferably without getting blown up this time."

"Then I shall leave the groceries to you," Minerva said. "When you have the time. Alice and I will be otherwise occupied for the rest of the day."

"This local human New Year business, wasn't it? I'll have a look around the village later, but if the occasion is as festive as you described, there might not be much to see. Tomorrow would be better."

"Much obliged. I've left a list in the kitchen." The Imp was surprisingly adept at haggling, so Minerva's finances were adequate for task of keeping them in some comfort. Minerva implicitly trusted the Imp with her money, on the basis that the Imp did not have much use for human currency save for human purposes.

Breakfast passed without incident, Alice having woken with the vaguely long-suffering air of one resigned to the fact that winter was, at the moment, still extant. Minerva dressed her warmly, and the two made their way towards the village.

True to the Imp's prediction, the village streets were quiet and empty. The few pedestrians out and about were clearly moving purposefully to their destinations, sparing Minerva and Alice no more than the obligatory glance of curiosity at the foreigners.

Snatches of bright, happy conversations could be heard from inside the houses Minerva passed. Apparently New Year's Eve was a day for staying indoors, with family and friends.

Her perambulations took her to the shopping district, where the occasional store was still technically open for business, despite the proprietors being more interested in chatting with visiting friends than conducting commerce.

Maria was standing outside the Kirisame store, critically inspecting the sign above the door. She nodded amiably as Minerva and Alice approached. "Margatroid-san, Alice-chan. Good morning, and a happy new year. I'm afraid we're not open today. Is there something I can do for you?"

"It can wait until a more convenient time," Minerva said. "I was just going to browse for a few more instruments for my work. Where is Seiji-san, by the way?"

Maria waved a hand down the street. "Cleaning up his workshop. He's generally quite neat, so it shouldn't take very long, but it's a good idea to be thorough for the New Year."

Sweeping out the old, and bringing in the new. "And yourself?"

"Hm? Oh, I was just considering replacing that sign," Maria said. "It's getting a little worn-out, don't you think?"
"I suppose it would depend on how much trouble installing a new sign would be," Minerva said, peering upwards. "What do you think, Alice?"

Alice shrugged disinterestedly.

Maria laughed. "It's all right. It was just an idle thought, anyhow. Are you going to the shrine tonight?"

"Quite likely, yes," Minerva said. "Yourself?"

"I have to take inventory, but I'll probably drop by with my son for a while. Seiji has some other plans, I think; something about helping a friend get over a romantic setback."

Not an auspicious end to the year for Seiji's unfortunate companion. "Is the shrine visit a regular thing? I mean, does it happen every year, without interruption? It just seems to be a large undertaking for Hakurei-san herself."

"For as long as I've been in Gensokyo, I believe so. Some of the girls in the village do volunteer to help out during the event itself, but most of the preparations are done by the shrine maiden alone. I'm sure she wouldn't mind some assistance," Maria added brightly.

"Isn't it a little odd for Hakurei-san to take care of the shrine alone?"

Maria frowned thoughtfully. "It does seem that way, but I've never been able to learn the details. It's not something people talk about much."

Minerva pondered this as she continued her journey through the village. Even Maria, as much a Gensokyo native as could reasonably be considered, was shut out of the secrets that the true residents of Gensokyo knew, the enlightenment spontaneously appearing in their heads without need for education. The land kept its own counsel, and outsiders were tolerated, but seldom accepted.

So why are you still here, Minerva Margatroid?

Like the village, the Hieda mansion was rather more quiet than Minerva was accustomed to. A lone manservant met Minerva at the gates, clearly on the way out himself. He gave distracted directions to one of the mysterious rooms in a wing of the mansion, where Miho was last spotted. Minerva thanked him, and stood aside to let him pass.

Inside the mansion, servants scurried to and fro, exchanging brief flashes of conversation and gossip as they swept past each other. Rooms were being aired, furniture was dusted, and there was an air of purposeful activity, albeit diminished by the absence of fully half of the usual staff.

Minerva made her way to the designated room, easily located via the lively chatter and shrieks of laughter from within. She hesitated at the threshold, unwilling to interrupt whatever excitement was underway.


"Happy new year," Minerva echoed, slightly offset from Alice's own mumbled version.
"Please, come in," Miho invited. "We've just finished a round, and I was thinking about taking a break."

Minerva shuffled into the room, patiently enduring the usual stares from the other women inside. All of them were dressed in bright kimonos, as Miho was. Miho chirruped a rapid set of introductions that Minerva almost immediately forgot; she was left with a vague impression that these were Miho's longtime friends, visiting for the eve of the new year.

Alice was met with a warmer reception, as the ladies engulfed her with enthusiastic exclamations and giggling hugs. The little girl bore this attention with commendable stoicism.

Several colourful cards were scattered across the floor, evidently the remnants of the game Miho and her friends had been playing.

"Hyakunin Isshu," Miho said, noting Minerva's gaze.

"Er... one hundred..."

"A hundred poets, one poem each," Miho supplied. "It's... oh, right, you probably haven't heard of it before. It's a game based on matching two halves of a poem." She indicated a neat stack of cards. "The first half is read out, and the one who first takes the corresponding card wins that card. There's a few other rules about picking the wrong card or card placement, but we can cover that later, if you're interested in learning. Or Alice, for that matter." Raising her voice slightly to address her friends: "All right, give the child some room! She's a guest here, too!"

Miho's friends reluctantly relinquished possession of Alice, who returned to Minerva's side, smoothing down her mussed hair with wounded dignity.

Minerva chuckled wryly. "I'm afraid my, er, lack of familiarity with the poetry in question would disqualify me. Do you memorize every one of these hundred poets?"

"Well, it's a famous anthology, and, um." Miho looked embarrassed. "Truth to tell, most of us just memorize a certain number of poems, and rely on those to win. Besides, understanding the meaning of the poem isn't as important as learning the sounds of the first few syllables, and associating them with the correct cards." Rallying: "Do you have anything similar? Some sort of well-known collection of poems, back in Britain?"

Minerva considered this. "Gaudeamus igitur," she suggested.

"Iuvenes dum sumus," Alice responded.

"What does that mean?" Miho asked, curious.

"It's just something sung among students," Minerva said. "It exhorts us to be merry while we are young and carefree, for our time on this green earth is limited." And how had Alice known about it? Minerva was fairly certain her curriculum did not include drinking songs of academia.

"That's... very Japanese, actually," Miho said. "Or, I should say, very human. It seems we are not so different."

"Hm," Minerva said noncommittally. Before she could reply, she was interrupted by a clear voice reciting lines of verse from the other side of the room, where Miho's friends had rearranged the
"Looks like they're starting the next round," Miho said, by way of explanation. "We should leave, so we won't interfere with the game." She darted towards a corner shelf to retrieve a gaily-spackled box. "I can introduce you to the basics of the game in the next room. Come on."

The trio adjourned to what looked like an identical room, a few doors down. On the way, they encountered Ryoutarou, whom Miho mercilessly drafted to assist in the lesson.

The class quickly dwindled to a single teacher and student, as Alice was the only one actively interested in the game. Minerva had shown willing for a few minutes, before unobtrusively extracting herself.

"A happy new year to you," Ryoutarou said, keeping his voice low.

"Likewise," Minerva said. "Were we interrupting your duties?"

"Not in particular," Ryoutarou said. "Besides, I always have time for Miho. In any case, I was just coming by to see if she needed some snacks."

"I've noticed the reduced staff. I take it most of them have gone back to their homes?"

Ryoutarou nodded. "The eve of the new year is a time for family. Certain seasonal dishes are served, most of them representing a wish for the coming year. Longevity, fortune, and happiness."

"A worthy sentiment."

Ryoutarou eyed Minerva shrewdly. "Would you... like to join us? For this New Year's Eve?"

For the only family Minerva had in this strange and foreign land were those she claimed for herself. One mysterious foundling, and one devilish assistant. It was still rather more than anything she could look forward to, back in England.

"No," Minerva said, not quite able to keep the regret out of her voice, "not for me. There is something I need to do. Which brings me to a request I would like to make: if it's not too much trouble, could you look after Alice for me? She'll not have much to keep her interest if she accompanies me. All in all, I think she'll be happier here. Safer. "She can accompany you to the Hakurei shrine tonight; I'll be there, and we can rendezvous then."

"Mm." Ryoutarou's tone was neutral. "And Alice might benefit from a nap this afternoon, to prepare her for the midnight shrine visit. We'll take care of Alice for you, Margatroid-san. You can conduct your... duties... without worry."

"Thank you," Minerva said.

Ryoutarou nodded. "You'll have to make a decision soon, you know."

"I am aware." And yet, if Minerva could delay the reckoning long enough to find a way to save herself and everyone around her... "I promised to keep her safe. But I promised not to abandon her. Sooner or later, one or the other must break."

Ryoutarou was silent for a moment. "I've learned a little more about your work from
Kamishirasawa-san. Or rather, the work that others like you have undertaken."

"Ubi sunt qui ante nos in mundo fuere?" Minerva muttered. She was not the first youkai hunter in Gensokyo, and she was treading a well-worn road, paved with the good intentions of her predecessors.

Or, for that matter, their bones.

"If it was just myself, I may continue my work without fear," she continued. "But with Alice... everything has changed. How strange it is, that having someone to care for would fill me with cowardice."

"Call it caution, instead," Ryoutarou suggested.

"The important thing is knowing the difference." Minerva looked at Alice, still engrossed in learning the game of a hundred poets. "I may have to leave Alice in your care in the future, for more extended periods of time, depending on circumstances. Some of what I must do is... unsuitable for a child."

"Alice seems loyal enough to you."

"She needs a family. And though it pains me to admit it, I may not be able to provide her with one, should circumstances intervene." Should anything happen to Minerva.

"Hieda no Alice?" Ryoutarou said, grimly.

It may yet come to that. "It's just a hypothetical. And the future is as yet uncertain; planning for the worst is only a sign of... caution."

Ryoutarou sighed. "I don't know what your intentions are, Margatroid-san. But whatever it is, I wish you luck."

And Minerva could certainly use every scrap of luck sent her way. "I'll see you again tonight, then."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from Through The Looking Glass. Picked mostly because I posted this chapter on FFnet on my birthday (September 17), intending to get it out early. Originally this was just half a chapter, but it works tolerably enough on its own.

Also the whole "iam tomorrow/nunc today" thing.

I binged through about fifty chapters of Chihayafuru just to get an idea of what the heck this "karuta" thing is. (Liked the informative bits about the history of karuta, hated the whole sports-anime stuff.) Also I tried to memorize at least some of the Hyakunin Isshu's English translations, but I ended up not using any of them. Sadface.

"Hieda no Alice" was a random joke from a reader on another site.
"Gaudeamus igitur iuvenes dum sumus": "let us rejoice while we are young". (Or, in modern terms, #YOLO.)

"Ubi sunt qui ante nos in mundo fuere?": "where are those who, before us, were in the world?"

Intentional Reference Count:

*Komarr, Forbidden Scrollery, "De Brevitate Vitae", oumisoka*
Alice had taken the news of Minerva's errand in stride; she was obviously used to her guardian disappearing on a moment's notice, a fact which did not escape Miho's notice. Thankfully, Miho had kept her opinions to herself, for once.

The path to the Hakurei shrine was deserted, but well-kept and clear of snow. Nobody would be slipping on any ice-slick steps tonight, especially when the lanterns lining the sides were lit.

Hakurei herself was perched on a small stepladder, delicately hammering nails into a corner of the roof of the shrine.

"Top left corner of the warehouse," she said, upon noticing Minerva's approach. "Green box."

"Hakurei-san-" Minerva began.

"Top left corner of the warehouse, green box. It's a little heavy."

Minerva sighed, and trod off.

The small warehouse behind the main shrine building was not unfamiliar, and Minerva quickly located the box in question. It was indeed heavier than it looked, and contained nothing more sinister than an ancient set of finely-crafted porcelain dishes and cups, packed tightly in straw. It did not seem to have been touched in several months; the layer of dust on the box suggested a period closer to a year.

Hakurei had finished her carpentry by the time Minerva returned, and was hanging a set of chimes from the roof corner. "Thank you," she said, climbing down the stepladder and taking the box from Minerva.

"Is that for a ceremony of some sort?" Minerva asked.

"Every year," Hakurei confirmed. "On the eve of the New Year, as we cross into a new day. It's particularly important here in Gensokyo, where the youkai presence is more, um, pronounced."

Minerva vaguely recalled having heard about this, in a conversation long past. "Ensuring the dominion of your pantheon's chief sun goddess, er..."

"Amaterasu-no-oomikami," Hakurei said. "Origin of all that is good and mother to us all."

"Yes, quite." Minerva trailed Hakurei into the main living area of the shrine. The debris of preparation for the night's events littered the floor; Hakurei navigated these with ease, but Minerva had to pick her way through the obstacles with care. "Do you handle all of this yourself? It seems like a rather large task for just one person."

"Is it?" Hakurei said brightly. "Well, it's been like this for many years now, so I suppose I'm used to it. Besides, sometimes someone comes up from the village to help out, and good company"
always makes the work easier."

It was, Minerva reflected, often difficult to tell whether Hakurei was deliberately keeping her conversation at the shallow end, in order to bait interlocutors into committing some grievous faux pas. Minerva's own unfamiliarity with the subtleties of the Japanese language was a further hindrance. "Have you always been alone in your duties here?"

"Well, I am the Hakurei shrine maiden."

"Hakurei-san, that evasion is hardly subtle, by anyone's standards. I expected more creativity from you."

Hakurei looked back at Minerva with an expression of genuine puzzlement. "I'm sorry, I don't understand what you mean."

Direct confrontation was not a useful option, evidently. "I've been trying to get into contact with you for some time," Minerva said. "And yet you were always conveniently unavailable."

"Oh, that must have been unfortunate," Hakurei said, entering a small kitchen. There was room enough for two in there, if they did not mind crowding. Minerva opted to stand outside. "I did have to make a trip into the capital some weeks ago, though," Hakurei continued. "I put up a notice, but I hear it was blown away in a storm."

"Was it an important errand?"

"Mm, in a manner of speaking. It was something I was called upon to do, anyhow." Hakurei unpacked the dishes, and began giving them a good scrubbing. "I did take the opportunity to visit an acquaintance, however. He was very helpful with some inquiries I had. About your situation, as it happened."

This was unexpected. "What sort of help was provided?"

"Notes about certain rituals. Hiizumi-san's library is more substantial than my own." Hakurei waved a hand vaguely back in the direction of what passed for a drawing room in a remote Japanese village shrine. "There's a sack with all the papers over there. This is probably going to take a while, so why don't you have a look in the meantime? We can talk about it afterwards."

Minerva frowned.

"I promise I won't vanish without warning," Hakurei added, without changing her cheerful tone.

Gathering what grace she could still muster, Minerva retreated to the designated area, clearing a space around the low table to sit. There was indeed a small sack on the table, filled with an assortment of correspondence. On the basis that Hakurei would not have allowed Minerva access to anything she had not already vetted for consideration, Minerva began browsing through these.

The usual bills of payment and receipts for city services partaken were set aside; as an afterthought, Minerva rearranged them in calendar order. Hakurei was not a spendthrift by any means, but she had indulged in a few luxuries during her stay in Tokyo, such as new clothes and sandals. A few receipts were for strangely-named items of a mysterious and expensive nature. From the affixed shop seals, Minerva guessed that these were intended for Hakurei's Shinto duties.
The notes Hakurei had referred to had once been tied together in a packet, but the string had broken, and the papers hopelessly muddled. Minerva suppressed a grumble as she referred yet again to her much-used dictionary, in an attempt to reassemble order.

Hakurei's city acquaintance did not have handwriting as neat and precise as hers, which was exacerbated by cheap brushes and ink. Japan's attempts to modernize its cities had also led to the enthusiastic embracing of the markers of civilization, such as sheets of paper. For once, Minerva would have preferred the traditional scroll.

Hakurei eventually passed by the table on her way back outside, bearing an armful of boxes containing miscellaneous items. Minerva stood, partly to offer assistance, but mostly to stretch her legs.

"Thank you," Hakurei said, as Minerva relieved her of a box of musty talismans.

"Is all of this really necessary for tonight's event?"

Hakurei took a moment to consider this. "The shrine visit at midnight of the New Year is not precisely an organized festival, Margatroid-san. It is merely a sort of tradition, although even that might be placing too much importance on it." At Minerva's blank look, Hakurei tried again. "We, that is, the people of Japan, are generally expected to visit a shrine at least once a year. Sort of to remind ourselves that the gods are still present, and still deserving of our praise and faith."

A much more lenient arrangement than church Sundays. "And if they visit the shrine at midnight on the New Year, they are able to fulfil that requirement for two years at once."

Hakurei nodded. "Of course, few actually keep close watch on such things. But it has become a habit, and while it is hardly necessary for anyone to take part in the New Year's shrine visit, I do end up seeing quite a crowd when the time comes."

They had reached a set of tables at the side of the shrine, under the shelter of the overhanging roof. Hakurei began unpacking the boxes, efficiently laying out their contents in an obviously mercantile display. "I would surmise all of this," Minerva said, indicating the preparations, "is a natural response to the possibility of a large number of people gathered in one place, who happen to be amenable to spending some amount of money while they're here."

"I do have to eat," Hakurei said blandly.

"Will you be stationed here for the majority of the night? Apart from your ritual to appease your goddess, anyhow."

Hakurei refrained from correcting Minerva's summation. "Some of the young ladies of the village have volunteered to help, albeit for a reasonable portion of the proceeds. I believe some of them are actually looking forward to wearing the shrine maiden uniform." She eyed Minerva. "I'm afraid I don't have a spare for someone of your height."

"That will be all right," Minerva said firmly.

About half of the contents of the boxes were laid out onto the tables, Minerva imitating Hakurei's arcane arrangements. Hakurei was oddly particular about the stacks of paper slips with certain words written on them; Minerva learned that these were fortunes, to be drawn by hopeful supplicants for a modest fee. Fortune slips warning of ill luck could be exorcised by tying them
onto the branches of a nearby tree. Minerva pushed aside visions of setting up a booth herself, offering tarot-based second opinions.

Several of the items to be sold were little jade pieces, shaped like commas. Minerva stared at them for a few moments, before recalling where she had seen them before. "These resemble half of the symbol of Yin and Yang I've seen so often."

"Magatama," Hakurei said. "The shape is... well, it's too lengthy to explain at the moment. But in general, it is intended to be a common replica of Yasakani no Magatama."

"Er."

"Yasakani no Magatama," Hakurei repeated didactically. "Along with the sword Kusanagi and the mirror Yata no Kagami, they are the Three Sacred Treasures of Japan. You may think of them as holy artefacts, along the lines of your Christian... cross?"


Hakurei acknowledged this. "I am not well-versed in your Western religions, I'm afraid. In any case, the Sacred Treasures are the Imperial Regalia, and they are the symbols of the heavens' favour, and the proof of the Emperor's rule. There are quite a few legends about the Sacred Treasures, involving the goddess Amaterasu. You might find them entertaining."

Interesting choice of adjective. "Do they hold some special significance? Apart from their, er, divine origins and Imperial importance."

"Kusanagi represents bravery," Hakurei said. "Or valour, or courage. Yata no Kagami represents wisdom. As for the jewel Yasakani no Magatama, well..."

"Power?" Minerva guessed.

"Benevolence," Hakurei corrected. "Attributes of a good ruler, and a good person."

The two women returned indoors to resupply. When they passed the drawing room once again, Minerva bent over to pick up a closely-worded letter. "I've been reading your mail, by the way," she said.

Hakurei looked politely interested.

"I confess some of the subtleties are lost on me, but is heterodoxy a common concern in your religion?"

This prompted a long, pained silence, as Hakurei formulated a way to explain the obvious to the ignorant foreigner using simple words. "Shinto is not so much a religion as you understand it, I'm afraid. In any case, the Sacred Treasures are the Imperial Regalia, and they are the symbols of the heavens' favour, and the proof of the Emperor's rule. There are quite a few legends about the Sacred Treasures, involving the goddess Amaterasu. You might find them entertaining."

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This prompted a long, pained silence, as Hakurei formulated a way to explain the obvious to the ignorant foreigner using simple words. "Shinto is not so much a religion as you understand it," she finally said, gently taking the letter from Minerva's hands. "It is a way for the people to relate to and communicate with the gods; a path of thought to the gods, as the name itself suggests."

"Which appears to fit the definition of a religion."

"But the gods are everywhere, Margatroid-san. They are limitless and myriad, and one cannot live a single day without interacting with them in one way or another. Shinto is how one lives, not what one believes." Hakurei waved the letter in her hand vaguely. "We may take in stories and practices
and habits from other sources. Sources which have been in this land long enough to be tradition, or which the people carry with them in their bones, wherever they come from. Folklore, or Buddhism, or perhaps even your Christianity."

Minerva followed Hakurei through the building, winding through more boxes and shapeless packages strewn across the floor. It was a wonder that the warehouse had anything left in it, considering the mess right here. "And that rather official-looking letter from the Japanese Imperial Government bureaucracy is representative of some sort of Council of Trent. Which you were summoned to Tokyo to receive the news thereof, if not the holy writs themselves."

Hakurei absently stuffed the letter into a sleeve of her robe. Minerva assumed the presence of a pocket within. "It has become... political. The current government wishes to show the world that it is strong and united. That Japan is one country, under one Emperor. Your England has one Church, does it not? It is the same thing that they seek to have."

"You do not approve?"

"I was not summoned to Tokyo, Margatroid-san. I went there of my own accord."

An answer to a question Minerva did not ask. Was it an answer to a question Minerva should have asked? "Is there, at the least, a glossary of common terms in Shinto? Or does every offshoot and shrine in Japan have their own definitions?"

"It depends," Hakurei said. "Where is the confusion?"

"The concept of a soul. Which, I gather, is rather different from the version I am accustomed to."

"Ah." Hakurei tapped a finger on her lips in thought. "I'll try to do what I can, but it's not the sort of thing you can summarize. You just... know."

As with everything else in Gensokyo. "I only require enough accuracy to be able to follow the notes you have so helpfully compiled for me. Or your acquaintance."

"My collection of books and scrolls about Shinto is somewhat limited," Hakurei said equably. "Price and opportunity, you see. Hot or cold?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Would you like your soba hot or cold?" Hakurei clarified. "I usually have it hot, considering the season."

Minerva realized that they had reached the kitchen once more, and that she was ferociously hungry. "I would have to concur. Hot it is."

"Long noodles for a long life," Hakurei said, as she opened cupboards to pull out worn, but carefully-cleaned pots and ladles. European-style, Minerva noted. "Usually it's eaten only shortly before the arrival of New Year's Day, or even as the year crosses over, but we'll be busy then."

"I hear this meal of symbolic longevity is to be eaten with family," Minerva said casually. "Do you usually eat alone?"

Hakurei favoured Minerva with her usual sunny, serene smile. "Yes."
The people of Gensokyo began to trickle towards the shrine only a few hours before midnight. Most of them glanced at Minerva’s patient presence at the torii gates in passing, but the foreign magician was a village fixture by now. One could get used to even the strangest of things, evidently.

Alice finally arrived, along with the rest of the Hieda entourage. The little girl was dressed in an adorably tasteful kimono in blue, with a fur-trimmed shawl around her shoulders. Clearly Miho's tastes had been overruled in favour of sanity.

The usual round of greetings ensued, before Alice was redeemed into Minerva's custody. Miho, surrounded by her giggling friends, departed to mingle and circulate among the other villagers, with Ryoutarou trailing behind a short distance, visibly awkward in the midst of concentrated femininity.

Once alone with Minerva, Alice happily gave a detailed, rambling report of games played, clothes tried, gifts received, and rather too much food eaten. Through the uncharacteristically loquacious flow of information, albeit delivered in disjointed fragments and verbs, Minerva failed to catch any reference to a proper nap. Alice had apparently been too excited to sleep.

Eventually, Alice wound down, just in time to notice the package Minerva had slung across her back.

"Oh, this? Just a few more notes to look through, later. Research." At Alice's mutter about the endless parade of work that seemed to plague certain magicians, Minerva adopted a stern expression. "Magic is as much about the journey for knowledge as the destination, if not more so. For the destination may be forever beyond the reach of even the most industrious student... yes, Alice, I know that means the work will never be done. That is the point."

Giving up on the peculiar preoccupations of grown-ups, Alice dragged Minerva along to the shrine proper.

The shrine grounds were not as crowded as Minerva had feared. There was no press of bodies as in the harvest festival, and people came and went as they finished whatever they came to the shrine to do, and spread out across the surrounding area in small, quiet groups. Whatever sanctuary from youkai attacks the Hakurei shrine had established, it seemed to extend past the property itself.

Nobody wandered far enough to lose sight of the lanterns arrayed around the shrine grounds, however. Perhaps safety was simply based on the reassurance of the light.

The Hakurei shrine was seeing respectable business tonight. Apart from the sale of trinkets and charms, there was a queue in front of the donation box, where visitors would toss in a suitable monetary offering, before jangling the bells hung above the donation box using the attached rope of colourful braids. Minerva knew quite a bit about the bells, because Hakurei had tasked her with making sure that they were taken down, cleaned, and replaced securely. The old rope had been fraying, and so Minerva had to produce a new one.

Through all the preparations, Hakurei had not volunteered any more meaningful information after the initial conversation, referring Minerva instead to the notes from her acquaintance. Minerva had
been relieved when the girls from the village finally arrived that evening, leaving Hakurei to instruct them on their duties and Minerva to attempt a dignified withdrawal into her research.

Minerva and Alice reached the front of the line, and cast their coins into the donation box, Alice drawing from her own allowance. Minerva went through the motions of invoking the favour of the Japanese gods by rote. Alice, for her part, looked terribly sincere.

What could Minerva wish for? Long life and prosperity, in the Oriental tradition, possibly. But living to a ripe old age was fraught with the vagaries of fate and chance, and riches beyond her imagining had never held much attraction for Minerva.

Courage, wisdom, and benevolence. An understanding heart, as with Solomon. Knowledge, as with Faust.

To save humans from monsters.

What do you really want, Minerva Margatroid?

Minerva and Alice shuffled to the side, allowing the line behind them to proceed. After the donations, there did not appear to be very much to do until midnight. Alice expressed little interest in drawing fortunes, despite its popularity with the other villagers; the winter-bare trees had begun to sprout little white paper knots. She lingered speculatively before the talismans, however, less for the alleged spiritual assistance advertised, and more for their decorative possibilities.

"Oh! Um..."

Minerva aimed a kind, non-threatening smile at the girl in a shrine maiden uniform behind the table. "Yes, dear?"

"You are, er..." The girl did not seem confident in her ability to pronounce foreign names. She fell back onto parroting prior instructions. "Hakurei-san told me to give this to you."

It was a box, about six inches to a side, slightly heavier than it seemed. Antique and corroded paper charms were plastered around it, with a fresh set sealing the lid.

"Am I allowed to open this?" Minerva asked, rattling the box gently. Based on how the weight shifted, there was something round inside, but the interior of the box was padded well.

"Um... she didn't tell me anything about that."

And the last and only spirit left inside was Hope. "Thank you for your timely delivery," Minerva said. "Please thank Hakurei-san for me, should you see her before I do."

Alice looked at Minerva questioningly, as they moved away from the tables.

"Not here," Minerva murmured. "Later, when I have more chance to study it in more detail. I would rather not proceed until I know what we are dealing with."

"Margatroid-san?"

Locating a tall British witch in the midst of a Japanese village was not especially difficult, Minerva reflected. "Seiji-san. I heard you were busy. Is Maria-san with you?"
Seiji flapped a hand vaguely. "You just missed her. She's feeling a little under the weather, so she decided to turn in early."

"Nothing serious, I hope. Oh, and a happy new year to you."

"Happy new year," Seiji echoed. "It's just a headache, I think; it'll probably pass by tomorrow."

"And your lovelorn friend?"

"Maria told you about that?" Seiji shrugged. "He's a melodramatic drunk, but he can't hold his liquor either. We wrung him out and tossed him in bed hours ago." He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Just between us, I think he still has a chance. I'm not sure whether I should encourage him to give it another go, however."

"Carpe diem," Minerva advised. "Tomorrow will be a new day. A new year, in fact. Speaking of which, will there be any other activities tonight? We've already paid our respects to the shrine. And the donation box."

"Mm, it depends on what you want to do, I think." Seiji cast his eyes around. "There's always Hakurei-san performing her ritual to Amaterasu. She should be..."

"Over there," Minerva said, pointing. She had watched Hakurei carefully arrange the offerings to the sun goddess, based on some arcane and ancient template. Privately, Minerva could not sense any particular significance to the arrangements, which nevertheless seemed to hold some deep and transcendent meaning to the shrine maiden and her religion.

"Oh, that's right, you were here earlier. Didn't you want to talk to Hakurei-san about something or other?"

"Something or other," Minerva agreed.

Hakurei was in the midst of her ritual, which looked to continue for some time yet. A respectful space was cleared around the ritual area, paired with an equally respectful silence. Only Hakurei's voice could be heard, over the crackling of the torches. Archaic syllables rolled smoothly off her tongue, accompanied by slow, measured gestures over the altar. A sacrament of the far East, requesting and ensuring the primacy of the forces of light over the denizens of the dark.

It was, truth be told, rather boring.

Minerva reached out to steady Alice, whose energy had been exhausted by now, leaving her dozing on her feet. Alice jerked awake, and immediately pretended not to be embarrassed. She did suffer to be led away, and voiced no objections to letting Seiji carry her on his back.

"Most people who're still here will have packed something to eat," Seiji mused, once they were a sufficient distance from the ritual to speak again. "Or read. Or do, in general."

"How long will they stay?" Minerva said quietly. For Alice had nodded off again.

"Until dawn. Which is about when Hakurei-san will be finished too."

"Dawn?" Minerva raised her estimation of Hakurei's stamina considerably.
"Being able to see the first sunrise of the new year will give you luck for the rest of the year," Seiji explained. "Or so they say, anyway. And the Hakurei shrine is one of the best spots to do it at."

And a ritual to the sun goddess should be finished only when the sun actually appears. "I'm afraid that will be rather too much for us. It might not be a bad idea to start heading back to the village."

The path from the shrine was lined with torches and the occasional collection of villagers, including a curiously high proportion of couples. Most of these were lost in their own conversations and worlds, paying Minerva, Seiji, and Alice no mind.

"There's a full moon out," Seiji said, evidently making conversation.

"Indeed." Feeling that this was inadequate: "Are there any stories? About the moon, I mean. In Japan."

"Rabbits," Seiji said. "Pounding mochi." Pointing up: "See, the shapes on the moon... the rabbit is there, holding the mallet, and there's the mochi."

Minerva raised an eyebrow. "For there liveth none under the sun, that knows what to make of the Man in the Moon. What else, apart from picture-shapes?"

Seiji coughed. "Well, there's also a princess."

"Oh?"

"A princess from the moon. One day she was found in a bamboo grove, as a baby, by an old bamboo-cutter and his wife. They raised her as their own child, and she grew into a beauty renowned throughout the land. Lots of stories... princes arrived to court her, but she didn't want any suitors, so she sent them away with impossible requests..."

"Impossible requests?"

Seiji's brow furrowed. "There was a list of five of them. Let's see... the great stone bowl of the Buddha, a jewelled branch from the floating mountain of Hourai, the robe made from the legendary fire rats of China..."

"Yes, I believe I have the gist of it." Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme. "Did any of the princes succeed?"

"Well, no," Seiji said. "Although one came close, with a forgery. Anyway, the princess had to return to the moon in the end. There's also a story about how she was friends with the Emperor, and she sent him an elixir..." He shook his head. "Never mind, that's enough about that. What about you, Margatroid-san? What do you see when you look up at the sky?"

The sun, the moon, and the stars. The power of the stars...

"When I was a young girl, no older than Alice is, my father took me to London for a holiday," Minerva said distantly. "We visited museums and parks, and it was all terribly exciting to me. But the one place which I remember the clearest is Flamsteed House: the Royal Observatory at Greenwich. The prime meridian, the basis of all longitude and thus the single most important point of reference in the entire world, was established to be there. There, at the Royal Observatory, the
world begins and ends."

If Seiji was nonplussed by this apparent change in topics, he gave no sign.

"We went to see the meridian marker in the courtyard," Minerva continued, every step in her memory as vivid as ever. "Just a little strip of brass, not especially grand or impressive on its own. And yet thanks to what that piece of brass represented, every country in the world may be laid out on a map, neat as you please." She turned her face up to the night sky. "It opened my eyes. My father was trying to tell me something about the British Empire, but what I remember from that moment was the vision of that brass strip extending all across the world, and the line lifted into the heavens, so that it may be seen wherever one may be."

Even on the wrong side of the world. Even in an alien, incomprehensible land of myths and secrets. Even here in Gensokyo, where the distinction between human and monster may not be so very clear.

"That's what I think of when I see the stars," Minerva finished. "The meridian of Greenwich, in the sky."

Seiji cleared his throat awkwardly. "Margatroid-san..."

The world blinked.

Minerva matched this with one of her own. Around her, what few villagers were present had also perceived the twitch in reality, and were looking around in confusion.

"Margatroid-san?" Seiji said again, this time looking worriedly at the sky.

The world blinked again. Now that Minerva was paying attention, she could see that this was nothing more, and nothing less, than the very briefest of moments, a mere fraction of an instant, when the entire sky had gone dark.

This time, when it returned, only the moon was present, hanging low and oppressive, alone.

"The stars are gone," Seiji said, with the tones of someone trying to convince himself that he was still awake and sane. "But they can't be gone. They're the stars."

"You are absolutely correct," Minerva said crisply, striding towards the village. "On both counts." Around her, the murmurs of the villagers had already begun, as did the convergence towards the Hakurei shrine in search of answers.

Lacking answers, reassurances would do.

Even Alice had woken up by now, sleepily rubbing her eyes and boggling at the sight of the new commotion. Seiji let her back onto the ground gently. "Margatroid-san, what's happening?" he asked.

Minerva reached into her coat to extract her pocket-watch, checking it with a glance. "A happy new year to one and all," she said.

"What?"
"Do pick up the pace, Seiji-san, Alice," Minerva said. "It has begun, and there is much to do."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title refers to the *shintai*, the sacred object in a Shinto shrine said to hold the divine spirit of the god being worshipped. Most *shintai* are sealed away and never seen, which makes Reimu's habit of using hers to bludgeon unsuspecting youkai a little unusual.

More information about the *goshintai* as regards to Touhou can be found in *Oriental Sacred Place* chapter 17. Which is also what inspired a side-plot-point in this chapter.

Hakurei's ceremony for the new year is based on the one Reimu does in *Strange And Bright Nature Deity* chapter 14 and 15. Any differences may be explained in-universe by the passage of over a hundred years, and out-of-universe by a poor memory for specifics.

The Shinto nationalization conversation was inspired by a discussion on exactly that in the Touhou thread on the RPGnet forums. I think Shadowjack posted most of the stuff I used.

The description of the shrine visit itself is based less on Touhou, with nobody but fairies and Marisa visiting Reimu's shrine, and more on other hatsumoude depictions in anime. (Specifically a mix of *Lucky Star* and *Yes Pretty Cure 5*.)

Eagle-eyed readers might notice my retcon, which happened during the writing of this chapter. It's never come up in the story itself, so I feel safe in pretending I Meant It All Along.

Most of this chapter was written without the benefit of Wikipedia. Whenever Singtel does its scheduled maintenance of its fibre network, suddenly I cannot access Wikipedia for a week or so. It's annoying.

*Intentional Reference Count:*


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